

*Book Review*

**Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2023). *Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader* (Elements in Publishing and Book Culture). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 104 pages.**

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*Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader*, written by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, explores how individuals perceive English language bestsellers by highlighting how readers choose books as well as how they navigate book recommendation culture. Through analyzing adult readers' attitudes to the term bestseller, the authors posit that readers have an active role in the publishing sphere by maintaining the success of bestselling fiction. The label "bestseller" acts as a beacon for some readers while a red light for others.

Fuller and Rehberg Sedo propose that society has entered an age of the multimodal reader cubed (MMR<sup>3</sup>) since individuals are consistently interacting with transmedia objects through the use of an array of digital devices and print sources together. Hence, for the MMR<sup>3</sup>, recommendations play a significant role in what type of content they seek out. The readers, themselves, are taking on an active role as advertisers by creating content and posting their recommendations online, which was not possible before the interactive nature of Web 2.0. A theme present in the book is the drawbacks of readers' online activity such as the loss of personal data and privacy to the platforms for posts as well as the unpaid labour that goes into producing book reviews. The book ends on a positive note, contending that readers have the power to change the conversations in the publishing industry. Through the #ownvoices and #weneeddiversebooks campaigns, readers are starting to dictate what publishers are producing and labeling as bestsellers.

For their study, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo use a mixed methods approach including a quantitative survey with readers, interviews with social media influencers, and qualitative work with international Gen Z readers in a private Instagram chat. The discussion in the book is divided into three sections based on the core actions of the contemporary multimodal reader: *Choosing*, *Connecting*, and *Responding*. The research comes to life through three imaginary readers (Sara, Priya, and Jana) who the authors create based on their analyzed data sets, illustrating the generalized reader from each sample group. Even though the authors do not state at the onset directly that each reader is part of a different generation, it becomes evident that each imaginary character belongs to a different demographic (Sara is Gen-X; Priya is Gen-Y; and Jana is Gen-Z).

In the section *Choosing*, the authors discuss how readers are selecting their books. The results of an internationally circulated questionnaire of 3,027 participants paints a picture of an individual who reads on multiple devices, employs a variety of methods for discovering and choosing books, and shares their reading experiences with others both on-and-offline. Additionally, readers are loyal to their favourite authors and listen to the recommendations of their friends. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo conducted a similar study in 2007, and compared to the 2020 results, the authors reveal an overall increase in readers using online resources (blogs, websites, and online reviews) as part of their trusted recommendations list. Additionally, there is more direct involvement of the book publishing industry itself within reading recommendation culture, such as the sponsorship of influencers and the collection of readers' personal data. Specifically asking whether readers choose a book based on its bestseller status yielded mixed comments from the participants of the study. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo contend that this means readers experience unease about bestsellers and that there is tension between commerce and culture. This thread could have been pulled at by the authors further in order to understand whether this tension has generated gradually over time or if this distinction between commerce and culture has always been present in the reader.

In the section *Connecting*, the authors focus on the motivations, labour, and recommendation practices of three influencers, interviewed for the study. The authors reveal that BookTube and Bookstagram are the primary platforms used by these influencers. The users who post on these platforms have become highly valued for their social capital because they act as intermediaries between the readers (their followers), the publishing industry, and the economies of online platforms. All three influencers believe that through many members of their community reviewing or featuring the same book, a bestseller can be created.

The authors also mention that the influencers often do not receive monetary compensation for promoting a book. Instead of payment, the influencers receive items from the publisher, which arguably also acts as free advertisement since the gifts are attached to a brand. However, this issue is not explored in depth and a further discussion of the problematic nature of free labour in the digital economy would have made for an interesting discussion.

The section *Responding*, centres on the reading and media habits of the Gen Z Instagram group that the authors formed for the project. The authors reveal that the Gen-Z readers “gather various types of information about books, from diverse media sources on-and-offline, as if they were making collages of possible content choices.” (65). Fuller and Rehberg Sedo further accentuate their point that it is the participation of content creators and readers online that can define whether a book is going to be a bestseller; without internet traction on social media platforms, a book has a very low chance of becoming a bestseller. This is evident through the introduction of social media platforms as book categories at physical bookstores with labels present such as BookTok selections.

An additional idea in this section of the book is that readers are aware of the tricks of the industry ranging from algorithms to the publishers’ targeted promotional materials, which makes the readers weary of what constitutes a bestseller and how a book becomes a bestseller. The readers are critical of the power that the publishing industry holds over them.

While this book is a short read, individuals within and outside of academia can find themselves in these pages, as the authors describe different generations and types of readers and reading habits. Each chapter can be read independently, making this book a good source for classroom discussions and independent reading. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo succeed in highlighting the active role of readers in the contemporary publishing industry and the agency Web 2.0 provides individuals in voicing their opinions and connecting them to other users. Overall, *Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader* is a solid addition to the field of audience studies and a thorough exploration of the developing habits of readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.