

“Is it possible to give a 6 out of 5 stars?”: Book Selection and Recommendation in the Internet Age

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To explore the factors that influence the choice of light reading, the seventy-five “most useful” customer reviews of twenty-five Amazon.com bestsellers were coded for reasons underlying book recommendation. The results show involvement to be most important, followed by author- and theme-related reasons. This highlights the pattern-driven nature of book selection.

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Much has been written about the role of publishers, editors, and other gatekeepers in the process of selecting and bringing certain books to the attention of the public (Bourdieu; Coser et al.; Janssen; Powell). These mediators are without doubt of prime importance, being the ones to decide which books will see the light of day, but ultimately it is always the reader that makes the final choice: to buy, borrow, or read a book. However, not much is known about the factors influencing this decision (Seegers & Verdaasdonk), and even less so when it comes to the ways in which the Internet, where a myriad of information on new book releases is available at a click of the mouse, is shaping the ways in which readers search for and use information to help them decide on their reading matter. This paper presents a brief overview of previous research on factors influencing readers' choice of books and aids to book selection on the Internet, followed by a small study that examines reader reviews of bestselling books on the Amazon.com website in terms of the factors emphasized in recommending a book to other readers.

Previous research

The selection and purchase of a given book has been modeled in analogy to consumer behavior as a complex process that comprises the search for information, the formation of preferences, and the final decision to buy or read a specific book (compare Janssen & Leemans; Kamphuis; Leemans & Stokmans; Leemans & Van Doggenaar). In this context, Janssen and Leemans characterize books as high-involvement products; that is, as goods that possess high personal relevance and whose acquisition necessitates extensive problem solving, involving a large number of information sources and the subsequent evaluation of the available options (see also Stokmans & Hendrickx).

Concerning the criteria according to which (potential) readers evaluate the books that have come to their attention, only a few studies have been carried out. In a study employing questionnaires with 218 buyers of fiction, Kamphuis inquired about their reasons for buying a specific book, making use of a list of thirteen evaluation criteria that had been generated in a pilot study. The results showed that the majority of reasons were related to the author of the book: the respondents had heard about the author before, were interested in the author, or had read or owned other books by the same author. The topic of the book was another reason that was mentioned by the respondents, although not as frequently as the author-related reasons. This predominance of author-related reasons led Kamphuis to conclude that, in today's publishing world, the author functions as a brand name, resulting in a kind of "brand loyalty."

Author-related reasons also emerged as predominant in book selection in a study by Leemans and Stokmans: They presented fifty participants with a sample of sixty fiction titles, ranging across different genres, requiring participants to first eliminate those books that were of no interest to them whatsoever and then choosing one book from among the remaining titles. During both phases, author-related reasons were important, although somewhat more so during the initial elimination phase. Additional reasons in both phases concerned the theme or the genre of the book, and style emerged as an additional reason during the final selection phase. Author- and theme-related reasons also predominated in a later study by D'Astous et al., with attractiveness of the book cover constituting an additional reason why readers said they felt attracted by a given title. Along similar lines, Duijx et al. demonstrated that book selection in both bookstores and public libraries was strongly pattern-driven, again pointing to the important role of prior experience in reading the work of a specific author or books from a specific genre (see also Verdaasdonk).

Aids to book selection on the Internet

Readers can choose only from among those books that have in some way come to their attention. In line with the modeling of books as high-involvement goods, it has been shown that readers make use of a large number of sources, including displays in bookshops, advertisements, reviews, literary columns, book programs on television, and recommendations by family, friends, or coworkers (Janssen and Leemans; Kamphuis). During the past decade, the internet has gained in importance as an additional source of information on cultural goods in general and books in particular (Hargittai; Rohmer). Digital information resources include:

- Author websites: These feature book descriptions, interviews with authors, information on the biography of the author, book reviews, information on readings and other events, reading group guides, and additional background information.

- Fan sites: These websites are typically highly collaborative, focusing on the “user” as much as the reader, and, in the case of fan fiction and other collaborative writing projects, blurring the distinction between reader and author. Features include: chat areas and games, a link to Twitter, groups on social websites such as MySpace and Facebook, avatars, graphics, emoticons, fan art (all for use by the fans), fan fiction, and so on.

- Publishers’ websites: These offer information on new releases, readings, newsletters, alerts, reading group guides, podcasts, access to excerpts, the option of sharing excerpts with others on social websites (via OpenBook), and so on.

- Booksellers’ websites: Amazon, as the largest and most popular Internet bookstore, offers the following features: editorial reviews, links to authors’ websites, links to communities and discussion forums, links to similar books, tags customers associate with a given title, related book lists compiled by other users, information on titles bought by other users that viewed the same book, customer reviews, and so on.

What is striking about this material in comparison to information on new book releases as featured in leaflets, reviews, or book programs on television is their markedly interactive and collaborative nature. Traditionally critics and reviewers acted as experts, guiding the public and participating in creating the literary status and reputation of a book (Janssen; Van Rees, “How”; Verdaasdonk). Now, with features such as Twitter, Facebook, sharing of excerpts through OpenBook, or writing reviews on Amazon, readers are increasingly taking over as critics, informing the reading selection of their peers. As pointed out above, recommendations by friends or colleagues have served as an information source in

book selection for some time. However, in the course of implementing these features on the Internet, the role of the reader is being transformed from an informal to an institutionalized one: the reader who describes, interprets, and evaluates a book vis-à-vis a larger public has become part of the “literary field” (Van Rees, “Introduction”). This adds a fourth stratum to Van Rees’ (“How”) distinction between primary, secondary, and tertiary critics, with readers acting as reviewers forming a new primary stratum whose members enjoy even less status than the journalists and former primary critics did.

Like other critics, in publicizing their book recommendations readers are limited by the institutional context in which they are operating and will usually draw upon those reasons that will make their logic and recommendations acceptable to others (Van Rees, “The institutional”). Thus, while readers who act as reviewers on the Internet are certainly not in any way representative of readers in general, it can nevertheless be assumed that the reasons they give for recommending a certain book provide some degree of insight into the kinds of reasons other readers also find relevant. In the following exploratory study, reader reviews on the Amazon.com website will therefore be used as material to provide information about the reasons that inform readers’ book selection. In this and in contrast to most prior research, the focus is not on literary works and authors in the narrow sense, but on those titles that draw the largest reading public; that is, on bestsellers and thus on light reading.

Methods

To obtain a selection of reader reviews, a two-step sampling procedure was implemented. In the first step, twenty-five bestsellers were selected. In doing so, it was assumed that bestsellers at different times do not substantially differ from each other. Thus, a selection of bestsellers from any day of the year would be as typical as that from any other day. Based on this reasoning, a list of the twenty-five top fiction bestsellers from the amazon.com website on a weekday (20 July 2009) was obtained. Because the list contained a number of books from the same series (notably from Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series), a revised list was created by deleting from the original list any third or fourth volumes from the same series and replacing these with the next bestsellers on the Amazon list (see the Appendix for the final list of twenty-five bestsellers).

In a second step, reader reviews were selected through purposive sampling. It was assumed that those reviews could be considered most in-

formation rich that were most likely to have an impact on the opinion of other readers. To obtain an indication of this, a feature of the Amazon system was used that allows the readers of the reviews to evaluate these according to perceived usefulness. For each bestseller, those three reviews were selected for analysis that had been classified as most useful, resulting in a total of seventy-five reviews in the sample.

These seventy-five reviews were then coded for what these readers liked about the book or why they would recommend it to others. Coding is a very flexible, inductive method that allows analysis of the meaning of textual material from a selected perspective – in this case, reasons for liking or recommending a book. To support the coding process, open source Weft QDA software was used (<http://www.pressure.to/qda/>, 14 March 2010).

The material was read repeatedly by the author of this paper, creating a new code whenever a new reason was encountered in the material. The resulting list of codes was revised several times in the course of reading the material, collapsing similar codes and introducing sub-level codes where necessary. The final list of codes, comprising twenty codes (including sub-level codes), was then applied to all seventy-five reviews (for a detailed description, see below).

Results

The list of twenty-five bestsellers included in the sample shows a remarkable variety of different genres. The top-selling book on the list, Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*, is a (modern) historical novel set in Mississippi in the early 1960s. In second place is J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* – a book primarily aimed at young readers (although just as eagerly devoured by adults) – followed by William P. Young’s *The Shack*, a religious novel. Other genres include the vampire novel (both Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series and Charlaine Harris’ *Sookie Stackhouse* series are represented on the list), the memoir (*Angela’s Ashes* by Frank McCourt), science fiction (Audrey Niffenegger: *The Time Traveler’s Wife*), the thriller (Stieg Larsson: *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), or “chick lit” (such as Sophie Kinsella: *Twenties Girl*). Overall, this very variety of titles and genres indicates that the reader reviews relating to the twenty-five titles selected (although they are of course far from constituting a representative sample of reader opinions in general) are nevertheless likely to cover a broad range of reader opinions and features appreciated about preferred books.

Another striking feature about this list of the top twenty-five bestsellers is the comparatively high number of books that are part of a series:

eleven out of twenty-five (in the original, unadjusted list: thirteen out of twenty-five). This constitutes evidence of the appeal of serial worlds and in itself indicates one prominent reason why books are appreciated by readers: the familiarity of these serial worlds and the characters inhabiting them (for more detail, see below).

Turning now to the results of coding the reader reviews, Table 1 displays coding frequencies for top-level codes.

Code	Frequency
Involvement	157
Comparison to other books	58
Quality of writing	28
Theme and genre	26
Sense of humor	17
Realism	10
Re-reading	10
Setting	6
General positive evaluation	5
Sharing with others	4
Classic	2

Table 1: Reasons for book recommendations: Codes and frequencies

Table 1 shows that one reason for liking or recommending a book clearly stands out; namely, involvement – that is, the way and the extent to which a book is able to engage the reader. Because involvement is such a broad term and covers many different ways of engaging with reading material, nine sub-codes were created that were intended to capture the different types of reader involvement mentioned in the reviews. These are displayed together with their coding frequencies in Table 2.

Code	Frequency
Becoming engrossed with the plot	39
Involvement with characters	38
Emotional involvement	30
Cognitive involvement	25
Unspecific involvement	9
Entertainment	7
Aesthetic involvement	7
Identification	2

Table 2: Involvement sub-codes and frequencies

The first type of involvement that is frequently mentioned across many genres relates to becoming engrossed in the plot, wanting to know what happens next, and experiencing suspense while reading; this is sometimes encapsulated in the terms "page-turner" or "impossible to put down," as in this description of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*: "[A]nd believe me, if you are looking for a page-turner, all niter excellent novel, this is the book for you."

Readers become involved not only with the plot, but just as much with the characters, as this quote illustrates (again taken from a review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*): "She is fascinating: ruthless and tough to a fault, yet internally vulnerable, struggling to comprehend her own feelings. She has an appeal that draws you to her, rooting for her, and wanting to understand her. Lisbeth is unforgettable, unlike most characters that populate mystery thrillers. There is such depth here." This is another code that was applied to reviews of different genres. Yet it is noticeable that character involvement is most frequent with novels that are part of a series, such as *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, or the vampire novels from the *Twilight* and the *Sookie Stackhouse* series. There is also a subset of code occurrences within "Involvement with characters" that relates to reviews written in a more reflective, analytical mode. The majority of reviews in which involvement with the characters is mentioned are written from the perspective of someone engaging with a character. This subset of reviews, on the other hand, focuses more on how the character is developed by the author: "The character development is so deep that I felt certain the author must 'know' pieces of these characters somehow in real life or experienced some of what she described within her own – Great depths to their personalities and interactions. You truly read into their souls and she captures details in her words that make for deep insight" (from a review of Jennifer Weiner: *Best Friends Forever*). Within the sample analyzed here, this more reflective stance is not taken towards any of the serial novels.

The two subsequent involvement codes relate to whether the involvement occurs primarily in emotional or cognitive terms. The emotional type of involvement is exemplified by the following excerpt from a review of *Olive Kitteredge*: "These stories of small town life in Maine linked through one woman, Olive Kitteridge are so emotionally honest and resonated so deeply, I felt literally fragile after I finished." Cognitive involvement, on the other hand, is characterized by accounts of how readers learned something new or how a book changed their previous ideas about a given subject. One book that is characterized as highly cognitively involving is the religious novel *The Shack*: "One of the most thought-provoking books I've ever read. As soon as I received my copy of *The Shack*, I read it

from cover to cover in one evening. This is a work that draws you in with a page-turner storyline. Then with a mind-bending turn, it proceeds to challenge all your preconceived theological notions. I have nearly finished reading *The Shack* a second time; next I plan to go through it with a pen to underline ideas that need mulling over.”

Emotional involvement, like involvement with the plot, is a code that recurs in reviews of books from all genres. The code of cognitive involvement, however, has notably not been applied to any reviews of serial novels, only to reviews of novels with more “literary” aspirations (such as: *The Shack*, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, *The Book Thief*, *Olive Kitteredge*, etc.).

The remaining types of involvement are mentioned significantly less often across the reviews. The code “unspecific involvement” was applied to reviews that indicated involvement with a book without going into any details about the relevant features of the book or the type of involvement that was experienced, as in this review of *Breaking Dawn*: “*Breaking Dawn* was definitely not what I expected to end a series of books that I truly became engulfed in and loved. However, I wasn’t disappointed. I honestly believe that Stephanie Meyer wrote a book filled with the happiness of writing something you truly enjoy.” “Entertainment” indicates another somewhat unspecific type of involvement. This code was applied whenever the readers themselves used the term “entertaining” or “fun to read” to describe their involvement with a book; for example: “Still, through its final page, this is an original and entertaining book,” relating to *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*.

Yet another type of involvement relates to the way language is used; this was termed “aesthetic involvement.” This is, for instance, evident in the following excerpt, relating to *South of Broad*: “Conroy uses the most beautiful language – it just made me want to read some sentences over and over. I found myself reading some parts aloud, just to hear the way the words resonated.” Like cognitive involvement, aesthetic involvement was not expressed in reviews of books that were part of a series, but primarily in reviews of more “literary” books (such as *Angela’s Ashes*, *South of Broad*, *The Book Thief*, and *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*).

A last type of involvement, which occurred only twice across the reviews, was termed “identification” (taking up the terminology used in the reviews). This also relates to involvement with characters, but goes beyond general involvement with characters in drawing specific analogies between a fictional character and the reader: “I especially enjoyed reading about Olive in her post-retirement years, the ways in which she deals with other people and herself. In many ways, I can identify with Olive, having doled out bits of malice in angering situations; or having been soft and

tender-hearted during others. Like Olive, I too have been both fool and sage” (relating to *Olive Ketteridge*).

Next to “involvement,” another frequent reason that readers give for liking or recommending a book is the favorable comparison with another book (see Table 1 above). The comparisons found in the reviews were of two types: they referred either to another writer or to other books by the same writer. Comparisons to other writers are wide-ranging, including comparisons to classic writers like Charles Dickens or Truman Capote, or to the Bible, as well as references to more popular works of fiction such as *The Da Vinci Code*. As the breadth of comparisons already indicates, comparisons with other writers are made across the full range of bestsellers included in the top twenty-five list, regardless of genre. In drawing their comparisons, the readers sometimes display a positively staggering degree of expertise, as does this reviewer of *From Dead to Worse* from the *Sookie Stackhouse* series:

As a reader I'm often driven by various reading projects. Last August I decided that I wanted to read my way through the more significant and critically acclaimed (e.g., Bram Stoker, Theodore Sturgeon, Richard Matheson, Poppy Brite, George R. R. Martin) and less significant but very popular (Anne Rice, Laurell K. Hamilton, Stephanie Meyer) writers. There were a couple of writers that I couldn't quite place in either camp. One was F. Paul Wilson, who I have yet to read. Another was Charlaine Harris. My initial fear was that she was going to be another Laurell K. Hamilton, who had started with a great initial promise but seemed completely clueless as to what to do next, making one misstep after another in destroying what could have been a very good series (and indeed, with a couple of books, like *OBSIDIAN BUTTERFLY* – interestingly completely divorced from the dreadful St. Louis social setting that destroyed most of her other books – she did show us something of what the Anita Blake books might have become). There were a long string of interesting parallels, including a protagonist with supernatural powers and a supernatural lineage becoming socially and romantically involved with vampires and were creatures. But while the Anita Blake books were increasingly less and less imaginative and more and more nothing short of pornographic, the Sookie Stackhouse books are unceasingly fresh, fun, and surprising. Everything that the Anita Blake books do wrong, the Sookie Stackhouse books do correctly.

Comparisons to other books by the same writer are typical in reviews of books that are part of a series, as in this review of *New Moon*: “This sequel to *Twilight*, though not exactly what most readers expected, exceeded those expectations with an amazingly unpredictable story line – complete with the familiar characters we love so much!” The question whether a book lived up to the expectations created by the earlier books in the series is especially prevalent in the reviews of the last volume of the Harry Potter series; for instance: “What fascinated me was this: Some people were right,

with regard to who is good, who is bad, who will live, who will die – but almost nobody got the ‘why’ part correct. I truthfully expected an exciting but rather predictable ending, but instead was thrown for a loop. We’ve known that Rowling is fiendishly clever for years – but I didn’t think she was *this* clever.”

As Table 1 shows, involvement with a book and comparison to other books are by far the most frequent reasons readers mention in their reviews for recommending a book. Another, less prevalent reason relates to the quality of the writing, as does the following comment on *Sarah’s Key*: “Tatiana de Rosnay has crafted a well-written novel that alternates between the past in 1942, and the present.” Another reason why readers recommend a book has to do with the theme: “This is a book about love and suffering, hatred and faith, fear and courage. It is about women of strength and dignity who carry on and manage to care about others despite an unjust system” (relating to *The Help*). This code was applied to any mentioning of a given topic as well as to recommendations that relied on book genre (such as referring to *The Time Traveler’s Wife* specifically in terms of being a science fiction novel). The quality of the writing and the theme of the books were mentioned by readers with approximately equal frequency, and both codes occurred in reviews of all books, regardless of genre.

Another reason why some of the readers appreciate some of the books included here is the author’s sense of humor or the ability of a book to make the reader laugh: “Often heartbreaking, yet unbelievably funny in parts. Real humor pops up unexpectedly, which renders the reading even more pleasant and lightens some heart-knotting situations” (relating to *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*). Another reason for appreciating the bestsellers was realism. This code was used to include both the reference to real events and psychological realism: “The voices were so true it was hard to believe they were fictional” (relating to *The Help*). The sense that they have encountered a book that they would like to re-read is another positive characteristic that recurs across reviews: “I will tell you that this is an astounding book, a beautiful book, and a book that I know I will read again and again” (relating to *The Book Thief*). All of these reasons are mentioned across genres.

The remaining reasons are found fewer than ten times across all best-seller reviews, but are nevertheless described here, considering the small sample size. These include: appreciation of the setting and the way this is rendered (“Charlaine Harris is a fabulous author, no question. Her style of writing is so engaging, so descriptive and entertaining; it takes only about a page of reading before I feel like I have been transplanted to Bon Temps, Louisiana”); a general positive evaluation, without providing any specific reasons (“This is the best book I have read in years! I can’t recommend it

enough! It is fabulous and I think they will make a movie out of it"; relating to *The Help*); a book evoking the wish to share it with others ("[B]ut in the past few years there have only been a handful of books that when I finish reading the book I sit and try to think of who I can send a copy to, who can I share this wonderful experience with. A book that when I finish, I want to go back to the beginning and start over"; relating to *The Book Thief*); and considering a book to have the qualities of a classic ("Angela's Ashes is a modern-day classic"). Again, these codes are used across genres, although this has to be qualified by the small sample size.

Discussion

Previous research on factors influencing book choice has emphasized the importance of author-related reasons and book theme, and to some extent writing style (D'Astous et al.; Kamphuis; Leemans & Stokmans). In this analysis of reviews of bestsellers, these reasons again emerge as important, thus emphasizing their relevance for the selection of both literary reading (which has been the focus of prior research) and light reading (which predominated among the twenty-five bestsellers selected for this study). In contrast to previous research, however, it is the degree of involvement and thus the kind of reading experience afforded by a given book that emerges as the most important reason of all.

On closer inspection, however, the paramount importance of involvement-related reasons in this study does not contradict the findings of previous research. In their descriptions of involvement with characters, for instance, readers sometimes refer to their previous experience with these characters in other books by the same author: "I think this book is for the fans who have fallen in love with these characters. We've spent the last year since the release of *All Together Dead* wondering what was going to happen next, and musing about the paths the characters would take. From *Dead to Worse* tells us some great stories, fills in some of the personal details we've all been aching to know, and sets the stage for what will be I hope many more books to come." Involvement with characters can thus be part of involvement with the story world created by a particular author and, like the high percentage of books from a series on the list of the twenty-five top bestsellers, this result emphasizes the pattern-driven nature of book choice found in previous research (Duijx et al.). The familiar has a strong appeal for readers, and the involvement and the "branding" potential of these story worlds is further emphasized by aids to book selection featured on the Internet, such as author websites or fan websites.

In addition to these reasons affecting book selection across genres, this study also points to additional grounds that may be relevant only for certain types of readers or with respect to certain genres. Character development, cognitive, and aesthetic involvement, for instance, emerge as reasons for book selection only with respect to “semi-light” reading, such as Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*. Other grounds on which readers recommend novels have not been discussed in prior research, such as the author’s sense of humor, the potential of a book for re-reading, or the wish to share it with others, and exploring their role in book selection is a task for further research.

This study analyzed only a small – albeit information-rich – sample of book reviews. In future studies, larger samples of reviews at different points in time from different countries and different booksellers should be examined in order to test the robustness of these findings. Moreover, to explore whether different reasons are relevant for different types of reading, analyses comparing the reasons for recommending “literary” as opposed to “light” books and comparing the reasons for recommending books from different genres should be conducted. With the Internet, an unprecedented amount of information on reading reception is at our disposal – it is up to reception studies to make use of it.

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APPENDIX: BESTSELLER FICTION ON AMAZON.COM AS OF 20 JULY 2009

1. Kathryn Stockett: *The Help*
2. J. K. Rowling: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*
3. William P. Young: *The Shack*
4. Charlaine Harris: *Sookie Stackhouse*
5. Mary Ann Shaffer: *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*
6. Audrey Niffenegger: *The Time Traveler's Wife*
7. Stieg Larsson: *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*
8. Frank McCourt: *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*
9. Stephenie Meyer: *Breaking Dawn*
10. Elizabeth Strout: *Olive Kitteredge*
11. Muriel Barbery: *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*
12. Jennifer Weiner: *Best Friends Forever*
13. Stephenie Meyer: *New Moon*
14. Stieg Larsson: *The Girl Who Played with Fire*
15. Pat Conroy: *South of Broad*
16. Tatiana de Rosnay: *Sarah's Key*
17. Janet Evanovich: *Finger Lickin' Fifteen*
18. Charlaine Harris: *From Dead to Worse*
19. Sophie Kinsella: *Twenties Girl*
20. Seth Grahame-Smith: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*
21. Markus Zusak: *The Book Thief*
22. Rack Riordan: *The Last Olympian*
23. Lisa See: *Shanghai Girls*
24. Stephenie Meyer: *The Host*
25. James Rollins: *The Doomsday Key*