

Making U.S. Readers in the Early Twentieth Century traces how definitions of “reading” and “being a reader” circulated through mundane, mass-mediated textual materials associated with three of the period’s increasingly influential institutions: the school, the newspaper, and the library. For a period that thought deeply about the implications of expanding networks of literacy and print, I assemble a formally and disciplinarily diverse archive of materials from the 1910s and 1920s. These materials represent the breadth of the period’s public thinking on reading, when technological innovations and societal realignments made it possible for reading to take on wide-spread, nationalized forms of meaning. By closely reading standardized reading tests for primary-school children, beginning reading primers for illiterate adults, newspaper book reviews, and library publicity materials, I distill a complex set of practices, attitudes, and behaviors—some textual, many not—that helped define “reading” and “being a reader” as a social performance to be calibrated to the demands of different audiences and communities. “Reading,” I argue, emerges in these materials not merely as an internalized, personal practice, but as a highly contingent form of sociality, a way of understanding one’s position in a world that was increasingly organized by print.

In its explicit focus on institutional sites of reading, *Making U.S. Readers* offers a new method for considering “reading” as a powerful, institutionalized idiom of social and cultural belonging. Unlike most studies of historical readers, which seek out evidence of individual or group responses to specific texts, I turn instead to documents that testify to the larger structures of thought and feeling that imparted social significance to “reading” as an abstract concept and an embodied practice. The broader focus that my approach affords also crucially includes forms of non-reading—from outright illiteracy to pretending to read—which underscore the exclusionary functions of reading in this period that institutionalized the now-commonplace practice of using reading as a cipher of modernization, social reform, civility, and citizenship. Furthermore, *Making U.S. Readers* provides a model for recentering literary studies around questions of readers and reading, the subjects and practice at the center of our disciplinary endeavor. By focusing on non-literary materials that represent the variegated spaces and texts around the literary, I offer a reminder that “literary reading” is but one of many ways that reading has been differentially institutionalized, starting in the early twentieth century and continuing through today. Rather than set literary reading apart from the more obviously instrumental modes of reading that I recover, I argue that we need to understand the types of reading we value, use, and teach not as ideologically neutral or transparently good, but as specific instruments in our own disciplinary project of making particular types of readers.

The first two chapters of my dissertation take on the idea of “making readers” in explicitly pedagogical materials intended for different populations of beginning readers. In Chapter 1, “‘Do what it says to do’: Standardized Reading and Silent Reading Tests,” I insist that any history of twentieth-century reading—particularly “general” or “ordinary” reading—must reckon with the indelible social and ideological effects of “standardized reading,” created and circulated broadly by silent reading tests and pedagogies in the 1910s and 1920s. As I retrace the trial-and-error attempts of educators and researchers to isolate, measure, and standardize “silent reading” across a burgeoning U.S. primary school population, I argue that test makers actually produced the “tangible, objective” reading that they had hoped to observe. In their content and form, reading tests modeled and rewarded a very particular set of textual practices, a “standardized reading” that, in its seeming self-evidentness, increasingly effaced the highly contingent interpretive moves and knowledges it entailed. As tests enabled new ways of plotting readers along the nation-wide axes of a normal distribution curve, the ascendancy of “standardized reading” made reading well—that is, doing well on reading tests—a marker of belonging inside and outside of the classroom.

In Chapter 2, “‘What a farmer reads shows in his farm’: Learning to be Literate with Adult Reading Primers,” I pivot to a different set of beginning readers—illiterate adults—through readings of the *Country Life Readers*, an unusual set of literacy textbooks designed by Cora Wilson Stewart (1875-1958) for native-born, English-speaking, white adults in her home state of Kentucky. By closely attending to the affective instructions embedded in Stewart’s reading and writing lessons, I show how her books lay bare the harsh “truths” of illiteracy’s significance in a social world. Everything, Stewart suggests, from farming practices, to personal hygiene, to civic participation, has the potential to betray one’s illiteracy. Rather than read despair into these lessons, however, I argue that as Stewart pulls back the curtain on the social constructedness of literacy, she opens a space for her students to imagine themselves as “literate” in a broader, more performative sense, in which “reading” and “being a reader” entails a wholly different set of skills than mere textual processing. Stewart’s books may not effectively teach their students how to actually read, but they do teach invaluable lessons about how and why to *act* like a reader, making them rare, explicit sources that reveal the implicit interpretive and affective structures that give meaning to reading.

While Chapters 1 and 2 focus on beginning readers, Chapters 3 and 4 turn to more figurative moments of readerly creation. Chapter 3, “‘To guide the right readers to the right books’: Newspaper Book Reviews and Typologies of Ordinary Reading,” turns to a ubiquitous form of commentary on literary culture that has received almost no direct scholarly attention. Rather than take newspaper book reviews as secondary evidence of textual reception, I consider how they helped make possible a variety of textual practices in their own time, in particular the practice of the “ordinary reader” imagining herself as a participant in and observer of a “literary culture.” I read both across a variety of newspapers and deeply into the work of one prolific reviewer (Fanny Butcher [1888-1987] of the *Chicago Tribune*) to show how reviews negotiated their imagined relationships to a broad, mass-mediated audience of readers. Poised between authors and readers, journalism and criticism, and the ordinary and the literary, book reviews provided a deeply ambivalent type of cultural instruction that at once upheld the distance of the literary while also providing the reader with a sense of closeness to and involvement in it. As dynamic documents that aspired to speak for readers of the past, book reviews can help us understand how “being a reader” is always a relational exercise, as the individual reader must understand herself in terms of multiple levels of community and belonging.

My fourth and final chapter, “‘A reading army as no army ever was before’: The American Library Association’s Campaign for Books and Reading in World War I,” provides a new account of what happened when reading was pressed into service by the extraordinary circumstances of total war. As part of U.S. war efforts in 1917–1918, the American Library Association (ALA) collected over \$5 million and ten million books and magazines to provide reading materials to soldiers and sailors at home and abroad. In order to support this impromptu library-military complex, the ALA produced a bevy of publicity materials that I argue constitute the first ever mass-mediated, institutionally-backed publicity campaign in support of widespread, general reading. Through the recurrent figure of the “soldier-reader,” a uniquely masculine reader who used libraries, books, and reading to become a better soldier, a better man, and a better American, the ALA pressed “reading” into a paradoxical service: to affirm American exceptionalism in alignment with the aims of the war and to allay war’s ruptures and traumas in the service of humanitarian peace. Within the ALA’s paradigm, non-reading is not merely a personal or communal shortcoming, but a matter of national (and even international) security. In contrast to other work on reading in the war that tends to focus on recovering the actual reading practices of soldiers, I argue instead that the ALA’s assuredly exaggerated claims about soldier-readers in fact provide a richer account of the potent meanings assigned to reading during a time of national crisis. As the final chapter, this reconsideration of the ALA’s wartime efforts offers a dramatic example of my project’s central claim: that everyday institutions, through everyday materials, used ideas of reading to delineate the bounds of inclusion and exclusion in civic life in the early twentieth century United States.