ROMANCE READERS AND THE POLITICS OF LITERARY TASTE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITAIN

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The Mass Observation (MO) archive, a collection of intimate, first-person narratives, offers unique insights into the different ways in which books and reading habits allow interwar and postwar women to negotiate and express identity in the safety of the domestic sphere, a traditionally feminine realm. By situating women's reading practices within broader historical developments in literacy, publishing, and gender roles, the essay examines how reading functioned as means of asserting individuality and personal autonomy. First, this paper will provide a concise summary of shifts in publishing, literacy, and literary taste, followed by a case study of Mills & Boon readers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, focusing on the social negotiations involved when women read for pleasure. While the activity of reading is not always confined to the home, the strong material and emotional attachments women express towards their books highlight that these objects often provide a unique source of comfort. The book itself therefore functioned as a portable 'home away from home,' which reinforced the twentieth-century reader's sense of self wherever she may be.

This paper will engage with responses to the MO 1988 Autumn Directive Part 1 and the 1993 Spring Directive Part 2, which ask respondents about their favourite pastimes and reading habits. The idiosyncratic nature of the MO material underscores the importance of avoiding any singular or universal notion of the female experience. Women's engagements with books and reading were shaped by class, age, and race; and although the MO archive offers limited background information for each respondent, it nonetheless provides valuable insight into the diverse ways women asserted personal autonomy through their literary choices.

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Data and Methods.

MO contains a wealth of intimate, detailed narratives across a range of themes related to everyday life. One of the most debated aspects of MO is its self-selectivity – respondents are in full control of what directives they respond to and the level of detail and truth in their responses, which some social scientists argue compromises the archive's representativeness.[1] Due to the self-selectivity of the material, the archive is inherently shaped by personal bias, limiting its use for those seeking statistical uniformity.[2] Though many scholars contend that these very characteristics can be seen as limitations – the archive's subjectivity, inconsistency, and lack of generalisability – are what make MO uniquely valuable. Rachel Hurdley conveys this idea under the description of MO material not as a reflection of wider social trends, but as "a particular case of the possible".[3] Joe Moran argues that this "first-person vividness" provides a subjective facet to research which is at times more valuable that the "dry empiricism of statistics".[4] Pollen further defends the archive's incoherent and heterogeneous nature, asserting that its "mixed and disruptive methods" grant access to the real inconsistencies of history that are often obscured by traditional research methodologies.[5] The voluntary engagement of MO respondents without prior knowledge of directive themes also highlights that participation in MO grows out of a general interest in sharing. For instance, respondent T1277 expresses that: "I enjoy the time brooding on topics for Mass Observation", suggesting that for this respondent, the considerable timeframe afforded to Mass Observation contributors, and the surprise element of the directive topics, make the process of writing for MO particularly pleasurable.[6]

By engaging with responses to the 1988 Autumn Directive Part 1, which asks respondents to explain their favourite regular pastimes, and the 1993 Spring Directive Part 2, which asks respondents specifically about their reading habits and organisation of books within their own homes, this essay examines how twentieth-century female respondents conceptualised their own reading practices and the social meanings attached to them. Common among many of the responses is an underlying awareness of literary taste as a marker of cultural identity, shaped by the broader social developments and late 20th-century attitudes toward reading. The ways in which this literary taste is discussed, however, differed starkly from person to person.

Literary Hierarchies and the Rise of the 'Ordinary' Reader.

The 'ordinary' reader emerged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as reading became an activity increasingly accessible to the general population. This accessibility depended on three requisites: literacy, leisure time, and disposable income – conditions that became widespread only by the late 19th century.[7] As Feather argues, "[e]ducation was the driver of change".[8] Accordingly, it was the Victorian education legislation, such as the 1870 Education Act, which prioritised the education of the poor, that enabled Britain to reach a rate of almost 100% literacy by the turn of the century.[9] These changes were not felt uniformly by both men and women – while both experienced significant increases in leisure time and disposable income, men benefitted far more than women from these developments. For instance, in her social study of Middlesbrough's working class, Lady Bell concluded that the men read more than their wives due to both a greater likelihood "to be stimulated by intercourse with his fellows" and because "he has more definite times of leisure in which he feels he is amply justified in 'sitting down with a book'".[10] Despite this, social changes throughout the century encouraged the emergence of the female reader, and by 1997, 71% of women compared to 58% of men read books.[11]

This reading boom continued to accelerate throughout the early 20th century, and the prominence of lending libraries in this period mirrored this growing interest in reading as a leisure activity. The First World War indirectly prompted an expansion in female readership. During the war, employment opportunities gave many women greater economic independence and increased their spending power.[12] The following interwar years ushered in a re-establishment of domesticated gender roles in which women were expected to return to "home and duty".[13] The domestic expectations of the interwar years were challenged by the emergent Modernist movement, where figures like Virginia Woolf defied traditional societal norms, instead advocating a

"conscious break from the past".[14] However, such avant-garde defiance largely belonged to women from wealthier, well-educated backgrounds, for whom reading had long been an accessible pastime.

Therefore, due to prevailing narratives of domesticity among working- and middle-class British women, greater numbers turned to home-based leisure activities which could be engaged in while maintaining a performance of conformity to these domestic gender roles. This included reading which, due to increased female spending power, women were increasingly able to self-fund. This, combined with a "post-war surplus of single women," created a new market of financially independent female readers whose literary choices were less constrained by a husband's control.[15]

While these changes were more apparent for middle- and upper-class white women, developments in library systems in the interwar period began the process of broadening accessibility to other demographic groups, predominantly working-class women. The public library service was available to 96.3% of the population by 1926, and library service points across Britain grew from 5,730 in 1920 to 23,000 in 1949.[16] Furthermore, by 1949, it is estimated that nearly a quarter of the population were registered as borrowers.[17] 'Tuppenny' libraries also emerged in the 1930s, and accommodated a growth in reading activity, particularly among the lower classes.[18] They rented out popular fiction for twopence a week, getting their name from the cost.[19] As such, lending libraries, particularly 'Tuppenny' libraries, increased the accessibility and affordability of reading for women across the country.

The response of the publishing industry to these developments was to capitalise on these new markets and commercialise the book trade, incorporating commodity-style techniques and prioritising the packaging and advertising of their books.[20] Certain publishing houses successfully targeted certain audiences, such as Mills & Boon, who marketed their books specifically to the types of women who frequented 'tuppenny' libraries.[21] Women had always read romantic novels, but the success of publishing houses like Mills & Boon solidified their popularity, and by 1982, romance novels accounted for at least 25% of all paperback sales.[22] This effort to cater to women's literary tastes, which had been otherwise neglected by publishing companies prior to the interwar period, encouraged the growth in the reading public, despite the two outbreaks of war. However, the commercialisation of the publishing industry and their newfound focus on working-class and female readers, who were generally excluded from literary engagement in prior decades, also invited debates over the effects of this greater accessibility.

As such, this growth in readership in the late 19th and early 20th centuries prompted what James describes as a "negative climate surrounding the growing popularity of book reading," a sentiment which fuelled the development of a literary hierarchy intended to safeguard 'high culture'.[23] In this period, Britain's social elites treated most popular leisure activities with scorn, likening them to a drug habit.[24] In regard to mass reading, they expressed a particular distaste for the mass use of regular and 'tuppenny' libraries, arguing that the latter in particular encouraged "the reading of fiction for entertainment only".[25] A product of this consternation was the conception of the literary hierarchy, organised into 'lowbrow', 'middlebrow', and 'highbrow' works of literature. While Virginia Woolf championed a defiance of traditional domestic roles through her fiction, she otherwise shared this condescending attitude towards the newly empowered reading public. She exemplified this disdain in a 1927 letter, arguing that middlebrow literature was "in pursuit of no single object, neither Art itself no life itself but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige," thereby articulating the anxious response of literary elites to a newly empowered reading demographic.

The persistence of this disdain for what the 'socially inferior' were reading through the mid-to-late twentieth century was a direct result of intensifying self-consciousness about status. The main factor in this shift

was the decline of traditional symbols of elite status. The decline of the British aristocracy began in the late 19th century and was solidified by postwar legislation such as the Life Peerages Act of 1958, which diminished the dominance of hereditary peers.[26] Therefore, as upper-class influence and relative living standards declined, individuals were compelled to defend their social status more aggressively and through novel means.[27] Cultural taste, including literary preference, was elevated to a primary indicator of status. As McCracken argues, "the reputation of a text seems to diminish as its readership grows".[28] Consequently, as the 1950s paperback revolution brought "books into far more homes than had ever had them before," the reputation of popular, mainstream fiction was associated with 'lowbrow' tastes, while preferences for established 'highbrow' works were associated with higher social status. The decision over what was and was not intellectually stimulating enough to be classed as 'highbrow' was decided entirely by the upper classes who, threatened by the popularisation of reading, were looking for new ways to diminish others to assert their own superiority. As such, it was the deterioration of traditional class definitions in the mid-to-late twentieth century that consolidated books as increasingly indicative of intellectual and social sophistication.[29] Therefore, as an analysis of the MO material will highlight, the distinction between 'highbrow', 'middlebrow' and 'lowbrow' literary tastes, which emerged in the interwar period, was able to survive well into the latter half of the century and still permeates discussions of reading habits today.[30]

Literary Favourites: the Case of Mills & Boon.

As literary tastes are seen as indications of social status and personal identity, it is unsurprising that readers are reluctant to associate themselves with genres and authors associated with 'lowbrow' and unintellectual tastes. Reading tastes are presented in the tangible display of bookshelves, and so constitute a semi-public display of identity and invitation for judgement, as acting as a microcosm of class status. This is reflected in a response from M1201, who explicitly uses the bookshelf as a tool of social navigation: "A study of a recently met person's bookshelves will tell me if we have anything significant in common".[31] This hints at the capacity of books to cultivate female friendships, exemplified by the proliferation of book clubs which has persisted well into the 21st century, and boast large female membership.

This tension between private enjoyment and public judgement is evident in the case of Mills & Boon, a publisher whose popularity among women has made it a primary target for the policing of 'lowbrow' literary taste. By 1998, Mills & Boon had sold over 200 million paperbacks in 100 markets, claiming 54% of the UK romantic fiction market, a dominance that stems from a loyal, and predominantly female, working-class readership.[32] As such, Mills & Boon has long been dismissed as formulaic and lowbrow, despite, and partly because of, its enormous popularity. As McAleer notes, the publisher has "always been the butt of jokes", and its rigid adherence to a successful formula, requiring authors to follow "a strict list of specifications", has drawn significant criticism.[33] The publisher has also long been a site of feminist contestation, especially during the period of second-wave feminism. This period focused on achieving substantive equality, and thus exposed and criticised traditional patriarchal structures across a wider array of issues than its predecessor, such as reproductive rights and domestic violence, and did so through more radical means. This also coincided with a historiographical 'cultural turn,' which prioritised cultural over the dominant political and economic modes of historiography, and incorporated theoretical frameworks from a range of disciplines, such as literary criticism and cultural studies.[34] The influences of second-wave feminism and the historiographical 'cultural turn' prompted an increase in the study of women's popular reading and invited much debate over the significance of romance novels in perpetuating or challenging patriarchal hierarchies.

Initially, critics argued that the books were regressive due to the reinforcement of traditional gender norms and emphasis on marriage and heterosexual romance, depicting the female protagonists as needy and weak.[35] More recently, scholars have argued that these novels provide space for female agency and escapism, representing a phenomenon that was uncommon for much of the 20th century: novels written by women specifically for women.[36] This new research is encouraging, but it is important that the study of these

novels is not approached with preconceived notions of their strengths or flaws; to effectively examine the genre's social significance, we must prioritise an analysis of the reader's experience over judgements of literary merit. Furthermore, while romance novels can risk perpetuating traditional gender roles, so does literature more popular amongst men – for example crime novels and military fiction, which often feature strong, stoic male protagonists. Yet there is comparatively little research into the shortcomings of these genres. The debate over reading habits would be enriched by the transition from a sole focus on the merits of a literary work to a prioritisation on the experience of the reader.

The most seminal work into the study of female romance readers was Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Interview responses from 42 romance readers challenge popular assumptions that romance novels are anti-feminist by nature, encouraging in their readers an acceptance of patriarchal traditions.[37] Accordingly, the MO directive responses from 1988 and 1993 that are the focus of this essay were written during a period of transition within academic literature on female popular reading. However, while the late 20th century saw a shift to a less critical perspective on romance novels such as those published by Mills & Boon, this was not immediately mirrored in popular perception.

The tension between the popularity of Mills & Boon novels and their existence as indications of anti-feminist, anti-intellectual values is evident in the following MO response:

The bedside tables in my parents' bedroom have become temporary bookshelves, although mum doesn't seem to get the time to read so much anymore. Before she started teaching again, the house was littered with 'Mills & Boon' books. You would find them everywhere – often stuffed down the side of chairs, where they were hidden if she was disturbed reading them! Once a week she would meet up with our next-door neighbour and swap copies.[38]

Her description of books 'stuffed down the side of chairs' evokes an intimate domestic setting where the pleasures of reading coexist with the constant interruptions of home life. Earlier in the response, A2685 explains that her mother studied literature at college before becoming a teacher.[39] Despite her mother's literary knowledge, her impulse to hide the books demonstrates a defence of her own literary taste and a tacit recognition of their low cultural status. Her weekly 'swap' with a neighbour, however, also represents a small, semi-clandestine act of female community despite her shame surrounding the genre. Female community was a large aspect of the lives of female readers from the start of the century. For example, during the Second World War, "female factory workers were to be found debating the merits of... *Gone with the Wind*" (Z-B, 260). Therefore, despite widespread disapproval, female readers have sought supportive communities in which they can discuss their reading habits at will, often in spaces that encouraged female autonomy over patriarchal dominance, such as the wartime workplace or within the home.

However, other respondents articulate explicit disdain for Mills & Boon and similar forms of popular romance, representing an internalisation of the patriarchal literary hierarchy, where women seek to express an intellectual identity by policing their own or others' leisure reading. Subsequently, T1277 describes Mills & Boon as follows:

Young Asian wives could buy the Mills and Boon romances, to which they are addicted, at the supermarkets with their groceries and dispose of them to the library when they were read. In this way the husbands could not complain of their extravagance, since the 70p would be hidden in the food bill.[40]

Here, the respondent's racialised framing exposes how the cultural policing of 'lowbrow' taste intersects with race and gender, positioning immigrant women as othered – both as racial outsiders and as 'addicted' readers of unintellectual fiction. These sorts of racial prejudices were normalised in late 20th century British society. The 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech by Enoch

Powell, which garnered mass public support, introduced a racist rhetoric which persisted well into the final decades of the century, encouraged by organisations like the National Front and British National Party. By 'othering' the readership to a specific, racialised group of 'young Asian wives', she attempts to defend her own intellectual identity as an Englishwoman and disavow the genre's low cultural status. Later in her response, she expresses that although she reads widely, these books are "seldom romances – never Barbara Cartland or any Mills & Boon," which further distances her from the genre and implies a belief that, due to the repetitive nature of the novels, she has no use for 'any' of them.[41]

Escapist literature peaked during wartime, as readers sought a refuge from the difficult realities of everyday life, but romance novels continued to serve this purpose for many women in the post-war period. In Radway's study,[42] she identifies the greatest motives for female readers of romance were "for simple relaxation", "because reading is just for me; it is my time", and "to learn about faraway places and times", highlighting the priority of both comfort and separation from the realities of a patriarchal society. This reliance on books for comfort was a[43] phenomenon evident among some MO responses. Reading provides a quotidian presence or companionship, offering a 'home away from home'. M1201 later states that "Sometimes, particularly when I'm tired, I like to read something that doesn't require energy, so I read an old familiar friend.", with "old familiar friend" suggesting that the routine reading provides a unique source of comfort.[44]

However, reading for the purpose of escapism is also critiqued in certain MO responses, just as it was by social elites in the first half of the century, who disapproved of literature that was not intellectually stimulating. L2039 states that "I cringe visibly at Louis L'Amour and Mills & Boon," aligning these genres with other forms of fiction deemed inferior, such as horror and westerns.[45] This rejection is tied to a broader critique of escapist literature, as evidenced by her defence of children's classics as "a 'better' form of escapism".[46] Accordingly, this respondent is actively seeking a defensible position *within* the realm of leisure reading, symbolising the impulse felt by many women to defend their reading choices after a history of dismissal. Such distinctions suggest that even among readers who consume fiction from outside the literary canon, there may exist an internalised hierarchy that differentiates between acceptable and unacceptable forms of leisure reading. For example, R1580 states that "[f]or my 'light' reading I choose 'bodice rippers'. They are those romantic novels (NOT Mills and Boon) about Pirates and Maidens".[47] Her preference for 'bodice rippers' over Mills & Boon romances suggests that even within the specific realm of popular women's romance, readers delineate between subgenres based on perceived literary quality and narrative complexity. This shows an active, self-aware attempt by the female reader to delineate a personal, defensible space of 'light reading' even within a stigmatised genre. The case of Mills & Boon underscores the gendered implications of literary taste, revealing how female readers navigate the hierarchy of 'legitimacy' in popular fiction during the late-twentieth century. The MO material reveals that these female readers are acutely aware of these hierarchies, and their responses reflect the diverse effects these judgments have on their private reading habits.

Conclusion.

The personal, often contradictory responses to MO directives reveal how women navigated the relationship between reading, identity, and social expectations, particularly in their engagement with genre fiction such as Mills & Boon. The enduring legacy of this phenomenon is most clearly demonstrated by the capacity of books to cultivate female friendships, evidenced by the persistence of book clubs into the 21st century, and their predominantly female membership. Furthermore, the continuous success of modern popular women's fiction, i.e. 'chick lit', suggests that this category of literature, providing narratives that speak directly to women's experiences and anxieties, still fulfils many of the same functions as the Mills & Boon novels. Thus, with additional time, it may be illuminating to extend a similar methodology into

a study on reading habits in the twenty-first century, but such a study would also require a consideration of the influence of social media on the position of romance and 'chick lit' novels within the literary hierarchy. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that by substantiating historical trends and scholarly debate with MO material, which preserves the idiosyncrasies of personal experience, we may begin to comprehend the different ways in which women asserted personal autonomy through their choice of literature at the end of the twentieth century.

Footnotes

1. Annebella Pollen, "Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: 'Scientifically, about as Valuable as a Chimpanzee's Tea Party at the Zoo'?" *History Workshop Journal* 75, no. 75 (2013): 221.
2. Jenny Shaw, 'Transference and Countertransference in the Mass-Observation Archive', *Human Relations* 47, no.11 (1994): 1395-6.
3. Pollen, "Research Methodology", 221.
4. Joe Moran, *Armchair Nation: An Intimate History of Britain in front of the TV* (London: Profile Books, 2013), 275.
5. Pollen, "Research Methodology", 223.
6. T1277, Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex): response to the Autumn 1988 directive.
7. Richard Daniel Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 306.
8. John Feather, *A History of British Publishing* (London: Routledge, 2006), 147.
9. Ibid.
10. Lady Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (Edward Arnold, 1907), 145.
11. Martin Francis, "Leisure and Popular Culture," in *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain: Social, Cultural and Political Change*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 258.
12. Ibid, 54.
13. Selina Todd, "Young Women, Work and Family in Inter-war Rural England," *Agricultural History Review* 52, no.1 (2004): 84.
14. Mary Ann Gillies and Aurelea Mahood, *Modernist Literature: An Introduction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007): 2.
15. Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54.
16. McAleer, *Popular Reading*, 49.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid, 70; Robert James "'Literature Acknowledges No Boundaries': Book Reading and Social Class in Britain, c.1930-c.1945," *Journal of Social History* 51, no.1 (2017): 83.
21. McAleer, *Popular Reading*, 70.
22. Edwin McDowell, "The Paperback Evolution," *New York Times*, January 10, 1982.
23. James, "No Boundaries," 83.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid, 92.
26. David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (Yale University Press, 1990); Mari Takaynagi, "A Changing House: The Life Peerages Act 1958," *Parliamentary History* 27, no.3 (2008).
27. Jennie Batchelor, Cora Kaplan, Caroline Bicks, and Jennifer Summit, *The History of British Women's Writing* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 104.
28. David Glover and Scott McCracken, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 109.
29. Jennie Batchelor, Cora Kaplan, Caroline Bicks, and Jennifer Summit, *The History of British Women's Writing* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 104.
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31. M1201, Mass Observation Archive.
32. Joseph McAleer, *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills & Boon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2-3
33. Ibid, 2, 6.
34. George Steinmetz, *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Cornell University Press, 1999) 1-2.
35. Glover and McCracken, *Cambridge Companion,* 8.
36. Ibid.
37. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
38. A2685, Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex): response to the Spring 1993 directive.
39. Ibid.
40. T1277, Mass Observation Archive.
41. Ibid.
42. Francis, "Leisure and Popular Culture," 259.
43. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 72.
44. M1201, Mass Observation Archive.
45. L2039, Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex): response to the Autumn 1988 directive.
46. Ibid.
47. R1580, Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex): response to the Autumn 1988 directive.

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