The Rhetorical Construction of Reader-Writer Identities in Contemporary Fiction Reviews

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF READER-WRITER IDENTITIES IN
CONTEMPORARY FICTION REVIEWS

by

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ABSTRACT

THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF READER-WRITER IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION REVIEWS

*The New York Times Book Review* is a prestigious, well-known, and widely-read publication. Each Sunday, countless readers turn to the reviews published in the *Times* for critiques of recently released contemporary fiction. The reviews are written by individuals of experience: novelists, short-story writers, nonfiction writers, professors of Literature, and editors of literary publications. However, in recent years, many websites have begun to publish online book reviews written by everyday readers. Goodreads.com, created in December 2006, is a social networking site devoted solely to reviewing and discussing books. My project examines the identity of the reviewer who writes for *The New York Times* and the identity of the reviewer who writes for Goodreads. I argue that by entering the rhetorical situation of the book review, via the *Times* or Goodreads, and by making key rhetorical moves, the reviewer constructs a “reader-writer” identity: the *Times* reviewer creates a “reader-writer” identity of an expert and the Goodreads reviewer creates a “reader-writer” identity of an apprentice. This project analyzes how these identities are constructed by the bylines or profiles of the reviewers, the format of the review venues, the occurrence or lack of writing errors in the reviews, the reviewers’ voices, and the reviewers’ treatment of their audiences. These reader-writer identities, I argue, are rhetorically constructed personas that are presented to the reading public. These personas indicate that the reviewer is a respectable reader in the community he/she has joined, either the *Times* community or the Goodreads community.
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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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I. Introduction

_Self-image is constructed by the ego. It gives you a façade that you can show to the world, but it also turns into a shield behind which you hide._

~ Deepak Chopra

Yesterday my colleague was walking down the hallway to his classroom, his arms laden with paperback copies of a book he would be soon distributing to his tenth-grade students. I offered to give him a hand, partly to be nice, partly to get a glimpse at the perfect, brand-new paperbacks. The book, _Never Let Me Go_, was not one I had ever heard of before, but I know of the author, Kazuo Ishiguro. On one of the many bookshelves in my home, there is a small, black paperback copy of Ishiguro’s novel _Remains of the Day_. Frankly, I don’t remember a single thing about this novel. I cannot tell you who the characters are, what the plot is, or how the novel ends. All I know is that, once upon a time, I read this book and liked it enough to keep it, rather than selling it to a used book store or passing it along to friend. This vague memory was enough to prompt me to ask my colleague for his opinion on this other Ishiguro novel. “Oh, it’s great,” he told me. “I have a ton of extra copies. Do you want to borrow one?” Just then the bell rang, signaling the beginning of the next class. My colleague held out a book, waiting for my reply. Students started to file into our classrooms. His recommendation and my dusty memory of Ishiguro’s other novel were all I needed. I absolutely wanted to read this book.

This brief exchange begins to illustrate the curious nature of how we comment on and evaluate books. My colleague’s three-word proclamation of the book’s value (“Oh, it’s great”) and my general understanding of Ishiguro as an established writer were enough to convince me that this was a novel worth reading. When the book was handed to me, I knew nothing else about it. Between the front and back covers of the book and
the first two pages, there are twenty positive, if not glowing, excerpts from book reviews published in noteworthy publications such as *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Village Voice*, *Slate*, and *The Boston Globe*. Given the formal published reviews and my colleague’s word-of-mouth review, I believed this would be a novel I would thoroughly enjoy. Yet, when I read the first chapter, I was immediately turned off by the plot. There was a science-fiction feel to the story—science fiction being a genre that I have never particularly liked. Over the course of twelve pages, it became clear that I probably would not invest any more time in reading this novel. I groaned inwardly. After expressing such enthusiasm in the hallway, after proclaiming how much I liked Ishiguro’s writing (despite my next-to-nothing memory of his earlier novel), how was I going to explain to my colleague that I didn’t finish the book, let alone read past the first chapter?

This experience with my colleague and Ishiguro’s book serves as a starting point for my argument. The ways we discuss and judge pieces of contemporary fiction reveal much about how we see ourselves as readers and how we see ourselves fitting into the larger community of readers. Because I view my colleague as an intelligent, well-read individual and because society tells us that the formal reviews in the *Times* and in other publications are paragons of good taste, I fell into the trap of assuming that their glowing praise of Ishiguro’s novel would ensure my enjoyment of the novel. For these very reasons, I also began to feel anxiety that my reaction to the book was not the same as my colleague’s or as the reviewers’. Was I missing something? Should I re-read chapter one? Should I try harder to like this book? This experience caused me to doubt myself.
as a reader and to doubt myself as a member of the community of “well-read” readers to which I have always assumed I belong.

When I began this research project, I initially set out to look at the ways readers define “good fiction.” I wanted to see the different types of criteria that readers discussed as they determined if a book was good or not. For two months, during the summer of 2009, I read reviews of contemporary fiction published in *The New York Times Book Review* and posted on the website Goodreads.com. However, as I began to sift through my notes on the reviews, a new idea began to emerge. It soon became clear that the book review of contemporary fiction—both the formal review in the *Times* and the informal review on Goodreads—is a complicated genre. On its surface, it seems to be a form that simply presents an overview and an evaluation of a chosen text. After all, this is the reason why many people turn to book reviews—they are looking for judgments of novels, ones that declare whether the books are pieces of “good fiction” or not. William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*, believes that the job of a reviewer, unlike that of a literary critic, is “more to report than to make an aesthetic judgment” (146). As a reporter, the reviewer serves as “the deputy for the average man or woman,” providing information so that the average person can make a decision whether to spend his/her money on a particular film or novel or product (147). However, I argue that the book review of contemporary fiction is much more than an informational text to aid consumers. Zinsser’s concept of the review, while convenient, is too reductive. While the reviewer may write under the guise of providing information to readers and consumers, beneath the surface of plot summary and evaluative comments, the book reviewer is adhering to a
second agenda: constructing an identity. Together, the rhetorical situation\(^1\) that the reviewer enters—namely, the writing and the publishing of a book review—and the rhetorical moves that the reviewer makes construct the reviewer’s identity. I label these constructed identities “reader-writer” identities, identities that reviewers use to locate themselves within the larger reading community.

The concept of the reader-writer that I propose should not be confused with the concept of the reader-writer relationship. Many scholars have written about the relationship between a writer and his/her reader. Most approach this concept from the angle of audience—how a writer communicates with the individuals that read his/her writing. Peter Elbow, author of *Writing with Power*, indicates that a writer’s neglect of his/her audience is a common problem in writing and he advocates for writers to be aware of and pay attention to their audiences (177). However, unlike Elbow’s view of the writer and his/her audience, I argue for the concept of a reader-writer as a single individual whose two selves—the reader self and the writer self—combine, much like the human body and the soul, to create one single identity. This reader-writer identity is therefore shaped by both the comments the individual makes about the novel he/she has read and the way he/she expresses those ideas in writing. In this project, I apply the term reader-writer identity to those individuals who first read contemporary fiction and then write reviews, published in *The New York Times Book Review* or posted on Goodreads.com, in order to express evaluations, reactions or judgments about the novels they have read. The reader-writer’s primary focus is, ostensibly, the reading of the novel; the writing is a vehicle for expressing ideas about the reading, not an end in itself.

\(^1\) The term “rhetorical situation” originates with Lloyd Bitzer. For more information about this term, refer to http://rhetorica.net/kairos.htm.
Therefore, in order to emphasize that the focus of this study is the way that reviewers represent themselves as readers, I label the individual as a “reader-writer” and not as a “writer-reader.”

In “Ethos Versus Persona: Self-Representation in Written Discourse,” Roger D. Cherry acknowledges that the way writers represent themselves is a largely unexplored territory in writing studies and that further study in this area will lead to a better understanding of “how writers construct rhetorical situations in the act of composing” (85). He argues that “self-representation in writing is a subtle and complex multidimensional phenomenon that skilled writers control and manipulate to their rhetorical advantage” (85). While I agree with Cherry’s statement about the complexity of self-representation, I would like to qualify his statement by adding that all writers, not just “skilled” writers, are in control of the selves they present in their writing. It is wrong to assume that the Times reviewer, who might be considered a skilled writer, is in control of his/her self-representation and that the Goodreads reviewer, who might be considered an unskilled writer, is not. Both reviewers are in control of the image or identity that they represent through their writing; however, the degree to which writers are able to control and manipulate their constructed identities—and their awareness of being able to do so—may vary. Cherry’s assumption, though, is noteworthy because it illustrates the stereotypical view of writers that exists. His vague, hard-to-define term “skilled writers” implies that certain individuals are skilled in writing, while others are not. And it is this very stereotype that shapes the reader-writer identities that the Times and Goodreads reviewers construct in their reviews of contemporary fiction. I argue that the Times reviewer constructs a reader-writer identity of “expert” and the Goodreads reviewer
constructs a reader-writer identity of “apprentice.” At first, my inclination was to say that the Goodreads reviewer constructs a reader-writer identity of “amateur,” as this word seemed to be the natural opposite of the term expert. However, the word amateur has a negative connotation in our society today, a connotation that would seem to match Cherry’s insinuation that some writers are unskilled—or, in other words, lacking in skill entirely. For this reason, the word “amateur” seems inappropriate here, because the Goodreads reviewers are not entirely unskilled. The word “apprentice,” therefore, seems more fitting here, since the term is used to describe a person who is experimenting and learning a certain behavior or skill. An apprentice is not unskilled; rather, an apprentice is in the process of gaining experience but is not yet an expert.

The two main concepts that Cherry addresses in his discussion of self-representation are “ethos” and “persona” and these two terms are helpful in examining how the reader-writer identity of expert or apprentice is constructed and presented. He explains that many mistakenly use these terms interchangeably when, in fact, they are two distinct terms. The term “ethos” originates with the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and his landmark text, Rhetoric, about the elements of argument. Cherry explains, “Ethos refers to the need for rhetors to portray themselves in their speeches as having good moral character, ‘practical wisdom,’ and a concern for the audience in order to achieve credibility and thereby secure persuasion” (86). The term “persona,” which derives from the literary tradition, is a bit more difficult to pinpoint as, Cherry notes, there has been much opposition over the term. One concept of the term “persona” is that

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2 It is important to note that the audience also constructs a reader-writer identity for the book reviewer. The readers of the review develop their own ideas about who the reviewer is, ideas that may or may not coincide with the reader-writer identity the reviewer constructs. However, my focus is solely on the identity that the reviewer constructs for him- or herself by entering the rhetorical situation of the book review and by making specific rhetorical moves.
it is a "merely a necessary mask for the author, that the mask is needed for the author to set him- or herself in the right posture toward a particular subject matter for a particular audience" (92). Others argue that "the author is the persona, and therefore is directly accessible" (92). However, for the purpose of this argument, the former definition of a mask is what is meant when the term persona is used. Ultimately, both the rhetorical approach of "ethos" and the literary approach of "persona" shed light on the book review, a unique genre that blends and blurs the lines between rhetoric and literature. Considering that the book review is more than the informational transaction that Zinsser suggests, the concept of "ethos" helps to inform an understanding of how the rhetorical situation and the rhetorical moves the reviewers make establish the reviewers' credibility as experts or apprentices. Additionally, the concept of the author's "persona" helps to highlight how the reader-writer identities of "expert" and "apprentice" are masks the reviewers wear as they present themselves to the reading public.³

The book review of contemporary fiction, a genre in which writers discuss fiction in their own nonfiction writing, is definitely affected by the writer's ethos and persona. Sam Tanenhaus, Editor-in-Chief of The New York Times Book Review, says in his interview with Michael Orbach, "A good review, a good argument, a good essay to me is always narrative. Not in the sense that it has to be chronological, but it builds for some kind of climax or there's a kind of sustaining of intellectual suspense: you're being taken somewhere by the writer." Tanenhaus is right. The reader of the book review is being taken somewhere—taken to a state of belief about who the reader-writer is. The reviewer

³ It is possible that not all New York Times fiction reviewers construct "expert" reader-writer identities and that not all Goodreads fiction reviewers construct "apprentice" reader-writer identities. However, I use these terms to represent general trend among the reviews included in this study. Additionally, the extent to which a Times reviewer represents him- or herself as an "expert" and the extent to which the Goodreads reviewer represents him- or herself as an "apprentice" varies from reviewer to reviewer.
creates a narrative, a story about who he/she is. Regardless of the label of “expert” or “apprentice,” each reader-writer aims to present an image of a respectable reader to others: an image built upon a strong ethos, an image that is a persona. This is not surprising, given the stereotypes and assumptions society has about those who read and those who do not. Pierre Bayard believes that there is a stigma attached to non-reading. In his preface to *How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*, he outlines three important “constraints” that he believes structure the way we think about and discuss books (xiv). First is the idea that individuals feel an obligation to read. He states, “We still live in a society, on the decline though it may be, where reading remains the object of a kind of worship” (xiv). In order to be respected, Bayard argues, one must read. The second idea he posits is that an individual must read carefully and thoroughly. “If it’s frowned upon not to read,” Bayard claims, “it’s almost as bad to read quickly or to skim, and especially to say so” (xiv). Finally, he concludes with the idea that people tend to believe that in order to discuss a book, the individual must have read the book.

Bayard’s points would suggest that to be viewed as a reader is much more advantageous than to be labeled with the stigma of a non-reader; however, it would be an error to ignore the fact that reader-writers who engage in reviewing contemporary fiction are aiming for identities as respectable readers, not just as readers. In “With Kindle, Can you Tell It’s Proust?,” Joanne Kaufman attests, “The practice of judging people by the covers of their books is old and time-honored.” The focus of her article is how the emergence of electronic book readers, such as the Kindle, affects what she calls “literary snobbism.” She explains:

But for the purpose of sizing up a stranger from afar, perhaps the biggest problem
with Kindle or its kin is the camouflage factor: when no one can tell what you’re reading, how can you make it clear that you’re poring over the new Lincoln biography as opposed to, say, “He’s Just Not That Into You”?

There is a difference, isn’t there, in the kind of respect awarded to readers of historical biographies and the kind of respect (or lack thereof) awarded to readers of relationship self-help books? Kaufman gives the example of Nicholson Baker who, when he was younger, brought a copy of Joyce’s *Ulysses* with him to the office when he was working as a temp, because he wanted others to know he wasn’t *just* a temp; he was someone who read Joyce. Furthermore, readers may gain more than just respect from the books they hold in their hands. Kaufman quotes Michael Silverblatt, a weekly radio show host, who discusses his idea of “literary desire.” He explains that there is an attraction he used to feel when he saw another person reading a book he loved or a book by an author he loved. Silverblatt said that, as a teenager, he would “start to have fantasies about being best friends or lovers with that person.” These examples show how readers are judged by the books that they read. Furthermore, in the book review, the reviewer is judged by what he/she says about the book he/she has read. The book review provides the rhetorical situation for the expert or apprentice to prove that he/she is worthy of acceptance into or continued membership in the community of respectable, “well-read” readers.

Thus, by writing a book review, the reviewer positions him- or herself inside, rather than outside, the larger community of readers. This idea of a community of readers or a reading public is, at first glance, hard to define. What does it mean to be part of a community of readers? Who is included in this community? Who is excluded? I argue that this “community of readers” is a fluid, constantly changing group of
individuals. I use the term “larger community of readers” to define a virtual group of individuals, a group that exists only online (such as the members of Goodreads) or that exists only in a person’s imagination or consciousness (such as the imagined yet unidentifiable group of people who read the book reviews in the Sunday *Times*). The group includes, but is not limited to, individuals who read contemporary fiction, individuals who read *and* write reviews (published in *The New York Times Book Review* or posted on Goodreads) of contemporary fiction, and individuals who read these reviews of contemporary fiction, but may not read the actual novels themselves. It is impossible, therefore, to know every member of this community at any given point in time. Some individuals may be long-standing members of the larger reading community; others may opt in and out of the community at various times. Some individuals have no desire to be part of the larger reading community and they never will desire to be included.

It is undeniable, though, that to be part of the larger reading community is synonymous with being part of a cultured group. Bayard states:

> As cultivated people know (and, to their misfortune, uncultivated people do not), culture is above all a matter of *orientation*. Being cultivated is a matter not of having read any book in particular, but of being able to find your bearings within books as a system, which requires you to know that they form a system and to be able to locate each element in relation to the others. (10-11)

While Bayard refers to cultivated people, I argue that his idea applies to the concept of the larger community of readers. The individuals that I include in this community—those reading, those reading and reviewing, and those reading reviews—are individuals who are engaging in the process of orientation that Bayard describes. To engage in discussion about contemporary fiction is to seek “to find your bearings within books as a system.” To establish a reader-writer identity by means of discussing contemporary fiction is a
way of positioning one’s self within society. Bayard says, “Most statements about a book are not about the book itself, despite appearances, but about the larger set of books on which our culture depends at the moment” (12). He terms this collection of books as the “collective library.” Therefore, when a person comments on a certain book in a formal or informal review, in the *Times* or on Goodreads, he/she is both establishing a reader-writer identity and indicating his/her relationship with the collective library and the larger community of readers.

In order to determine how expert or apprentice reader-writer identities are created, I first examine how the rhetorical situation of the book review of contemporary fiction provides key information about the reviewer. Each book review provides biographical background about its author—the *Times* provides this information via the writer byline and Goodreads via the member profile. How the reviewer is described is a key first step in the construction of the reader-writer identity. Additionally, the structure and format of the contemporary fiction review and where it is published impacts the reader-writer’s self-representation. The way the review is presented in writing and the degree of control the writer has over the review, once published, both contribute to the reader-writer identity of expert or apprentice. In addition to examining the rhetorical situation, I analyze the rhetorical moves the reviewer makes in the writing of the review. The three areas that this study focuses on are the reviewer’s ability to provide a smooth error-free “writing surface,” the voice the reviewer uses, and the reviewer’s treatment of his/her audience. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings on our ideas of what constitutes good fiction and how we judge those individuals who present evaluations of contemporary fiction.
II. Research Process

For this research project, I have closely read the reviews of contemporary fiction published in *The New York Times Book Review*. Over the course of the data collection period, June 28, 2009 to August 31, 2009, the Sunday Book Review published book reviews for thirty-seven novels and I have read and studied each of those thirty-seven reviews. Appendix A provides a list of all the *Times* reviews collected and studied in the research process. The list is sorted by date of publication.

In addition, for each of these novels reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review*, I analyzed the ratings and reviews readers posted on the website Goodreads.com. Every Monday during the research period, I would first read the fiction reviews published in the *Times* the previous day and then read the corresponding reviews posted on Goodreads. Appendix B provides a list indicating how many Goodreads reviews were available on the date of access and how many of those reviews I accessed and read. For novels with a small number of Goodreads reviews available, I accessed and studied each of those reviews. For example, on June 29th, there were five reviews of Ana Menéndez’s novel, *The Last War*, and I studied all five of those reviews. However, there were several novels with significant numbers of reviews. To keep numbers reasonable, I studied the first forty reviews. For example, on June 29th, there were 208 reviews available for Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s novel, *The Angel’s Game*. However, I read only the first forty of those reviews. The only exception to this procedure is Colum McCann’s novel, *Let the Great World Spin*. On August 3rd, fifty-three Goodreads reviews were available and I read all fifty-three reviews.
In addition, since the focus of my research was the book reviews, not the novels themselves, I opted not to read any of the novels which were reviewed in the *Times* and on Goodreads. My purpose was to remain unbiased and to not allow my own opinions of the novels influence my reading of the reviews.
III. Literature Review

Current research indicates that the rise of book reviews posted on websites such as Amazon.com, which sells books, and websites like Goodreads.com, which is a book-based social networking site, has caused scholars to become interested in the role of the regular consumer or average reader in assessing the merit of a given work of fiction. Researchers seem to agree that this new forum for the book review is potentially revolutionary because it allows an everyday Joe to assume the authority historically reserved for those experts who write reviews for elite publications such as The New York Times—the authority to pass judgment about whether or not a book is “good” and the authority to publish this evaluation for anyone and everyone to read. In this sense, the everyday Joe can challenge the high-brow standards of what has literary value and what does not, ultimately bringing power to the hands of the masses.

Perhaps the most notable voice currently studying the online book review is Lisa Ede, a professor of Composition and Rhetoric at Oregon State University. Ede primarily studies what she calls “online citizen reviews” published on Amazon.com. In her 2005 talk given at the Oregon State University Center for Humanities, “From the Monthly Review to Amazon.com Customer Reviewers: Popular Culture, Technology, and the Circulation of Cultural Power,” she acknowledges that “for centuries tensions between high and popular culture, between those who claim authority and expertise as artists and intellectuals and ordinary people, have existed” (5). It is not that the cultural divide is new—rather, what is new, revolutionary, and unprecedented is that “this balance of power may be shifting” (8). One example Ede gives is of Harriet Klausner, a former librarian, who posts reviews of books on Amazon. She has the honor of being Amazon’s
top-ranked reviewer, with more than 9,000 book reviews to her name. Her status as a reviewer is so popular that the publicity director for Knopf “currently sends Ms. Klausner every fiction title his house publishes” in order to get her online review (1). This makes it quite clear that Klausner has claimed a certain level of authority, at least in the eyes of Amazon customers and publishing companies like Knopf. While it would be premature to say that Klausner’s reviews wield more power than those published in The New York Times, her apparent popularity makes a cogent argument in support of Ede’s hypothesis that the balance of cultural power may not be as stable as it once seemed.

However, it is important to note that Amazon is a commercial website whose main goal is to sell books and make a profit. Therefore, the reviews on Amazon serve a more specific purpose than the reviews on a nonprofit social networking site like Goodreads, where members write and read book reviews primarily in order to foster discussion and interest in books. While some Goodreads members may choose to purchase books based on the reviews, others may not. I, myself, am an active member of Goodreads and I elect to obtain most of my books from my town’s public library. Ede does acknowledge this commercial aspect of the citizen reviews posted on Amazon. She explains that the decision to post customer reviews is part of the company’s business plan. Furthermore, she mentions that some may “wonder, as well, if customer reviews on Amazon.com and other commercial websites represent not a laudable resistance to cultural hegemony but rather the ability of capitalism to co-opt and commodify individual acts of self-expression and communication”(7). For this reason, my research moves in a different direction than Ede’s. I look only at reviews published in two distinct forums that are not primarily focused on the selling of books—The New York Times and
Goodreads. The *Times* makes money from the sales of its newspaper (of which the Sunday Book Review is one small part) and from advertisements; similarly, Goodreads operates based on funds from its investors and from advertisements. Neither profits directly (as Amazon does) from the book reviews.

Lisa Ede’s research has been informed, as she notes, by Rosa Eberly and her book *Citizen Critics*. It is from the title of this work that Ede developed her term “citizen reviewers.” Unlike Ede, Eberly does not specifically focus on online book reviews, although the Amazon reviewers Ede studies would, no doubt, fall into Eberly’s category of “citizen critic.” She uses this term to refer to “a person who produces discourses about issues of common concern from an ethos of citizen first and foremost—not as expert or spokesperson for a workplace or as a member of a club or organization”(1). The use of the word “citizen” in the naming of average, regular readers is important and reveals the heart of Eberly’s research—that she believes “that cultural texts have some role to play in reinvigorating participatory democratic practice”(1). For Eberly, public discourse about literary works is a way for citizens to reclaim their authority and make changes in the democracy that governs their lives. She stresses the importance of the social interaction and communication among ordinary readers. She explains, “My studies of the discourse of literary public spheres suggest that nonexpert citizen critics have argued in public about literary texts—sometimes about whether those texts should be banned, but much more often about how what they defined as the news in those texts might affect their lives, their children’s lives, and the public good”(9). Her research is important, therefore, because it focuses less on the aesthetics of a text—as one might expect to be the focus of
an elite, high-brow review in the *Times*—and more on the impact a text can have on the lives of individuals.

Eberly’s research also aims to move from individual readings and toward “a more collective sense of interpretive rhetorical practice” (10). She emphasizes the power of literary texts to inform and impact the ways that individuals live their lives rather than emphasizing the mere aesthetics of such texts. In fact, the multiple interpretations and applications of literature are what she believes makes the discourse of literary public spheres (the book review being one form of such discourse) so powerful. She writes, “By studying the divergent and interacting interpretations of actual readers writing about fictional texts in rhetorically constructed literary spheres, I want to suggest that public criticism may provide a better means than literary criticism does of studying the process through which literature has affected society” (18). Eberly believes that citizen critics’ literary discourse may be more significant than that of the traditional academic literary critics. Although academic literary criticism and the contemporary fiction book review in the *Times* are two different genres, both represent the idea of the expert, high-brow elite and Eberly’s interest in the citizen critic is valuable in examining the public literary community created on Goodreads.

Although not as influential for this research project as Ede and Eberly, Janice Radway nonetheless serves as a worthwhile source because of her interest in the difference between high-brow literary fiction and middle-brow genre fiction and the accordant biases of each. In *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desires*, Radway examines the way the Book-of-the-Month Club, founded in 1926, affected readers and middle-brow taste. Her first exposure to the
club was when she was a graduate student in 1975. In the introduction to the book, she discusses the disdain for the club she saw among university intellectuals, a club the academics saw as "a middle-brow operation offering only the come-on of free bestsellers to people who wanted only to be told what to read in order to look appropriately cultured" (1). However, the texts the academics upheld did not have for Radway the same power as the books she chose to read on her own, books she obtained from the club. She explains:

As a consequence, my new tastes somehow failed to duplicate precisely the passion of my response to these other, suspect, supposedly transparent, popular books. Those books prompted physical sensations, a forgetting of the self, and complete absorption in another world. The books that came to me as high culture never seemed to prompt the physical shudder, the frisson I associated with the books of my childhood. (3)

However, in her research, Radway reexamines her complex relationship with the Book-of-the-Month Club—a relationship that was not necessarily perfect. She explains that, through her research, she became "aware of how much [she was] a product of middle-brow culture" (11). This realization prompted many questions. She writes, "Critics of the club traditionally suggest that it either inspired consumers to purchase mere signs of taste or prompted them to buy a specious imitation of true culture. Was that all I had garnered from the club? I did not think so. But what exactly had those books conferred on me? ...And did I want to defend middlebrow culture as a result?" (11-12). Radway's research on the Book-of-the Month Club is important because the club is, in a way, a precursor to social networking sites like Goodreads. Both the club and the website represent more of what can be called middle-brow literature, as opposed to the novels often lauded by academics and *The New York Times*. It is easy to assume that the middle-brow culture is more democratic, more authentic than the high-brow culture. Yet, as
Radway implies, the middle-brow culture also comes with its own complexities and cannot necessarily be seen as the cure-all antidote to “evil” elitism.

Lastly, while Radway’s work is useful in that it gives a picture of reading and judgments on literary merit in the twentieth-century in the United States, Frank Donoghue’s book *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers* is perhaps equally as valuable because it explains the advent of the book review in eighteenth-century England. He explains that up until the later part of the century, authors were supported by aristocratic patrons. However, the population of writers began to grow, and soon there were not enough patrons to support the myriad writers trying to make a living. As the patronage system began to die out, writers were forced to turn to the open commercial market for income. This, as Donoghue points out, “precipitated a crisis among aspiring authors” (2). It was at this point, in the mid-eighteenth century, that the periodicals, most notably *The Monthly Review* and *The Critical Review*, took on the role of presenting judgments of books to the reading and consuming masses.

Donoghue explains:

I argue that authorship became increasingly defined in popular criticism, and that from 1750 onward, literary careers were chiefly described and indeed made possible by reviewers. The *Monthly*, founded in 1749, and the *Critical*, founded in 1756, projected themselves as the sole arbiters of literary production. They claimed to represent the interest of the elite among the English reading public and to articulate those interests in their review articles. From this privileged position, they supplied the plots for a variety of literary careers. (3)

In this history, we see the beginnings of a publication like *The New York Times*, which also claims to represent refined taste in literature. Just as the book reviews in the eighteenth-century periodicals, today’s formal book reviews also, to a certain degree,
determine "the plots for a variety of literary careers"—a review in the *Times* can make or break a writer's success.

What is most interesting about this historical work is that it seems to mirror, in a sense, the state of authorship today. Donoghue explains the crisis facing writers in eighteenth-century England—the transformation of whom they were writing for, the transformation of how their work was judged and valued. Similarly, authors today are facing a revolution in authorship. With the rise in online book reviews written by average Joes, the ways in which literary careers are determined are changing. If, as Lisa Ede suggests, the elite, expert reviews are losing power and the apprentice reviews are gaining authority, then this will transform how contemporary fiction is judged and how a writer gains success. The aristocratic patronage system died out in the late eighteenth-century; might *The New York Times* also suffer a similar end? Might the masses—the ordinary people writing reviews on Goodreads—win out, just as the reading public gained the authority to determine an eighteenth-century writer's fate?
IV. The Rhetorical Situation

Who is the reviewer?

If you pick up any newspaper and select an article to read, you will be given very little information about the article’s author. Some articles will include a byline that provides nothing more than the author’s name. Others will have bylines that include the author’s name and the association with which he/she is affiliated. For example, if I open to any page in *The Record*, a local New Jersey newspaper, I see articles by staff writers of the newspaper and articles written by other individuals who are authors for other publications—such as *The Star-Ledger* or *The Associated Press*. This is usually the extent of the information that is provided for authors of newspaper articles—and for good reason. The purpose of the newspaper is to provide news, not to provide personal profiles of the authors of the articles. However, the rhetorical situation of the book review is unique in that it places an emphasis on the personal profile of the reviewer. The *Times* reviews included in this study provide more information about who the reviewer is than do standard newspaper articles and the Goodreads reviews sometimes provide even more information than do the *Times* reviews.

At the bottom of every *Times* review, there is a standard one-sentence byline that provides some information about who the reviewer is. It may not seem that one sentence is capable of providing much information, but this carefully constructed byline is critical in shaping the reader-writer identity of the reviewer. Whether or not it is deserved, these bylines establish the reviewers as experts on writing and literature. First of all, the reviewers have been chosen by the editors of *The New York Times Book Review*. Byron

Incoming books first go to “previewers,” who go through 10 or so of them a week to identify books to review....After a book is chosen to be critiqued, the selection of a reviewer begins....First, the previewer proposes four or five possible reviewers for each book recommended for review. Mr. Tanenhaus [Sam Tanenhaus, Editor-in-Chief] then decides which reviewer will be asked to do it. His list of the main qualities of a good reviewer: a willingness to take the book on its own terms, narrative skill, a track record (because established authors have a right to be assessed by equally established reviewers), and professionalism in working with editors and deadlines. Most, but not all, of the reviews are written by people not on the paper’s staff.

This process is important, because it shows that the reviewers do not volunteer or ask to review certain novels. They are selected by the *Times* and they are selected based on their writing skills and reputations as professionals. The byline is then written in order to relay biographical information about the reviewer that demonstrates the qualities that made the individual eligible to write reviews for the newspaper. Of the thirty-six reviewers (one reviewer, Laurie Winer, is the author of two of the thirty-seven reviews), twenty-one are described as fiction writers (most are described as novelists, but a few are described as short story writers). Fifteen are described as nonfiction writers (including critics and regular contributors to nonfiction publications). Four are described as editors of literary publications, such as *The Paris Review* and *AGNI*. Three are described as professors and/or heads of writing communities and seminars (Max Byrd, president of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and Sven Birkerts, director of the Bennington Writing Seminars). Finally, one reviewer, M.T. Anderson, is described as the winner of the 2006 National Book Award.

Secondly, as if the backing of the *Times* were not enough, each of these reviewers has already established him/herself as an expert on literature and writing. Each reviewer
already has a certain level of validation of his/her expertise—from the publisher who has published his/her novel or short story collection, from the publications that have published his/her nonfiction, from the individuals who have hired him/her for an editorial or teaching position, or, as in M.T. Anderson’s case, from the panel of judges who have determined the winner of the National Book Award. Therefore, the one-sentence byline at the bottom of the *Times* review indicates that the reviewer is seen as an expert—and not just by the *Times*. The description of the reviewer as an expert significantly impacts the ethos of the reviewer. With a simple one-sentence byline, the reviewer has gained credibility in the eyes of his/her reader. After all, who better to pass judgment on a work of contemporary fiction than an expert in writing and literature?

Furthermore, the byline of a *Times* review is sometimes crafted in such a way to imply that the reviewer is not just an expert on literature and writing in general, but also an expert on the topic the novel addresses. This is most clear from the example of Laurie Winer, who is the author of two of the reviews included in this study. It is telling that Winer’s byline is different for each of her reviews. The byline for her August 23rd review of Valerie Martin’s *The Confessions of Edward Day* states, “Laurie Winer is the former theater critic for the Los Angeles Times, and earlier reviewed theater for The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times.” It is not a coincidence that this byline specifically mentions Winer’s former role as a theater critic, considering that Martin’s novel is about an actor struggling to survive in New York’s theater world in the 1970s. This byline suggests that Winer is not only an expert on writing, she is also an expert on theater—making her a fully credible and well-equipped reviewer for Martin’s novel. However, the byline for her August 30th review of Lucinda Rosenfeld’s *I’m So Happy for You* tells a
different story. It states, "Laurie Winer is a Los Angeles-based writer and critic."

Notably missing, just one week later, are the references to her former role as a theater critic. Yes, the byline states that she is a critic, but it omits the fact that she was a theater critic. This is undoubtedly because Rosenfeld's novel, a novel about the complexities of female friendship, has nothing to do with theater. If the byline were to state her expertise in theater, a reader might wonder if Winer is really capable of reviewing the novel. What does a theater critic know about chick lit? However, the byline is carefully written—vaguely, actually—to avoid the possibility of any such questions in the reader's mind.

Goodreads also places an emphasis on the reviewer behind the review. Unlike the Times reviews, though, these reviews do not have simple one-sentence bylines. Rather, they are accompanied by links to full member profiles. When a reader looks at a Goodreads review on the website, he/she will find that the only information provided about the reviewer is his/her user name and profile picture (if one is available, as not all Goodreads members choose to have profile pictures). However, more information about the reviewer is available on his/her profile. These profiles are available to any registered member of the website and the amount and kind of information that can be found on these profiles varies per Goodreads member. Some members post the bare minimum of information while others post a significant amount of details about themselves. Yet, despite the amount of information he/she provides, the Goodreads member creates a reader-writer identity of an apprentice. Unlike the Times byline which provides validation of the reviewer's expertise, the Goodreads profiles provide personal information about the reviewer—information that does not have any bearing on the reviewer's ethos. As Cherry indicates, a writer develops a strong ethos when he/she
expresses a solid moral character, possession of practical wisdom, and concern for the audience (86). However, the information that a Goodreads member provides is exactly what you would expect to find on a book-based social networking website: gender, hometown, lists of books, hobbies, personal interests, and other facts about the member. Although the member provides information about him- or herself, it is not information that suggests moral character, wisdom, or goodwill towards his/her audience. This lack of a strong ethos clearly establishes the Goodreads reviewer as an apprentice—someone who is writing reviews of contemporary fiction but lacks experience and expertise.

For example, Goodreads member “Carol K.” reviewed and posted a 3-star rating of Richard Russo’s novel, *That Old Cape Magic*. She has opted not to include a photograph on her profile and the profile provides some basic information: 1) Carol K. lives in Medinah, Illinois; 2) She joined Goodreads.com in July 2008; 3) She was last active on the website “this month”—November 2009. In addition, her profile contains links to her bookshelves where she can list what she is currently reading (as of 11/14/09, Carol K. is not currently reading anything), the books she has read (68 in total) and the books she wants to read in the future (*Jericho’s Fall* and *Last Night in Twisted River*). Her profile also shows a list of her friends on the website. She has thirty-three friends on Goodreads (“John Mesjak,” “Andrew Davidson,” “MK,” etc). Lastly, her profile indicates how many reviews she has posted (53 reviews) and provides links to each review. In comparison, “Alison” also reviewed Russo’s novel, but her profile offers much more information than Carol K.’s does. Alison does have a profile picture, although it is not a photo of her but rather a picture of a steaming cup of what appears to be coffee. In addition, you learn that she is a female, living in Asbury, New Jersey. She
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joined Goodreads in August 2008 and, like Carol K., was also last active “this month.” Her favorite activities are “reading, writing, photography, running, and spending time with [her] family” and her favorite books are “The Book Thief, East of Eden, Pride and Prejudice, The Road, To Kill a Mockingbird.” Alison has also provided a link to her blog (http://www.alisons-bookmarks.blogspot.com/) where she posts reviews of books. She writes on her blog, “I am one of those women who prefers Borders to Bloomingdales. I will read anything and everything I can get my hands on, and I will post my thoughts here.” Alison’s bookshelves show that she is currently reading True Blue, that she has read 164 books in total, and that she has a list of 127 books she would like to read, the most recently added being Sarah Palin’s memoir, Going Rogue. Alison has eighteen friends (“Nely,” “Maggie Stiefvater,” “Brian Leaf,” etc). She has written 88 reviews. Finally, unlike Carol K., Alison’s profile indicates that she has taken Goodreads’ Never-Ending Trivia Quiz and that her average of correct answers is 68.1%.

Given all this information, how do Carol K. and Alison construct reader-writer identities of apprentices? It is clear from the each of the profiles that both Carol K. and Alison lack expertise. Unlike Times reviewer Laurie Winer, neither Carol K. nor Alison has been selected to write book reviews. In fact, each reads and then posts reviews voluntarily, so there is no honor awarded in their writing of reviews. Similarly, the information provided in each of their profiles does not indicate that either of them has gained fame or notoriety for publishing anything. Yes, Alison has her blog, but that is something she has created and published by herself—something anyone can do. All we can tell from the existence of her blog is that she is an avid reader and frequent reviewer. Neither Carol K. nor Alison has any outside source providing validation of her ability to
write reviews of contemporary fiction. Furthermore, despite the information both Carol K. and Alison have provided, they remain rather unknowable—or at least unknowable when compared with the *Times* reviewers. Neither of the women has given her full name, and neither has posted a photograph of herself. The information we do know about the two reviewers is general biographical information: gender, hometown, names of friends. Each reviewer does establish herself as a reader (Carol K. with a total of 70 books on her three bookshelves, Alison with a total of 296 books) and as a frequent reviewer (Carol K. with a total of 53 reviews, Alison with 88). However, this is no special distinction; many people read and, on Goodreads, many people review. Alison’s profile does provide some additional information, yet it merely reinforces her reader-writer identity as an apprentice. She lists her interests (“reading, writing, photography, running, and spending time with [her] family”), but does her love for running and her family appreciation indicate that she is a trustworthy reviewer of contemporary fiction? Unfortunately, no.

In addition, noticeably absent from each woman’s profile is mention of what she does for a living. Is Carol K. a professor of literature at an Illinois university? Is Alison an award-winning journalist at a major magazine? It is possible that, for privacy reasons, the women have opted not to include their professions on their member profiles. Carol K. gives very little information on her profile; therefore, it should not be surprising that she does not list her occupation. But what about Alison? She has provided a lot of personal information about herself and privacy does not seem to be an issue, considering she also includes a link to her personal blog. Therefore, why not post her profession? Here I would venture that if Alison did have a distinguished profession, one that would
designate her as an expert in writing and literature, she would post her profession on her profile. The omission appears to be intentional and the omission itself is yet another way in which she creates her reader-writer identity of apprentice.

Yet if we take these three examples—Times reviewer, Laurie Winer; Goodreads reviewer, Carol K.; and Goodreads reviewer, Alison—we must acknowledge that the reader-writer identities of experts and apprentices, respectively, are nothing more than personas created by the rhetorical situation of the Times and Goodreads book reviews. It is clear from the two examples of Winer’s bylines that her reader-writer identity of an expert is a persona that she presents as she reviews each novel. The persona depends on the rhetorical situation she is in: when reviewing Valerie Martin’s novel, Winer exhibits the persona of a theater critic; when reviewing Lucinda Rosenfeld’s novel, she exhibits the persona of a general critic. Similarly, the Goodreads reviewers present personas of apprentices because this is what the rhetorical situation forces them to do. Goodreads has not chosen Carol K. and Alison to write reviews; rather, they post these reviews voluntarily. Additionally, although they post information about themselves on their member profiles, none of this information suggests that the women are experts. However, we must remember that just because the information does not suggest that they are credible and fully-capable reviewers, this does not necessarily mean they are not credible and fully-capable reviewers. The reader-writer identity of apprentice is a persona that hides a real individual. The real individual is only partially known, only partially seen behind the mask of the apprentice.
Forum/Format

The reader-writer identity of the reviewer is, without a doubt, impacted by the format of the publication in which his/her book review is published. The characteristics of *The New York Times Book Review* as a forum for publication support the expert reader-writer identity of the *Times* reviewer and the characteristics of the Goodreads website support the apprentice reader-writer identity of the Goodreads reviewer. The most notable difference between the two review systems is the length and structure of the physical piece of writing. A reviewer for *The New York Times* writes a piece of prose, ranging from approximately 500 to 2,000 words (approximately one to two and a half printed pages) and presents his/her judgment of the novel in this piece of writing. This is the standard template for a *Times* review and each follows this format. In comparison, the Goodreads reviews come in a variety of forms: multi-paragraph pieces of prose, stream-of-consciousness rants, short one or two sentence blurbs, or even bulleted points or lists. In addition to writing reviews, Goodreads members have the option to rate the novels on an objective scale of one to five stars. Most, if not all, reviewers take advantage of this opportunity. In fact, most members express their opinions of the books they have read in two ways: by giving ratings to the novels they have read and by writing reviews that provide explanations for the ratings they have given. To help members in this process, the website provides a description of each of its ratings. A rating of five stars means “It was amazing.” A rating of four stars means “Really liked it.” Three stars equal “Liked it.” A two star rating translates to “It was ok” and one star represents “Didn’t like it.”
One of the most obvious implications of the differences between these two review forums and formats has to do with clarity. Because they are reading through pieces of prose, the readers of the Times reviews have to interpret the reviewers’ comments in order to ascertain whether the reviewers are praising the novels. Sometimes this is an easy task. For example, in her August 23rd review of Valerie Martin’s novel, reviewer Laurie Winer writes, “Valerie Martin’s sort-of thriller, ‘The Confessions of Edward Day,’ is one of the best novels I’ve ever read about the actor’s psyche.” However, sometimes the task is much more difficult. In the August 9th review of Monica Ali’s novel, In the Kitchen, William Grimes comments on Ali’s “wonderful ear for Britain’s welter of new speech patterns” and the “brilliant debates” in which her characters engage. But then he describes her novel as a “meandering, overstuffed narrative that, for long stretches, goes nowhere in particular.” Readers of this review are left wondering whether Grimes’ review is a recommendation or a warning. On the other hand, Goodreads’ star system helps the readers of the reviews. Because reviewers can and do rate the novels on a five-star scale in addition to writing reviews, the reviewers’ opinions of the novels are, in theory, clear from the number of stars in the ratings. Additionally, the written reviews posted on Goodreads generally provide a clear justification for the given ratings. For example, both “Heather” and “Grace Andreacchi” rated and reviewed Eva Hoffman’s novel Appassionata. Heather gave the novel five stars and the first line of her review is “This is a brilliant piece of literature: eloquent and completely engrossing.” Grace Andreacchi gave a rating of three stars and she begins her review by stating “An interesting but I think ultimately unsuccessful book.” Both of these reviews seem in harmony with the given rating. However, there are, of course, some ratings and reviews
that seem to contradict one another. In her review of Gaynor Arnold’s novel *Girl in a Blue Dress*, “sisterimapoet” said, “This didn’t really work for me….A bit too tame and lame and limp….It felt overly long for what I gained from it.” Yet, despite these rather negative comments, sisterimapoet gave the novel a rating of three stars, which per the Goodreads description means “Liked it.” Overall, though, the occurrence of contradictory reviews and ratings is rare and the bulk of the reviews on Goodreads.com appear to offer much clearer, unambiguous critiques of the novels.

These issues of clarity and ambiguity play into the reader-writer identities of expert and apprentice. The Goodreads reviews are, in general, accessible to most readers. I use the word accessible to identify the straight-forward, direct nature of the Goodreads reviews. The average reader would be able to read a Goodreads review and understand the meaning that the reviewer is trying to convey—and if the reader were unsure, the star rating would help to clear up any confusion. On the other hand, the *Times* reviews are not nearly as accessible. Without a rating system like that of Goodreads, the reader of a *Times* review must do the work of interpreting the prose. In fact, the average reader may not be able to read a *Times* review and understand the reviewer’s comments about the novel. For example, the following is an excerpt from the opening paragraph of Will Blythe’s review of *Amateur Barbarians* by Robert Cohen:

Robert Cohen’s “Amateur Barbarians” raises the question of whether the novel of male midlife crisis is suffering a midlife crisis of its own. Is the genre now as stale as an old mattress? … And in this case, how well does Cohen push back against the limitation of a form that, like any genre if blindly followed, can frog-march characters in a direction that life — or a good novel — might not? In simplest terms, must the novelist eat his genre or be eaten by it?

The average reader may not understand Blythe’s question about Cohen’s ability to “push back against the limitation of form” or his question about whether “the novelist must eat
his genre or be eaten by it.” The terms “form” and “genre” are well-known in the literary world, but not all readers are as well-versed in academic jargon. Additionally, the metaphor of eating may prove troublesome for some readers of Blythe’s review. These kinds of confusions for the average reader may continue throughout the rest of the review. Even later, when Blythe answers his own question by saying “Cohen does not eat his genre,” the average reader may still not be able to grasp whether or not Blythe is praising the novel.

This result, however, may be the very one Blythe is aiming to evoke. Perhaps Blythe does not wish for his review of the novel to be accessible or straight-forward or simple. In “The Rhetoric of Literary Criticism,” Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor state that there is

one fundamental assumption behind critical inquiry: that literature is complex and that to understand it requires a patient unraveling, translating, decoding, interpreting, and analyzing. Meaning is never obvious or simple for, if it were, the texts under scrutiny would not be literature and therefore would not be worthy of unraveling, interpreting, decoding, etc.

Although book reviews are nonfiction and not pieces of literature, I argue that Fahnestock’s and Secor’s idea—that there is a common assumption that complexity equals value and worth—can and does apply to the Times reviews. Why doesn’t Blythe open his review with a clear, declarative sentence stating whether he does or does not like Amateur Barbarians? Why open with esoteric comments about authors eating genres and genres eating authors? By writing in this complex way, he is requiring that his reader unravel, translate, and decode his comments. And if this is the case, the very fact that his review requires unraveling, translating, and decoding suggests, to those that believe the assumption, that Blythe’s has value. It as if Blythe’s review has become a piece of
literature in itself; in order to interpret the novel, first the reader must interpret the review. In comparison, the following is the full text of a review of *Amateur Barbarians* written by Goodreads member “John Luiz”:

A wonderfully written tale of a man going through a mid-life crisis, who shares alternating chapters with 30-year old man trying to get a start on adulthood.

Wonderful insights into male psyche here, but the main reason to read Robert Cohen is the beauty of his prose, his genius-level observations on the human condition, and his light humorous touch that makes taking all his brilliance in such a joy.

This review is clear and direct. We don’t even need to see John Luiz’s five-star rating because his review is so accessible. With comments such as “wonderful insights,” “beauty of his prose,” “genius-level observations,” and “brilliance,” it is apparent that John Luiz is praising Cohen’s novel. There is nothing to translate, decode, or interpret.

The implication, then, is that the complexity of the *Times* review supports the construction of Blythe’s expert reader-writer identity, while the simplicity of the Goodreads review supports the construction of John Luiz’s apprentice reader-writer identity. The expert reviewer has presented his ideas about Cohen’s novel in an elaborate and intricate way, while the apprentice has presented his in simple sentences.

The idea of accessibility applies not only to the readability of the review, but also to the reviewer’s access (or lack thereof) to publication. If we think about it in broad terms, only a select few individuals can publish reviews in *The New York Times Book Review*. To put it simply, the *Times* is a restricted, closed system and only those selected experts have access to it. However, even those experts have limited control within the system. Reviewers who write for the *Times* are chosen to write reviews and they must submit their reviews to the newspaper. The newspaper then edits and publishes these
reviews, once a week, on Sunday, both in print and online at nytimes.com. Once published, the Times reviewer cannot make changes to the review or delete it from the newspaper’s print or online form. The review is permanent and static—or, to employ a common saying, the review is “written in stone.” If there are any changes to be made, the power to do so rests in the hands of The New York Times. In fact, the only change that would be made to the review would be an editorial comment or correction. For example, on August 31st, I accessed Lucinda Rosenfeld’s review of Dan Chaon’s novel, Await Your Reply. Rosenfeld’s review was originally published online on August 23rd and the version I accessed on August 31st contained an online correction to the original review.

The newspaper writes:

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:
Correction: August 30, 2009
A review last Sunday about “Await Your Reply,” a novel by Dan Chaon, misspelled the surname of two filmmaking brothers known for dark comedies and noirish thrillers. They are Joel and Ethan Coen, not Cohen.

However, the text of Lucinda Rosenfeld’s review of the novel, originally published on August 23rd, remains the same. Yet, although the Times reviewers are no longer in control of their reviews once they are submitted to the newspaper, the lack of control paradoxically reinforces their expert reader-writer identities. Although the reviewer has no power to change the review after it has been published, this permanence of publication is a sign of honor. The review will remain in existence for many future generations of readers to read, a sign that the review is viewed as a piece of quality, expert writing worth preserving. In addition, the print copy Sunday edition of The New York Times currently costs five dollars (although the online version is free to registered users of the website).
Many people are willing to pay money for the newspaper—and, in essence, many people are willing to pay money to read the Sunday book reviews.

On the other hand, anyone with access to a computer and an internet connection can write reviews and post them on Goodreads. The website is an open, free system and any apprentice has access to it. Members simply log on to the website, using their own individual passwords and user IDs. Once logged in, the members type up their reviews, click “Save” and the reviews are then instantaneously posted online. Members may post reviews any day of the week, any time of the day. Furthermore, the Goodreads review is fluid. At any time, a reviewer can log on to the website and change, delete, or add to a review that he/she has previously posted. For example, on August 6th, “Jason Kennedy” posted a review of *Await Your Reply*. He gave the novel four stars and said, “Three narratives that seem random, but Dan Chaon ties them together in interesting ways. I really liked this one—will write more on it later.” As of September 26th, Jason Kennedy has not updated this review, but he is still able to do so. However, Goodreads reviewer “Adam” has revised his review of Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* several times. His first review is on August 6th. He gives the novel one star and writes, “It’s so hard for me to give ‘groovy’ characters any of my time. Pg. 50ish: eh.” On August 7th, he adds a paragraph to his review that begins, “8/7 EDIT: Is this awful? Am I missing something? Because I think it may be absolutely awful.” Three days later he adds two more paragraphs. He writes, “8/10 EDIT 2: I’m putting this down. I’m just not interested in this half-ass ‘stoner within a genre’ stuff.” Since the control of the review is in the reviewer’s hands, and not in Goodreads’ hands, members can post reviews while they are reading, after they have read, or even before they have read. They can then add to,
delete, or revise these reviews whenever they want. Some members, like Adam, take
advantage of this option. Others, like Jason Kennedy, know they have this ability and
retain the right to exercise it at any point in the future.

However, there is something about this system that distinctly portrays it as a
forum for apprentices rather than a forum for experts. First of all, there is no filter—the
reviews go “live” as soon as the members finish writing them. The lack of an editor to
polish and revise the review suggests that the Goodreads reviews are not important
enough to require an editor. In other words, the lack of an editor suggests that it doesn’t
matter to Goodreads if someone posts a ridiculous, nonsensical, error-filled review. In
addition, since the reviews can be changed at any time, there is a sense that the reviews
are only temporary, transitory pieces of writing. The review of a novel posted on the
website may not be the same in one month. In fact, it may not even exist one month later,
if the reviewer decides to delete it. This opens up some questions: Does this mean that
the reviewers constantly change their minds about the novels they have read? Does this
mean that the reviews posted are just first drafts that will be cleaned up later? Does this
mean that a posted review is not the reviewer’s “best work”? There is no option on the
website to save a draft of a review before posting. Therefore, the Goodreads reviewer is
given two choices: to not write a review or to write a first draft of a review as best as
he/she can and then publish it as the final draft instantaneously. This is clearly different
from the publication process of the *Times*. It would be unthinkable to expect an expert
reader-writer to write a first draft of a review, take a quick proofread, and then publish it
immediately. This would most certainly put his/her expert status at risk, because the first
draft would not be his/her best work. The very nature of the Goodreads system, then,
forces the reader-writer to construct an identity of an apprentice. Since the reader-writer has no opportunity to polish and perfect his/her review, other than on the spot, he/she is constantly put in the position of publishing his/her less-than-best writing. Also, while the Times is a well-known publication, Goodreads is not as well known. Goodreads is a free website, with no membership fees or fees for reading archived material. The fact that these reviews are always free, unlike the print version of the Times reviews included in the $5.00 newspaper, reinforces the idea that these reviews are only apprentice reviews, reviews that would not be able to attract paying customers.

Another characteristic that establishes the distinction between the expert Times reviews and the apprentice Goodreads reviews is the volume of reviews published. Every Sunday, The New York Times Book Review includes approximately eight to twelve reviews (some of these reviews are of contemporary fiction; others are reviews of books of other genres). These reviews are all written about different books. Therefore, on a given Sunday, there is only one review per book. If a reader picked up The New York Times on Sunday, June 28th, he/she would have found only one review of Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s new novel, The Angel’s Game—a review written by Terrence Rafferty, a writer for the Times’ horror column. On that given Sunday, Rafferty’s voice is the only one discussing the novel. However, if that same reader had logged onto Goodreads on the next day, Monday, June 29th, he/she would have found 479 ratings and 208 reviews of this novel. In fact, as of November 21, 2009, the Goodreads numbers have skyrocketed to 2,798 ratings and 1,005 reviews. The sheer volume is astounding. The implication is that the Times review stands alone and, as a result, is awarded attention and honor. It must be an important, expert piece of writing if it is the only one of its kind, right?
However, the Goodreads review is one of many. For example, “Generic Jeanette” posted a four-star rating and a review of the novel on June 25th. However, unlike Rafferty’s review in the *Times*, there is nothing to make her review stand out. In this case, her review is one in one thousand. Generic Jeanette’s review is, as her user name implies, generic and her reader-writer identity is that of the apprentice. Furthermore, it is likely that an author will turn to the *Times*—a well-known and prestigious publication—to read the one, single review of his/her novel. It is also likely that authors will turn to other notable publications (such as *The Atlantic Monthly*) to read reviews of their novels. However, how many authors will turn to Goodreads? Of the thirty-seven authors in this study, five of them have created profiles as a “Goodreads Author” on the website: Dan Chaon, Jill Ciment, Elisabeth Hyde, Colum McCann, and Lucinda Rosenfeld. It is likely that these five authors read the reviews that members post on the website. Of the remaining thirty-two authors, all we know is that they are not registered as Goodreads Authors. This suggests that some of these authors do not know of the website and that some of these authors do not read these reviews. Furthermore, even if an author did know of Goodreads, would he/she read through the hundreds or thousands of apprentice reviews? It seems likely that a Goodreads review might be overlooked, simply because of the sheer number of similar apprentice reviews posted on the website.

However, the connection between these two seemingly disparate situations is that both the Goodreads reviewer and the *Times* reviewer need the larger forums in order to make their reviews public. Goodreads and the *Times* are the means by which these voices, both the apprentice on Goodreads and the expert in the *Times*, can be heard. In order to get widespread distribution and audiences, reviewers need what Deborah Brandt
calls “sponsors of literacy.” She defines this term as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). If we apply Brandt’s concept to the Times and to Goodreads, we can see how both act as sponsors of literacy for the reviewers. The New York Times Book Review does enable reviewers to publish their critiques of books, but at the same time it closely regulates and, to a degree, suppresses the power of the reviewer. This is clear from looking at the process of publication. Brandt states, “[Sponsors of literacy] lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored” (167). The New York Times is a household name, a publication that most American citizens know. In essence, the Times lends its name to the reviewers and with the name comes all the prestige, popularity, and notoriety that the newspaper has—further emphasizing the reviewer’s expert identity. In comparison, Goodreads acts as a sponsor of literacy by enabling and supporting its members’ ability to publish book reviews. However, it would be wrong to say that Goodreads does not closely regulate its members and their reviews. The very fact that Goodreads requires users of the website to create member IDs and profiles is a form of regulation and control. If the website weren’t concerned with regulating its members, there would be no need for user IDs—anyone could post on the website, with no control and no regulation.

Ultimately, by entering the rhetorical situation of the book reviews and by accepting the sponsorship of the Times or of Goodreads, the reviewer automatically begins to establish a reader-writer identity of an expert or an apprentice. The stark differences in the format of each publication—the degree of clarity or complexity in the review, the fluid or static nature of the system, the volume of reviews available for each
book—affect the constructed reader-writer identity. However, although these features of the publication forums influence the way a reviewer represents him- or herself, we must remember that these are features of the systems themselves. As a result, the reader-writer identities of expert and apprentice, as shaped by the structure of *The New York Times Book Review* and the structure of Goodreads can only be personas—masks that the reviewers don when they enter the specific, unique rhetorical situation of writing a book review.
V. Rhetorical Moves

Writing's Surface

At its most basic level, the ability to properly use the English language is an invaluable skill for any writer who wishes to be taken seriously. Elbow explains:

Grammar is writing’s surface. When you meet strangers, you can hardly keep from noticing their clothing before you notice their personality. The only way to keep someone from noticing a surface is to make it “disappear,” as when someone wears the clothes you most expect her to wear. The only way to make grammar disappear—to keep the surface of your writing from distracting readers away from your message—is to make it right. (168)

Besides the description of the reviewer in the one-sentence byline in the *Times* or the member profile on Goodreads, the surface of the book review is most likely what readers first notice. Therefore, proper use of language is a key factor in the construction of the reader-writer identity. The reviewer who writes without errors presents a stronger, more credible, more respectable ethos and identity than the reviewer whose writing is marred by errors. Elbow explains, “Writing without errors doesn’t make you anything, but writing with errors—if you give it to other people—makes you a hick, a boob, a bumpkin” (167). This is the cold, hard truth of our society. The expectation is that published writing will be free of errors. This, however, is not an unreasonable expectation. When we buy a product, we expect it will be in perfect, working condition. When we buy food, we expect it will be fresh and not spoiled or stale. When we read a published piece of writing, we expect it will be in perfect, working condition and not spoiled with errors. When this expectation is not met, we judge the writer—and often our judgments are harsher than Elbow’s suggested “hick,” “boob,” and “bumpkin.”

The book reviews in the *Times* are virtually flawless, free from unsightly writing errors. Considering that there is an editorial staff to work with the text that the freelance
writer produces, it is hardly exceptional that the reviews published in the *Times* are clean and polished. These reviews simply meet society’s expectation of an unflawed product. Out of the thirty-seven *Times* reviews, there were only two minor exceptions to this perfect picture. One review, Gaiutra Bahadur’s review of *The Last War* by Ana Menéndez, concluded with a sentence that seemed unclear and made me question its syntax: “*The Last War*’ shows how that instinct can lead to dispatches about the bedroom, as well as those from the war zone.” Bahadur’s wording of “dispatches about the bedroom” and her sentence structure seem clunky and awkward. In fact, it is still unclear to me whether this sentence is grammatically incorrect. Even that one suspicious sentence it is enough to raise a small, niggling question in the back of my mind about Bahadur’s review: If she doesn’t recognize the awkwardness of her concluding sentence, is she really equipped with the knowledge to review someone else’s writing? Yet other readers of this review might not have the same reaction as I did. Some might not take note of this sentence at all. Others might question many of Bahadur’s sentences, including ones that, in fact, are grammatically correct. Nonetheless, given that her expert reader-writer identity already established in her byline, any such question that arises in a reader’s mind can be easily dismissed. The byline for her review indicates that she was a journalist reporting from Baghdad in 2005. If anything, she may not be a native English speaker. Surely she can be forgiven for one awkward sentence in the entire 593-word review. Lucinda Rosenfeld, another *Times* reviewer, made a spelling error in her review of Dan Chaon’s *Await Your Reply*. She misspelled the surname of two filmmaking brothers, writing Joel and Ethan “Cohen,” rather than “Coen.” However, this was a small, understandable error—one that most readers, with the exception of Coen
fans, most likely would not have noticed. It is a mistake anyone could make. Besides, Rosenfeld’s byline states that she has just published her third novel; one misspelled name is not enough to jeopardize her ethos and status as an expert reader-writer.

Overall, the absence of writing errors in his/her review preserves the expert reader-writer identity of the *Times* reviewer and suggests that the *Times* reviewer is an expert on the English language. However, there is an obvious fault with this suggestion. The *Times* reviewer must submit his/her writing to the newspaper and the editorial staff of the newspaper will edit, polish, and revise the piece as necessary. Orbach’s interview with Dwight Garner, the Senior Editor of the *Times* book reviews, explains the editing process. Garner explains:

Some of these are painless. Walter Kirn, for example - he's one of our regular critics - files copy that is all but letter-perfect. He's so crazily, unfairly talented he could probably call me from his truck and, in between drags on cigarettes, dictate a review that's smart, rude, elegant and funny at the same time and that would be just about the best thing in the newspaper the day it appeared. But they aren't all that easy.

As Garner states, some reviewers, like Kirn, do submit nearly flawless reviews. However, Garner’s comment that “they aren’t all that easy” implies that some of the *Times* reviewers are not experts on grammar, usage, and mechanics (and, possibly, also not all that skilled at writing “smart” or “elegant” reviews). It is entirely possible that reviews have errors when they are submitted to Garner and his editorial staff. The texts might have a few typos, a few chronic errors, or even a whole host of problems. The bottom line is that, no matter what the situation, the *Times* reviewer’s reader-writer identity is presented as one of an expert on the English language—a designation that may not be true at all. Rather, this reader-writer identity of an expert is a persona behind which the reviewer can hide. If anything, the expert on the English language is the
nameless copy editor sitting in a cubicle in the office of The New York Times. In the event of any errors, such as the misspelling of the Coen brothers’ surname, it is difficult to tell who is at fault—was the misspelling Rosenfeld’s mistake or was it the mistake of her editor?

Goodreads members, on the other hand, do not have an editorial staff to proofread and edit their reviews before they are posted online. Therefore, it should not be surprising that spelling and grammar errors are much more common in Goodreads reviews than in the Times reviews. Since there are no editors to clean up the text, writing errors that occur are directly attributable to the writer. For the most part, these errors in the Goodreads reviews are tiny and inconsequential and they do not interfere with the meaning the writer is trying to convey. However, the mere presence of errors, even tiny ones, is enough to support the reader-writer identity of the Goodreads reviewer as an apprentice. For example, “Cynthia Tooley”, incorrectly used an apostrophe in the word “others” in her April 16th review of Ginnah Howard’s novel Night Navigation. She writes, “It’s innately frustrating to read about her dilemma and frustrating to see her listen to other’s who want to judge how she loves her son.” Another, “Cheri,” improperly joins her sentences and appears not to know the difference between the contraction “it’s” and the possessive pronoun “its.” Her March 26th review of Trouble by Kate Christensen states, “Devoured this book in a night, this book’s simple pull is it’s vivid characters.” However, neither Cynthia Tooley nor Cheri has any information on her profile to distinguish her as an expert in literature or writing, no information to excuse these errors. Cynthia Tooley lives in Glendale, California and her interests are “Literary Fiction, Classics, Trollope, Art, True Crime.” She has taken Goodreads’ Never-Ending Trivia
Quiz and her average of correct answers is 73.1%—or, in academic terms, a “C” average. Cheri lives in Portsmouth, New Hampshire and her interests are “design, yoga, organic gardening, business.” She provides a link to her blog about web design (http://www.primalmedia.com/blog). Cynthia Tooley may be interested in Literary Fiction and Cheri may be a master at web design, but each woman has designated herself as an apprentice reader-writer with the grammatical errors in her book review.

Every now and then, the writing errors in the Goodreads reviews are hard to overlook. For example, on August 11th, “Denali Dasgupta” writes a scathing review of Nick Laird’s novel, *Glover’s Mistake*. She gives the novel two stars (but not one?) and writes:

I took some time to look at pictures of Nick Laird on the Internet so just in case I ever run into him in New York I can give him a piece of my mind. What a load of garbage this book is. Things like this make me hate the publishing/reviewing complex for feeding us hot new authors who really can’t right. Laird’s incompetent tumblings at character development suggest he should stick to poetry. His satire is weak an unoriginal and even my internet rantings are better than the ones he writes in the voice of David.

Dasgupta is putting her ethos in jeopardy with her misuse of the word “right” instead of “write” and her error in saying Laird’s satire is “weak an unoriginal” instead of “weak and unoriginal.” Readers of her review may question her ability to judge character development, considering she doesn’t appear to know the difference between the two homophones. Perhaps she *does* know the difference, but her sloppy writing isn’t helping her case if she wants others to take her opinion about Nick Laird’s writing seriously.

The information on her profile cannot save her ethos from these egregious mistakes. Her profile shows that she is twenty-six years old and living in Brooklyn, New York. The only information she provides in the category “About me” is one comment: “Trying to
do as much leisure reading as the last president.” She has also taken the Goodreads trivia quiz and her average of correct answers is 90.5%—rather impressive. However, the only assumptions that can be made from the profile are that Dasgupta has some strong political opinions and that she has a talent for trivia. Nothing else has suggested that she is an expert on writing and literature and, because of her writing errors, she has constructed the reader-writer identity of an apprentice.

However, just as the *Times* reviewer might wear the mask of a master of English, the Goodreads reviewer might inadvertently wear the mask of “a hick, a boob, a bumpkin.” Let’s give Dasgupta the benefit of the doubt for a moment. It is entirely possible that she *is* an expert on the English language. We all make errors in our writing, regardless of our grammatical prowess, especially when we write quickly. We omit, misspell, and misuse words. It is possible that Dasgupta wrote her review quickly—and, apparently, in an angry huff—and posted it without proofreading it. As previously mentioned, the rhetorical situation of the Goodreads review has put Dasgupta in this position. Her first draft of review is, for all intents and purposes, her final draft.

Furthermore, there is no option for her to use a “spellcheck” feature before she posts her review; however, even a spellcheck feature wouldn’t catch Dasgupta’s errors of “right” and “an” because these are inappropriate words, not misspelled words. Perhaps, then we can attribute her errors to haste. This would be a reasonable explanation for her errors. However, if her errors were a result of haste, wouldn’t she go back and revise them? Dasgupta did, in fact, go back and revise her review. When I originally read her review on August 31st, it included the two aforementioned errors. As of November 4th, a revisit to her review shows that she fixed her misuse of “right” for “write.” She did not,
however, fix her misuse of “an” for “and.” Ultimately, it is hard to tell if Dasgupta’s errors are a result of a lack of time, a lack of knowledge, or a lack of attention to detail. Whatever the reason, Dasgupta has unavoidably identified herself as an apprentice reader-writer with her writing errors.

Whatever the reason, the absence or presence of writing errors in a book review will impact the reader-writer identity of the reviewer. The *Times* reviewer benefits from the editing of the editorial staff and as a result, he/she is given a certain level of prestige, a reputation of being an expert—a reputation that he/she may or may not deserve. The Goodreads member is most definitely at a disadvantage. Any writing errors, even small ones, will establish an apprentice reader-writer identity for the reviewer—regardless of whether the errors are simply careless errors made in haste.
Voice

Perhaps the most important, though the most elusive, aspect of the reader-writer identity that individuals construct is the writer’s voice in the book review. Many writers and scholars have struggled to find a definition of what “voice” is. Elbow acknowledges the complexity of the term and attempts to give a distinction between writing that has voice and writing that does not:

To summarize, writing without voice is wooden or dead because it lacks sounds, rhythm, energy, and individuality. Most people’s writing lacks voice because they stop so often in mid-sentence and ponder, worry, or change their minds about which word to use or which direction to go in. A few people even speak without voice.

Writing with voice is writing into which someone has breathed. It has that fluency, rhythm, and liveliness that exist naturally in the speech of most people when they are enjoying a conversation. Some people who write frequently, copiously, and with confidence manage to get voice into their writing. (299)

If we try to reduce Elbow’s ideas to key phrases, we can say that that writing that lacks voice is “wooden or dead” and writing that has voice has “liveliness.” Elbow’s definition gives us a starting point for thinking about voice, but he by no means resolves the haziness the surrounds the term. Voice is extraordinarily idiosyncratic and, for this reason, it lies at the very heart of a piece of writing. To examine a writer’s voice is to attempt to understand his or her identity. For this reason, the voice of the reviewer in the contemporary fiction review is one of the most telling ways a reviewer constructs his/her reader-writer identity.

In “Looking and Listening for My Voice,” Toby Fulwiler notes, “Most published voices are carefully constructed. They are composed, revised, and edited to present the self in particular ways, conveying as best they can an image on paper that corresponds to a self-image in the author’s head” (162). The idea of the “self-image” that the writer has
is particularly important in the discussion about the expert and apprentice reader-writer identities that individuals construct in book reviews. The reviews published in the *Times* are clearly crafted pieces of writing that have been prepped for publication. On the other hand, most of the reviews posted on Goodreads are rants and riffs that appear to have been dashed off quickly, without fine crafting or tuning. This does not mean, however, that the finely-tuned *Times* reviews have voice and the spontaneous Goodreads reviews do not. The issue is not that black and white. Elbow believes “everyone, however inexperienced or unskilled, has real voice available; everyone can write with power” and that only “fear or unwillingness or lack of familiarity” prevents a writer from writing with voice (304). I argue that the voice of the *Times* reviewer is, as Fulwiler suggests, carefully constructed through revision and editing, whereas the voice of the Goodreads is less crafted, less consciously constructed, given the nature of the Goodreads system.

The first indication of a reviewer’s voice is in the title of the review—or the lack thereof. Each of the thirty-seven *Times* review is titled. The titles are witty and sharp and apt—allusions to other novels or films (such as “Into the Wild” or “Sleeping With the Enemy”), a mix of allusion and wordplay (such as “Bleak Housekeeping” for the novel based on the life of Charles Dickens), oxymorons (such as “Hot Ice”) and catch phrases (such as “Wish You Were Here” for the novel whose plot revolves around a character receiving postcards from his dead mother). If we think about Elbow’s ideas (writing that is “wooden and dead” versus writing that has “liveliness”), we can confidently say that these titles are an indicator of liveliness. But what can we infer about the reviewer’s identity from these titles? While it is most likely that editor of the *The New York Times Book Review* writes the titles, we must acknowledge the possibility
that the reviewer might provide input or give suggestions about potential titles. However, even if the reviewer is not involved in the titling process, the title reflects the body of the review and is therefore attributed to the reviewer’s ideas. That being said, the previously mentioned titles suggest voices that belong to expert reader-writers who know how to turn a phrase and who are well-versed in literature and popular culture. However, not all the titles of the *Times* reviews are clever. Some seem to be, in my opinion, fairly straight-forward and lacking creativity—for example, “Terminal Bliss” (for the novel about the marriage between a man and his wife with terminal cancer), “The Tramp Returns” (for the novel about Charlie Chaplin), or “Reunited” (for the novel about a group of friends who reunite years after graduating high school). Even these less creative titles imply expert reader-writer voices, because the mere existence of the titles suggests that the reviews are *worthy* of titles. The reviewer—or the editorial staff of the *Times*—is giving the piece of writing a name, an identity, which suggests that it is a piece of writing important enough to be named, to be published, to be discussed and referred to.

In contrast, not a single one of Goodreads reviews has a title. The absence of titles suggests that these reviews are inconsequential pieces of writing, ones that do not deserve or require names, that will be posted online but not *published*, that will probably never be discussed or referred to. Even if this is not the case, even if these reviews are *significant* and will be read and discussed by many, it is telling that it has not occurred to Goodreads members to title their reviews. What is stake here, implicitly, is an issue of voice. The *Times* reviewer creates an identity of an expert by titling his/her review, no matter if the title is creative or obvious. The Goodreads reviewer creates an identity of an apprentice by opting not to—or not being aware of the opportunity to—title his/her review. If the
Goodreads reviewer were to give his/her review the dullest, most prosaic, or most trite title, it would be an attempt to establish a reader-writer identity of an expert. However, no such attempt is made in the Goodreads reviews. In fact, because of the rhetorical situation created by the website, it might actually be quite odd for a Goodreads reviewer to title his/her review. Given that the website emphasizes and reinforces the casual and informal nature of the Goodreads review, it is not surprising that the reviewers do not title these reviews. Informal pieces of writing are not generally titled. Would someone title a grocery list? A journal entry? Why then would a Goodreads reviewer title an informal book review?

When we move into the actual body of the review, it is automatically clear if the reviewer is writing in first or in third person. This choice has a significant impact on voice and the reader-writer identity. In “‘So what is the problem this book addresses?’: Interactions in academic book reviews,” Polly Tse and Ken Hyland examine the use of language and rhetorical structures that writers use in academic book reviews. They examine the use of first person pronouns and possessives, or what they have termed “self-mentions” in book reviews of three disciplines: biology, philosophy, or sociology (772). They found that the frequency of self-mentions varied across the disciplines. For example, in sociology, the use of self-mentions was rare. Tse and Hyland quote an excerpt from an interview with a sociologist in order to provide a potential reason for the lack of first-person in the sociology book reviews. It reads, “In book reviews, I think we don’t even use ‘we’ or ‘I.’ I think it is because the purpose is not the clear expression of oneself, but the expression of knowledge. This purpose is very clear in book reviews. We all understand what we are doing” (785). This excerpt raises two important ideas
surrounding the use of first person. First, the interviewee suggests that to use first person is to strive towards some form of self-expression. Secondly, he/she suggests that the book review is not written in first person because the book review should express knowledge.

Twenty-seven of the thirty-seven *Times* reviews are written solely in third person, with the remaining ten reviews containing very few sentences that use first person, while most of the Goodreads reviews are written solely in first person. If we apply the sociologist’s two ideas, they would suggest that, in general, the *Times* reviewer writes in a third person voice to express—or at least give the appearance of expressing—knowledge, while the Goodreads reviewer writes in first person because he/she is concerned with expressing his/her self. Take, for instance, the openings of two different reviews of the same novel—one written by a *Times* reviewer in third person, one written by a Goodreads reviewer in first. In his review of John Crowley’s *Four Freedoms*, Max Byrd writes:

> John Crowley is a virtuoso of metaphor, a peerless recreator of living moments, of small daily sublimities. And his latest novel, ‘Four Freedoms,’ is in many ways his most unguarded and imaginative work. But readers expecting fantasy or science fiction—Crowley is the author of the cult fantasy series “Aegypt”—should be warned. This new book is rooted firmly in the clear, knowable past; at times, it has the grainy, kinetic authority of an old newsreel.

Byrd’s use of third person allows him to present his opinion of Crowley’s novel in a way that appears as if he is relaying knowledge, or information, to his audience. His comments that “Crowley is a virtuoso of metaphor, a peerless recreator of living moments” and that “this new book is rooted firmly in the clear, knowable past” are clear, bold, and confident. It would be easy for a reader to trust Byrd’s words, to take them as
truth or fact delivered by an expert. In comparison, Goodreads member “Aaron” opens his five-star review of Crowley’s novel with the following paragraph:

A few years ago I introduced Crowley’s work to my father, by way of Little, Big, which has since become his favorite book... it's likely mine as well. Since my dad still lives in Northampton, MA and I'm quite a few leagues west, when Mr. Crowley announced he'd be doing a reading from his "new novel" at a bookstore in Amherst last week, my dad, great dad that he is, made sure to attend on behalf of both of us. Yesterday I received a mystery box from the good ol' brown truck... inside, a copy of Four Freedoms, signed by John Crowley with the dedication: "For Aaron, From Dad -- And the Author..." This being the first gift of its kind ever to fall into my hands, you'll have to forgive me if the forthcoming review is just a hair biased.

There is clearly a difference in voice between these two openings. Aaron’s use of first person results in a much different voice. Instead of presenting knowledge, Aaron appears to be concerned only with self-expression and this marks him as an apprentice. His opening is full of personal information: his opinion of his father (“great dad that he is”), his father’s place of residence (city and state), and his favorite book (one of Crowley’s previous titles). For sure, we can begin to piece together an idea of just who Aaron is, but we would be hard-pressed to say that he is offering us knowledge about Four Freedoms. Aaron continues his review, adding another full, thick paragraph with more direct commentary on the novel. However, we read on with awareness of the personal information he has already provided to us. When he writes, “Easily Crowley's most accessible book, without question,” we can’t help but wonder, most accessible to whom? To Aaron, who has already admitted that his review is “a hair biased”? To his father, resident of Northampton, Massachusetts, who does nice things like send his son autographed books in the mail? Byrd constructs an expert reader-writer identity by using third person; Aaron constructs an identity of apprentice by using first.
To be clear, I do not use Aaron’s example as a way to comment only on Goodreads reviewers. The use of first person compromises the ethos for any reviewer—including *Times* reviewers. For example, in his August 30th review of Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs*, *Times* reviewer Jonathan Lethem writes, “I’m aware of one—one—reader who doesn’t care for Lorrie Moore, and even that one seems a little apologetic about it. ‘Too...punny,’ my friend explains, resorting to a pun as though hypnotized by the very tendency that sets off his resistance.” For many readers, Lethem’s opening lines may raise questions. Lethem says he only knows one person who doesn’t like Lorrie Moore. But how many people does he know? And, of those people, how many of them have actually read Lorrie Moore’s work? In comparison, fellow *Times* reviewer Byrd’s opening lines are declarative and firm and they don’t seem as likely to open up any of these questions in the mind of the reader. It is quite possible that Byrd and Lethem and Aaron are experts on writing, but the difference in voice affects the ways in which readers may possibly read their reviews. However, Lethem can take the risk of using first person because of the strength of his byline. The one-sentence byline states, “Jonathan Lethem’s eighth novel, ‘Chronic City,’ will be published in October.” This byline alone asserts Lethem’s status as an expert reader-writer. Not only is he a novelist, he is also a novelist who has written eight novels. Therefore, when he indulges in first person voice, he does so knowing that this rhetorical move is not enough to discount the expert status he has gained by way of writing eight novels. This is not to say, however, that Byrd’s review has voice and that Lethem’s and Aaron’s do not. If we recall Elbow’s ideas of voiceless writing being “wooden or dead” and voice-filled writing having “liveliness,” we can confidently say that, in fact, all three of these reviewers—Byrd, Lethem, and
Aaron—write with voice. Each of their reviews has a feel of liveliness and energy. All we need to do is look at their diction to see evidence of such: Byrd’s use of “virtuoso,” “grainy,” and “kinetic;” Aaron’s use of “I’m quite a few leagues west” and “the good ol’ brown truck;” and Lethem’s use of “I’m aware of one—one—reader.” All three reader-writers have voice, but Byrd’s voice is more formal while Lethem’s and Aaron’s voices are more informal. Based on diction alone, Byrd clearly establishes himself as an expert, Aaron clearly establishes himself as an apprentice, and Lethem walks a fine line in between the two with the safety net of his expert byline to protect him.

The more formal language, the more likely the reviewer is able to establish an expert reader-writer identity. Likewise, the more informal the language, the more likely the reviewer will have an apprentice reader-writer identity. Therefore, the use of profanity—perhaps the most informal language of all—automatically puts the reader-writer’s identity at stake. Not a single one of the Times reviews contains profanity; the same cannot be said of the Goodreads reviews. However, the use of profanity is not widespread. In fact, only six of the 648 Goodreads reviews I accessed and read contain obscene language. Still, its occurrence is worthwhile examining. Some of the profanity is tame and innocuous. For example, “Michael” writes a four-star review of Lorrie Moore’s novel *A Gate at the Stairs*. His review is actually quite lengthy, a six-paragraph critique that is much longer than most of the other reviews of Moore’s novel. The very last line of Michael’s review is “Goddamn, though, are her sentences good.” However, perhaps it is because there is only one profane word in the entire 725-word review or perhaps it is because he uses “goddamn” to praise Moore’s writing—whatever the reason, Michael’s use of “goddamn,” although clearly informal, does not feel offensive, crass, or
vulgar. Likewise, when “Jo” uses the word “kick-ass” in her review of Monica Ali’s *In the Kitchen*, it does not feel obscene: “i don’t enjoy novels that chronicle the unraveling of their protagonists, and i don’t enjoy novels written by young female writers with a kick-ass feminist novel under their belts that chronicle the unraveling of middle-aged guys.”

However, certain uses of profanity are uncalled for and ruin the ethos of the reader-writer. The most offensive uses of profanity occur in two reviews of Thomas Pynchon’s novel, *Inherent Vice*. “Chris” uses the term “fuck-up” twice in his review and closes his review by saying, “However, I EXPLICITLY FUCKING REFUTE the infantilizing notion that fiction is just about having fun, the comfortable suburban notion that the author just wants to dazzle the reader with an application of wacky, fun sentences and ideas.” Similarly, “Adam” uses a wide array of profanity in his negative review, including “fucking,” “half-ass,” “shit,” “cowshit,” and “goddamn.” In comparison to the profanity-free *Times* reviews, the use of profanity causes these Goodreads reviews to appear considerably less serious, less polished. Martha Kolln, author of *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, states, “As a reader, you will usually spot an inappropriate word simply because it calls attention to itself—negative, uncomfortable attention” (61). This is the case with the profanity in the Goodreads reviews. While the uses of “goddamn” in Michael’s review and “kick-ass” in Jo’s review are not overly vulgar, these words still call attention to themselves, from the mere fact that profanity is unexpected in a book review. Even more so, the profanity in Chris’ and Adam’s reviews calls “negative, uncomfortable attention” to itself. Other Goodreads members are capable of critiquing Pynchon’s novel without the use of profanity, as is
Walter Kirn in his *Times* review. Why, then, the need for profanity? It is indeed the mark of an apprentice, one who is not aware that readers expect book reviews to be profanity-free, in the same way they expect book reviews to be free from writing errors.

Another mark of the apprentice reader-writer identity is a voice that belies a sense of self-consciousness. Noticeably frequent in the Goodreads reviews are comments in which the reviewer doubts or blames him- or herself for not understanding or not liking a certain book. For example, “Allyson” both opens and closes her review of Richard Flanagan’s novel *Wanting* with self-criticism. The first line of her review is, “I feel as if I should value this read more.” The last line states, “Disappointing and partially my failing as a reader with this subject and theme.” Her comments are interesting because they suggest Allyson believes there are some high standards for readers that she is not meeting. She says that she “should” like Flanagan’s novel, and her tone appears apologetic—she clearly believes that she is not meeting what is expected of her or what she is obligated to do. She also says, quite shockingly, that her dislike of the book is a sign of her “failing as a reader.” This is clearly the voice of an apprentice reviewer, a reviewer who is not confident enough in her own opinions and evaluations. If Allyson feels like she has failed as a reader, why would any reader trust her review? She is portraying herself as someone inadequate and not worthy of passing judgment on Flanagan’s novel. Similarly, two readers of Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* use self-deprecating comments in their review. Their comments are even harsher than Allyson’s self-judgment. In his August 11th review, “Rich” writes, “OK, i will admit it. i just did not understand this book....I am an idiot. I read these reviews and it just makes me feel
like a total moron.” Likewise, “Mikelkpoet” also insults himself in his August 24th review:

I had two weeks to read this book, then I had to return it to the bookstore that I work at. I kept meaning to pick the book up, and try to finish it, but I never got beyond page 20, finding myself, often, re-reading passages wondering what the hell I had just read. If inability to gain access to the most accessible novel, so far, by Thomas Pynchon makes me an idiot, well then, I am an idiot.

Both reviewers call themselves idiots and both refer to other reviews of Pynchon’s novel posted on Goodreads (Rich says “I read these reviews…” and Mikelkpoet refers to “the most accessible novel,” the common assessment of Pynchon’s novel among the other Goodreads reviews). Rich also feels the need to “admit” that he doesn’t understand Pynchon’s book, as if he is confessing a horrible, shameful secret. Like Allyson, these men are not only constructing reader-writer identities of apprentices, they are also constructing reader-writer identities of inadequate, unworthy readers. “Colin” goes so far as to give his readers a warning of his review of Jim Krusoe’s novel, Erased. He writes, “Caveat: I often react poorly to literary humor that many other people seem to enjoy—I spent a fair portion of the novel feeling like I just plan didn’t get it.” It’s as if he is warning his readers that since he didn’t understand the novel, his review might not be a worthy evaluation of its merit.

The examples of Allyson, Rich, Mikelkpoet, and Colin are perhaps extreme examples—examples of people so very honest in their shame of not meeting some unnamed reader expectations. However, there are many other Goodreads reviewers who reveal their feelings of self-doubt and blame through thinly-veiled statements like “I wanted to like this book” and “I didn’t understand what this book was supposed to be about.” Of the forty reviews of Monica Ali’s In the Kitchen, all of which were accessed
on August 10th, six contained comments by the reviewers stating that they wanted to like the book and/or that they didn’t know what they were supposed to take from the book. Comments such as those by “Stacie” (“I didn’t know what I was supposed to care about”) and “Megan” (“*Whew* I feel better after reading some of the other reviews...I really wanted to like it”) suggest that Goodreads reviewers feel lost, confused, or unsure of themselves if they don’t completely understand, in black and white, what a novel is about or trying to say and if other reviewers are praising a novel that they didn’t like. These comments suggest deep-seated insecurities that some of the Goodreads reviewers harbor about their own skill or ability to read and comment on contemporary fiction. Whether openly honest, like the comments of Allyson, Rich, Mikelkpoet, and Collin, or more guarded, like those of Stacie and Megan, these comments firmly establish the reviewer as an apprentice.

However, we must remember that all of these voices are those of people writing reviews to be published in the Times or posted on Goodreads. Therefore, we must remember Fulwiler’s point that “most published voices are carefully constructed.” In fact, it is possible that these are the reviewer’s public voices—the voices they use when speaking to or writing for others. It is possible that this is not the reviewer’s true voice. However, Fulwiler also notes, “If there is such a thing as an authentic voice, it is protean and shifty” (162). He implies that an individual’s real voice, if one exists, is constantly changing. Therefore, we must then acknowledge that the reviewer’s voice—the expert voice or the apprentice voice—is a persona, a mask the reviewer wear when presenting him- or herself to the reading community. Perhaps the expert reader-writer is aiming for a witty voice with a clever title. Perhaps the apprentice reader-writer is aiming for a
humble voice with expressions of self-doubt or blame. Whatever the situation, these written voices can only be personas, representations of the individual behind the words—representations that may only be true to varying degrees.
Audience

Elbow states, “Writing’s greatest reward, for most of us anyway, is the sense of reaching an audience” (212). Both the Times reviewer and the Goodreads reviewer are rewarded, because each knows for a fact that there is a guaranteed, real audience who will read his/her book review. Yet, without a doubt, there is a difference in size and scope of the audience of a Times review and the audience of a Goodreads review. The Times reviewer’s audience is most likely large. Orbach gives us the numbers in the preface to his interview with Sam Tanenhaus. Orbach states, “[R]eaching over 1.7 million people every week, The New York Times Book Review is not only the most high-profile, but also the most read book review publication in the country.” Obviously, not every one of those 1.7 million people will read the reviews. Some readers may just turn to the bestseller lists; others may skim through the reviews, reading only a few sentences here and there. However, some of those 1.7 million readers will read the reviews and it’s reasonable to say that the number of such readers is most likely significant. On the other hand, the Goodreads reviewer’s audience is not necessarily large. The Goodreads website states, “We have more than 2,600,000 members who have added more than 63,000,000 books to their shelves.” However, although the number of Goodreads members is larger than the number of readers of the Times, it is very possible that a review posted on Goodreads will only be read by a handful of people. “Lauren,” who posted a review of Rafael Yglesias’ novel, A Happy Marriage, on July 6th, may very likely have a small audience. A look at her member profile shows that she has fourteen friends. When she posts a review, each of her fourteen friends will have the review posted on his/her Goodreads homepage. It is likely that some of her friends—but perhaps
not all—will read her review. Beyond those fourteen people, however, it is hard to
determine if any of the other 2,600,000 Goodreads members will read Lauren’s review.
Some, like myself, will search the website for *A Happy Marriage* and then read through
the posted reviews. Others, unless they have specific reasons to search for Yglesias’
book, will not. Despite the size of the audience, though, both the *Times* reviewer and the
Goodreads reviewer know that *someone* is reading the review he/she writes. For this
reason, it is not surprising to see the reviewers using rhetorical moves to address the very
real audiences that will read their reviews, moves which construct expert and apprentice
reader-writer identities.

Tse and Hyland argue that the book review “involves charting a perilous course
between critique and collegiality, minimizing personal threat while simultaneously
demonstrating an expert understanding of the issues” (773). This two-pronged focus of
“critique and collegiality” is important, because the reviewer must focus on both
presenting his/her evaluation of the book and on maintaining a respectful relationship
with his/her audience. In their study of academic book reviews, Tse and Hyland noted a
high frequency of what they term “engagement markers” across all three disciplines—
biology, philosophy, and sociology. Tse and Hyland define engagement markers as the
use of language which seeks to directly speak to and include the reader. For example,
they found that reviewers often use second person pronouns, such as “you” and “your,”
and they see this as “the clearest way a writer can acknowledge the reader’s presence in a
text” (781). They also argue that reviewers use inclusive pronouns, such as “we,” “our,”
and “us,” in the book review “in an attempt to address their readers as equals” (782).
Unlike the use first person, which suggests that self-expression is the reviewer’s main
focus, the use of second person and inclusive pronouns indicates that the audience is the reviewer’s focus. Although the Tse and Hyland study focuses on academic book reviews, the occurrence of engagement markers is equally prevalent in the contemporary fiction reviews in the *Times* and on Goodreads.

Of the thirty-seven reviews published in the *Times*, sixteen display use of second person pronouns. In some reviews, the use is minimal—so minimal, in fact, that a reader might miss it. For example, Robin Romm’s review of Emily Chenoweth’s novel, *Hello Goodbye*, is written almost entirely in third person, with only one sentence of the 657-word review including a second person pronoun. Other reviews, though, make a much more obvious and clear use of “you” and “your.” In her review of Jill Ciment’s novel, *Heroic Measures*, Caitlin Macy writes the entire opening paragraph with a second person approach:

> It’s an indelicate, sometimes even an indecent-feeling situation in New York life. You go to look at an older — all right, let’s just say it — an *old* couple’s apartment that’s come on the market. On the way up to see the place, your broker murmurs, “They’re actually going to be in the apartment,” and adds, as if it would make you feel less of a craven bottom feeder: “They’re very nice.” You walk around the apartment alternately wincing and smiling — trying for an expression that says you recognize you’re intruding but you’re genuinely interested in the view from the master bedroom. Finally your agent sums up a couple of lives’ work with a stage-whispered confidence: “French doors could do a lot to really open this up.”

The effect of this opening is unmistakable: Macy is luring the reader into her review. Not only does she use second person pronouns, she also creates a hypothetical situation in order to introduce her critique of Ciment’s novel. It is a successful rhetorical move for three reasons. First, Macy directly addresses her audience, making the reader feel part of the review. By directly including the reader, and not in an insignificant way, she establishes an ethos of camaraderie. It’s as if she is saying, *Haven’t we all been in this*
position before? Second, by using second person voice here, she creates a life for the reader—he/she is a New Yorker, seeking an apartment, dealing with an uncomfortable position. Even a non-New Yorker, a non-apartment dweller, can allow him- or herself to be drawn into this narrative, even if momentarily. Lastly, and most importantly, Macy creates an expert reader-writer identity for herself. Her use of the second person is intended for the specific rhetorical purpose of including and influencing her reader. She does not use the second pronoun casually or carelessly—her use is clearly intentional and carefully crafted.

Goodreads reviewers also use second person pronouns in their reviews, but none does so as directly and intentionally as Macy does in her Times review. For example, in her four-star rating of Ginnah Howard’s Night Navigation, “Michele” dips in and out of second person. After a brief summary of the novel, she writes:

Her sparse, yet somehow still lyrical style draw you into her world, into her characters, until you find yourself a de facto member of this dysfunctional and desperate family.

There is a price to being drawn into a tale such as this. It leaves the reader with the emptiness, no --- make that the hollowness, that comes from living with continually dashed hope. Eventually, only numbness remains.

Yet if you've ever wondered what it's like to be a parent of an addict, this novel is the closest you'll ever want to come to finding out. Despair? It abounds in this novel, but so does understanding and the depths of a mother's love.

Do I recommend the novel? That depends. If you have the fortitude to delve into dark subject matter out of a genuine desire to understand, then yes. Otherwise, you'd best skip it.

Michele’s use of second person is inconsistent. In the above excerpt from her review, she begins with second person, explaining how “you” will be drawn into Howard’s world. Yet, in the next paragraph, she transitions to third person, here referring to “the reader”
instead of to “you.” She stays here only for a moment, before returning, in the final two paragraphs, to her audience of “you.” In essence, Michele is both directly acknowledging her reader and also casting him/her aside with the impersonal, clinical label of “the reader.” I would argue that this is a careless mistake on Michele’s part; had she realized her inconsistency, I believe she would have revised her review. However, taken in comparison with Macy’s review, we can clearly see that Macy’s use of “you” is consistent, clear, and intentional while Michele’s use of the second person pronoun is not. Both reviewers are seeking to acknowledge their readers, but Macy’s *Times* review reflects an expert reader-writer identity while Michele’s Goodreads review reflects that of an apprentice. Michele may realize that she can use the second person pronoun to address her audience, but she is not aware of how to fully utilize this move to her rhetorical advantage. Had she maintained a consistent use of “you,” rather than lapsing into the general “the reader,” she would have been making a move towards establishing an expert reader-writer identity. However, her use of the second person pronoun relegates her to the reader-writer identity of an apprentice.

In addition to the use of second person pronouns, the use of inclusive pronouns is also evident in the *Times* and Goodreads reviews. Twenty of the thirty-seven *Times* reviews contained examples of “we,” “our,” and “us.” The majority of the twenty reviews use the inclusive pronouns sparingly—most only have a handful of such pronouns—but their use remains significant. When Sven Birkerts opens his review of *Exiles in the Garden* by Ward Just, he writes, “For a nation so besotted with politics, we have very few novelists who address the treacherous interface between public and private spheres, probing the implications of accountability. Ward Just is a distinguished
exception.” Here, Birkerts’ use of “we” is subtle but powerful. He declares that “we have very few novelists” and by doing so he is including the reader in his group of fellow readers—his virtual reading community. Although he doesn’t explicitly state so, the second line of his review suggests that we now have Ward Just. This is the only use of an inclusive pronoun in the review, but it sets the tone immediately. Birkerts’ rhetorical move indicates that he considers himself and his reader equal members of the same group. Will Blythe, reviewer of Robert Cohen’s *Amateur Barbarians*, hits a similar chord with his use of “we.” In discussing what he calls the “novel of male midlife crisis,” he writes, “If we exempt from consideration the Dante of ‘The Divine Comedy,’ who finds himself lost in dark woods and shortly thereafter enters the Inferno (this remains preferable to joining a men’s group), writers have been making narratives of male midlife crisis since the ‘60s....” Blythe includes his reader in a group which clearly, based on the allusions to Dante, is well read in literature and familiar with classic texts. Others, like John Haskell, simply use the pronoun “we” to indicate that his assumption that the reader of the review is also a reader of the book being reviewed. Haskell writes of Jim Krusoe’s novel *Erased*, “We happily follow Theodore to a mythical and sui generis city that, in Krusoe’s sympathetic hands, is famed not for the fires that occasionally break out on its river but for its bountiful breakfasts and the geniality of its inhabitants, whose helpfulness and spirit of community keep the plot in motion.” In Haskell’s view, “we” are all readers of Krusoe’s novel. He doesn’t seem to consider that perhaps some members of his audience will not read Krusoe’s novel. Each *Times* reviewer establishes himself as an expert by presenting himself as a member of a virtual reading community and by extending this membership to the reader of his review. Of course a reader of a *Times*
review is a member of this reading community; this seems to be the assumption that the
expert reader-writer is making. It is a community that “has” writers like Ward Just, that
discusses Dante, and that reads writers like Krusoe who are reviewed in the *Times*.

However, the use of inclusive pronouns in the Goodreads reviews is much less
common. Very few of the Goodreads reviewers use “we,” and those that do seem to do
so with a different intention than that of the *Times* reviewers. Unlike Birkerts, Blythe,
and Haskell, who appear to use “we” in order to address groups to which they belong,
Goodreads reviewers “Rebecca” and “Lynn” seem to use “we” as a general reference to
human beings. In her five-star review of Yglesias’ *A Happy Marriage*, Rebecca
concludes, “For me, this novel reflects so honestly the intricacies of all our relationships,
and the very human condition of grief and loss when we must let go of someone we
love.” Is Rebecca referring specifically to the intricacies of her readers’ personal
relationships? That would be unlikely—how could she know if the novel “honestly”
reflected the relationships of her readers? This would mean she would have to know all
of her readers—and know each *extremely* well. It seems more likely that she is using the
inclusive pronoun casually, referring instead to the condition of mankind. It appears that
Rebecca is not speaking to the readers of her review; rather, it appears that she is
speaking of humans in general, humans with intricate relationships and who experience
grief. Similarly, the last sentence of Lynn’s four-star review of *Exiles in the Garden* by
Ward Just states, “Thought provoking about the choices we make in life and how they
play out.” Lynn also seems to be using “we” casually rather than as an intentional way to
include her readers and herself in one group. Finally, Goodreads member “Julie Wiley”
also uses the second person pronoun, but she uses it to address a specific audience—a narrow audience. In her review of Jim Lynch’s novel, *Border Songs*, she writes:

His first book, *Highest Tide*, was a wonderful read especially for those of us who grew up in the Puget Sound region of Washington State. *Border Songs* takes his gift of storytelling to a whole new level. He weaves nature, Canadian border issues, real people, crime, ethical issues, etc. and ever so subtly, reminds you of not only who you are but how things tend to work themselves out when we go back to our own true nature.

Here Julie Wiley is using the “us” to specifically address her audience of readers who grew up in the Pacific Northwest. As she continues, switching to “you,” it is clear that she is speaking only to this very specific audience. What distinguishes Rebecca’s, Lynn’s, and Julie Wiley’s reviews from those in the *Times* is that each of the Goodreads members seems unaware of the larger virtual reading community. Rebecca and Lynn address human beings in general and Julie Wiley addresses Puget Sound/Washington state natives. Furthermore, while the *Times* reviewers (Birkerts, Blythe, and Haskell) use “we” to indicate a group of respectable readers, Wiley uses “we” to indicate a group of people who share the same regional background. The common thread among the members of this group is their upbringing in the Puget Sound area; the common thread among the members of the groups the *Times* reviewers allude to is literature. Even if *Times* reviewers were alluding to small groups (though I’m not sure this is the case), it is significant to note that the groups they are referring to are groups of readers, not groups of Pacific Northwest natives. Thus, each Goodreads reviewer presents herself as an apprentice, someone who is not yet a member of the larger reading community, to which the experts, such as Birkerts, Blythe, and Haskell, clearly belong.

This narrow vision of audience is clearly indicative of an apprentice. Some Goodreads reviewers choose to direct their reviews to specific, named audiences, and this
too reveals their apprentice reader-writer identities. In an unusual move, “Choupette” addresses her angry review directly to Goodreads, the very system that provides her with the opportunity to write the review in the first place. In her June 17th review of Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s *The Angel’s Game*, a book she has actually not read and has added to her “never-read” bookshelf, she writes:

Don’t think I haven’t noticed you spamming me with ads and recommendations, goodreads. Don’t think I’ve forgotten how profoundly mediocre Zafón’s first novel was. Don’t think I don’t lose a great deal of respect for any author who resorts to cheap advertisement of their book over the internet, on television or, worst of all, on billboards outside airports. Don’t think that your soulless, empty, bought-and-paid-for recommendations are going to make me any more likely to read this book. They won’t.

Her view of her audience is so incredibly narrow—she writes as if only Goodreads staffers will read her review. Nowhere in her brief review does she try to persuade other members not to read Ruiz Zafón’s book. In fact, she doesn’t even acknowledge the existence of other readers. She is focused solely on attacking Goodreads and its “soulless, empty, bought-and-paid-for recommendations.” This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that her profile shows that she has seventy-three friends—each of whom receives Choupette’s updates and reviews on his/her Goodreads homepage. It is very likely that some of Choupette’s friends will read her review of Ruiz Zafón’s book; in addition, other Goodreads members, like me, may read her review. As a result, she puts her ethos in jeopardy by not only by failing to acknowledge her audience, but also by blatantly ignoring it. Without a doubt, Choupette establishes a reader-writer identity of an apprentice.

Similarly, some members address all or parts of their reviews to the directly authors of the novels. Some are full of praise, some are angry diatribes. As previously
mentioned, “Denali Dasgupta” writes an angry review of Nick Laird’s *Glover’s Mistake*. The first full paragraph of her review is written in first person; however, she closes her review with three comments addressed directly to Laird:

*It’s amazing that this kind of nonsense passes for literary fiction. Here is a good sample sentence “The rain fanaticized.” Really Mr Laird? You are full of it. * you did not discover the “funky caucasian” dancing face. * you hate your characters and b/c you do, i do too.

Unlike Choupette, Dasgupta does not ignore her audience by addressing the entire review to Laird. However, the direct attack on Laird in the latter half of the review still establishes her as an apprentice. She falls prey to her anger and loses her focus on her audience, putting her ethos at risk. She overlooks her true audience: her twenty-seven friends who will see her review on their Goodreads homepages and other Goodreads members, like me, who have searched for reviews of Laird’s book. By berating Laird directly, she loses her connection with her audience and she exhibits the behavior of an apprentice. It would be unthinkable for a *Times* reviewer to attack an author in this manner. But, unlike a *Times* reviewer, Dasgupta does not have to worry about her reputation as an established reviewer or about jeopardizing her payment for this review. She does not have to worry about an editor questioning her comments. On Goodreads, she can review Laird’s book in any way she wishes. The only thing she puts at risk is her reader-writer identity.

The use of engagement markers, however, is not the only way a reviewer indicates his/her attitude toward audience. Goodreads reviewer “Hannah Messier” does not use “you” or “we” in her June 26th review of Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs*, but she refers to another Goodreads member (and her review) by first name only. She writes:

...the reason I remembered this book was Imogen’s review, which says
everything I would like to say. Lorrie Moore is one of my favorite of all time short story writers, but as a novelist she ranks a hair lower. Just a hair, though. And everything Imogen said totally and perfectly explained why that is the case.

Messer refers to “Imogen Binnie,” who also posted a review of Moore’s novel. A look at Messer’s profile shows that Binnie is one of her forty-three friends. Because she refers to Binnie by first name only, it appears that Messer’s review is directed towards a limited audience of individuals who also know Binnie and have read her review—presumably friends that the two reviewers have in common. Messer’s reference to Binnie is an indication of her belief that only her friends will read her review, an indication that she is unaware of her potential to reach a wider, larger audience with her review. That she writes directly to this limited audience is clearly the move of an apprentice.

It is a sign of their expert reader-writer identities that none of the Times reviewers direct their reviews towards specific, named audiences. The closest the Times reviewer gets to labeling his/her audience is with the use of “we.” Even then, the audience remains a vague and nebulous group of readers. However, the use of references and allusions to other writers and pieces of writing in the Times reviews suggests that the reviewers are making certain assumptions about their audiences, however vague and undefined they may be. For example, Susann Cokal’s treatment of her audience in her July 12th review of Gaynor Arnold’s Girl in a Blue Dress reveals a lot about the reader-identity she is constructing. The opening paragraph of her review begins:

Dickens lovers are having a great year. It has already brought two thrillers built around his unfinished “Mystery of Edwin Drood,” in addition to a trim novel by Richard Flanagan, who contrasts the emotional life of Dickens with that of a young Tasmanian aboriginal girl.
Cokal does not make the effort to name the three novels—the two thrillers and the trim novel—that she refers to in her opening lines. She hints at the third novel, saying that the author is Flanagan. However, this is as far as she goes. The newspaper’s online version of her review does include hyperlinks to reviews of two of the books she refers to (the May 29th review of Matthew Pearl’s *The Last Dickens* and the June 28th review of Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting*); however, a reader who read this review in the print copy of the newspaper on July 12th could have potentially been left clueless. Cokal’s vague references indicate that she either expects that the members of her audience will know which novels she is referring to (because, after all, shouldn’t readers of *The New York Times Book Review* recognize the references to these recent reviews?) or, if they don’t, that she doesn’t feel the need to inform them. By implying that the titles she is referring to are common knowledge, Cokal is constructing a reader-writer identity of a well-read, well-informed reader. She is also constructing the identity of a reader-writer who is a member of *The New York Times Book Review* community.

The title of Cokal’s review also suggests an expectation that the reader of her review will recognize an allusion to a classic text. Her review is appropriately titled “Bleak Housekeeping,” an allusion to Dickens’ novel *Bleak House*, given that Arnold’s novel is based on Dickens’ life and marriage. Such allusions are common in the *Times* reviews. Some are made in passing, while others serve a more pointed purpose. David Gates’ review of *To Heaven by Water* by Justin Cartwright makes the following passing allusion: “[The novel] has the musty air of a merely literary exercise, without the intimacy and urgency in the face of sexuality and mortality that mark, say, the recent work of Philip Roth.” Gates does not explain his allusion to Roth, nor does he indicate
which recent works he has in mind—perhaps because he feels he shouldn’t have to explain. It appears that he either expects the audience to understand the allusion or that he feels no qualms about leaving the audience to interpret the allusion on its own. However, in her review of Kate Christensen’s novel, *Trouble*, Kaui Hart Hemmings makes a pointed and clear reference to Chopin’s *Awakening* as she discusses the character development of Christensen’s protagonist:

Josie is so awake from the onset that she would make Kate Chopin proud. Indeed, there are moments when Josie is strikingly similar to Edna Pontellier, the heroine of Chopin’s “Awakening” — as when she states that she’s “going toward life, away from numbed stasis and paralyzed discontent.” But Edna’s discontent was painstakingly drawn, her obstacles complex and riveting, and the consequences of her choices profound and derailing.

Unlike Cokal’s and Gates’ vague references and allusions, Hart Hemmings alludes to Chopin, but does so in a more user-friendly way. She names the author and the title of the text she refers to, as well as the full name of Chopin’s heroine. Hart Hemmings’ move suggests care and concern for her audience, a desire to make sure that her readers understand the allusion she makes. Other *Times* reviewers include multiple references and allusions in their reviews, explained to varying degrees. Will Blythe’s review of *Amateur Barbarians* by Robert Cohen alludes to Dante, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Theodore Dreiser, and Richard Ford. The online version of the review contains a hyperlink to information about Richard Ford, but no hyperlinks for the other three allusions. If a reader does not recognize Blythe’s reference to Melville (“when Ahab returns home from killing the whale”) or to Dante or Dreiser, he/she will not fully understand Blythe’s comments. Furthermore, the reader of the print newspaper better recognize all four allusions, since no hyperlinks are available in print. Similarly, Jonathan Mahler’s review of *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann alludes to the 2004 film *Crash*, Wolfe’s
Bonfire of the Vanities, Jonathan Lethem, and Colson Whitehead. The online review provides hyperlinks to the three writers, but not to the film. To his credit, Mahler does provide a little bit of information about his allusions to the writers and their texts ("another novel of colliding cultures: 'The Bonfire of the Vanities,' Tom Wolfe's classic portrait of New York in the 1980s" and "the emergence of a new generation of New York novelists led by Jonathan Lethem and Colson Whitehead, both native New Yorkers"), but again the allusion to the film is left unexplained.

To a certain degree, the use of these references and allusions seems to be an unabashed mode of name-dropping, the use of a secret language which determines whether the reader of the review is inside or outside of the virtual, elite reading community. However, we must acknowledge that the reviewer's use of references and allusions—and the degree to which he/she explains such comments to the audience—is a key rhetorical move that the Times reviewer uses to establish his/her expert reader-writer identity. By referencing past Times books reviews, as Cokal does, and by alluding to classic and contemporary writers—as Gates, Hart Hemmings, Blythe, and Mahler do—the reviewers boost their credibility by displaying their knowledge of literature and of the recent reviews published in the Times. Allusions and references assure the reader that he/she is in expert hands—the hands of an expert who has read many books, as well as many reviews of such books, and is able to place the text at hand, the text being reviewed, within what Bayard calls the "collective library." In comparison, the use of references and allusions is much less common in the Goodreads reviews. Cokal makes references and allusions in her review of Girl in a Blue Dress; none of the ten Goodreads

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4 Jonathan Lethem is also a reviewer for The New York Times Book Review. He reviewed Lorrie Moore's novel A Gate at the Stairs on August 30, 2009. Therefore, Mahler's reference to Lethem is not only a reference to a contemporary writer, but also to a fellow Times reviewer.
reviews for this novel accessed on July 13th contains allusions or references. Gates alludes to Roth in his review of *To Heaven by Water*; neither of the two Goodreads ratings accessed on August 17th contains allusions or references. Hart Hemmings alludes to Chopin in her review of *Trouble*; only one of the twenty-five Goodreads reviews, accessed on July 6th, contains an allusion: “Joy” writes that the novel is “somewhat like Thelma and Louise,” alluding to the 1991 film starring Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon. Finally, both Blythe and Mahler make multiple allusions in their respective reviews of *Amateur Barbarians* and *Let the Great World Spin*. However, none of the Goodreads reviews for these novels—one review for *Amateur Barbarians*, accessed on July 27th, and fifty-three reviews of *Let the Great World Spin*, accessed on August 3rd—contains allusions or references.

The infrequency of references and allusions in the Goodreads reviews is in stark contrast with the high frequency of such in the *Times* reviews. To be clear, the Goodreads reviews are not completely void of references or allusions; rather, references and allusions do exist in these reviews, but their occurrence is rare. For example, I accessed fourteen Goodreads review of Ron Carlson’s novel, *The Signal*, on August 3rd. Of those fourteen reviews, only three reviewers made allusions or references. “Marian Deegan” says, “There is a singularly laconic voice that belongs to the American West, and is captured by authors like Norman Maclean and Mark Spragg.” Similarly, “Chris Wright” states of Carlson’s novel, “It’s a gem of Western storytelling much like the works of Annie Proulx, Cormac McCarthy, or Norman Maclean.” Finally, “Adam McGill” refers to *Five Skies* in his review, one of Carlson’s previous novels. These references feel different than those made in the *Times* reviews. In the case of Carlson’s
novel, his reviewers make references to other contemporary writers that they are reminded of when reading *The Signal*: Maclean, Spragg, Proulx, McCarthy, and Carlson himself. However, the allusions and references in the *Times* review seem to go one step further—they seem to attempt to prove the depth and scope of the reviewer’s literary knowledge. The *Times* reviewers allude to long-established authors and texts, not just contemporary writers on the bestseller lists. For example, Hart Hemmings doesn’t refer to a contemporary female author when reviewing Christensen’s novel—she alludes to Kate Chopin. Blythe, in his review of Cohen, refers to contemporary writer Richard Ford and classic authors Dante, Melville, and Dreiser. Mahler’s review of McCann refers to contemporary writers (Lethem and Whitehead) and a contemporary film (*Crash*), in addition to alluding to the classic 1980s novel, *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Therefore, the *Times* reviewer’s allusions are more effective in establishing a strong ethos and a strong expert identity that would boost the persuasiveness of the review. In comparison, the Goodreads reviewer’s allusions, infrequent and pedestrian, do not do much else than indicate that the reviewer has read other contemporary novels, thus resulting in an apprentice reader-writer identity.

Finally, the reviewer indicates his/her attitude towards the audience of the review by how much he/she reveals about the plot of the novel. Goodreads reviewers sometimes write about entire novels, from start to finish, mentioning key moments in the plotlines and discussing how the novels conclude. However, they are able to do so without worrying about ruining the novels for future readers. Goodreads has designed its website so that before posting a review, a member has the option to click a box which says “this review contains spoilers.” By doing so, the review will then be posted on the website,
but with a warning that reads “This review has been hidden because it contains spoilers. To view it, click here.” Anyone who chooses to read the review will have to click on the link in order to show the full text of the review. This allows the Goodreads reviewer to write freely about the events in the novel, to comment on the twists, the surprises, the ending—and still exhibit goodwill towards his/her audience. Having this choice—to read or to avoid a review that contains spoilers—is extremely helpful for the users of the website. Some members may read the reviews before they begin reading a book, some may read the reviews while they are reading a book to get a sense of what others have thought, and some may read the reviews only after they have finished the last page. The reviewer protects the audience members and their reading experiences by not revealing important information about the novel, information that a reader would want to discover on his or her own.

However, no such option exists for the Times reviewer. He/she is in an unenviable position: the reviewer must present a judgment of the book, including a general description of the plot, but not spoil the reading experience. The way the reviewer works through this tricky situation reveals his/her attitude toward the audience. For example, Roxana Robinson provides a very detailed description of the novel’s plot in her 1,192-word review of Richard Russo’s That Old Cape Magic. She explains the characters and their emotional issues, as well as mentioning each of the main events in the novel. Towards the end of the review, she writes, “The second part of the novel takes place a year later, in Maine, and the second wedding is Laura’s. I won’t reveal what happens during the interim, except to say that Griffin and Joy have reached a pretty serious impasse.” It is an ironic moment, considering that Robinson has already revealed
so very much about Russo’s novel. Similarly, towards the end of her 1,383-word review of *Await Your Reply*, written by Dan Chaon, Lucinda Rosenfeld writes, “Without giving too much away, not all the characters in [the novel] are who they appear to be in the beginning.” Her disclaimer feels pointless; she may not have given away this twist, but she already has given away numerous details about the characters and their experiences. While both Robinson and Rosenfeld attempt to show concern for their respective audiences, two other reviewers seem to show little, if any, care for the reading experiences of their audience members. Robin Romm closes her review of Emily Chenoweth’s *Hello Goodbye* by revealing nearly everything about the novel’s ending:

> Eventually, Abby learns that her mother’s cancer is terminal. She casts aside youthful preoccupations, as well as her virginity. Elliott must also face a kind of reckoning, as Abby’s grief forces him into new challenges of fatherhood. Only Helen is left unmarred, thinking that “the world is beautiful, and she is so glad she has seen it.” At some point, she’ll have to wrestle the truth. In fiction, though, unlike in life, one can avoid such brutal moments. Chenoweth leaves the family at the resort, intact, suggesting a kind of eternal togetherness. It’s a generous gesture — a melancholy wish. But it, too, is a fantasy waiting to be dispelled.

Romm gives the final update on each of the three main characters in the novel—Helen, her husband Elliott, and her daughter Abby—leaving very little to the reader’s imagination. In an even more blatant gesture, David Gates reveals the two biggest twists in his review of Justin Cartwright’s *To Heaven by Water*:

> He jazzes up the two biggest moments with childish cliffhangers, which withhold crucial information for supposedly dramatic effect. At one point, Lucy’s ex-boyfriend puts a gun to his mouth and the chapter ends as she’s “about to be showered with human bits”; we learn, after a teasing interlude with the brothers in the Kalahari, that the ex has been put in a psych ward and that the gun was only “a replica.” Another chapter ends with David apparently about to sleep with a woman who’s been pursuing him; the next begins when he wakes up, “reaches across the bed and finds she has gone.” But the “she,” we learn after a few pages of backtracking, turns out to be a different woman entirely, one whom — how to
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put this? — no father-in-law should be bedding. I suppose it’s not fair play to spoil a writer’s choicest frissons, but Cartwright hasn’t played fair either.

By disclosing the truth about the gun and the relationship between David and his potential lover, Gates suggests a lack of concern for his audience. He even admits that it is probably “not fair to spoil a writer’s choicest frissons,” but he does it anyway. It appears that he does with only one goal in mind: presenting his negative opinion of the novel (he writes, at the end of the review, “I’ll admit that ‘To Heaven by Water’ isn’t the worst novel ever written”).

Yet, upon further review, it is clear that although the Goodreads reviewer has the ability to hide his/her review because it contains spoilers, very few reviewers exercise this option. None of the fourteen reviews of Emily Chenoweth’s novel, accessed on August 3rd, used the spoiler option. None of the forty-eight reviews of Richard Russo’s novel, accessed on August 17th, used the spoiler option. There were no Goodreads reviews of Justin Cartwright’s novel available on August 17th. Finally, none of the forty reviews of Dan Chaon’s novel used the spoiler option. So what does this mean? This means that rather than writing detailed reviews that would need to be hidden because they contain spoilers, the Goodreads reviewers for these four novels opted to write more general, vague reviews. For example, “Heather Cox,” wrote the following review about Hello Goodbye:

As depressing and sad as this book was, I absolutely loved it. And I hate cliched phrases like "this book was beautifully written," but, well, it was.

I really thought Chenoweth nailed her characters--especially Abby and Elliott.

Chenoweth’s portrayal of Abby’s struggle to find herself after experiencing her first semester of college was infinitely relatable. And I loved Abby’s mental game--if I hit this tree, with this rock, my mother will be okay; if I see 3 yellow cars in a row, things will be okay. I’ve definitely done that myself. A really spot-
on portrayal of how someone who is straddling adulthood, while holding onto her
colorhood, would deal with something as devastating as the illness of a parent.

Plus, I thought the Beatles song title of "Hello Goodbye" was perfect.

This is the full text of her review and, as compared with Romm’s review, Heather Cox
does not spoil the novel for the reader of her review. Similarly, “Sally” writes the
following review of Dan Chaon’s *Await Your Reply*:

I loved this thriller/mystery that weaves three stories together. There is a brother
looking for his mentally challenged twin, a high school girl who has run off with
her teacher and a boy searching for his biological father. This book is all about
identity and how we define it. The story is fabulous right up to the mind
boggling end. Don't miss this one.

She has briefly mentioned the characters and the plot line and she has given her reaction
to the novel; however, she has not given away any key information about the plot.

How do these moves—the Goodreads reviewer’s protecting of the reader and the
*Times* reviewer’s spoiling of the reader’s experience—illustrate their apprentice and
expert reader-writer identities, respectively? Rather than writing more detailed reviews
and hiding them with the spoiler option, most Goodreads reviewers opt to write general,
vague reviews with unsubstantiated claims. Heather Cox claims that Chenoweth “nailed
her characters—especially Abby and Elliott,” but only gives one example of Abby’s
behavior (her mental games to “ensure” her mother’s health) and no examples of Elliott’s
behavior. Thus, it remains unclear for the reader of her review exactly how Chenoweth
did such a good job with her character development. Cox also claims the title of the
novel (taken from a Beatles song) is “perfect,” but doesn’t explain why. These vague,
unexplained remarks are the sign of an apprentice reader-writer. Either Cox doesn’t
realize that she needs to support her claims about Chenoweth’s novel or she is not willing
to use the spoiler option and take the time and effort needed to write a more detailed, fleshed-out argument in praise of the novel. On the other hand, the *Times* reviews are, for the most part, detailed and offer substantiated claims. Gates certainly does ruin the twists at the end of Cartwright’s novel, but he does so in order to support his claim that Cartwright “jazzes up the two biggest moments with childish cliffhangers, which withhold crucial information for supposedly dramatic effect.” It may spoil the reader’s experience, but it does so for a specific purpose: to establish an expert reader-writer identity. The in-depth and fully-explained review serves as proof of Gates’ close reading and analysis of Cartwright’s novel. In comparison, Heather Cox’s empty statements seem as if they could have been written by someone who didn’t actually read Chenoweth’s novel, someone who merely skimmed the book jacket or a few chapters.

Ultimately, all these indicators of the reviewer’s attitude toward his/her audience are key components in the construction of the reader-writer identity. By using second-person pronoun and inclusive pronouns, reviewers directly address and include their readers. Additionally, the reviewer reveals his/her concept of audience by writing for a narrow, specific audience or for the larger community of readers and by including references and allusions to other writers, novels, and/or book reviews. Finally, the degree to which a reviewer protects or spoils the audience’s reading experience reveals much about the depth and quality of his/her review. The way in which the reviewer is able to handle and manipulate these rhetorical moves determines his/her expert or apprentice identity. The expert *Times* reviewer exhibits care and concern for the audience, but does so only when it suits his/her rhetorical purpose. The apprentice reviewer sometimes exhibits care and concern for the audience; however, the apprentice is not always fully
aware of his/her audience and, at times, misses rhetorical opportunities because of this lack of awareness.
VI. Conclusion

Tse and Hyland call the book review “a highly charged genre” (788). I argue that the book review is a complicated genre. From the moment the reviewer enters the rhetorical situation of the book review, he/she has accepted both the task of critiquing the novel and the task of creating a persona to present to the reading public. The reviewer constructs this persona, or this reader-writer identity, by entering the rhetorical situation and by making certain rhetorical moves as he/she reviews the novel. The description of the reviewer, the limitations or constraints of the publication forum, the reviewer’s use of language, the reviewer’s voice, and the reviewer’s attitude towards his/her audience all combine to create one single reader-writer identity.

Although the *Times* reviewer constructs a reader-writer identity of an expert and the Goodreads reviewer constructs a reader-writer identity of an apprentice, both reviewers strive to present a persona of a respectable reader. However, the term “respectable reader” has a different definition in *The New York Times* community than it does in the Goodreads community. In "Talk to the Newsroom: Book Review Editor Sam Tanenhaus," Tanenhaus explains the raison d'être of *The New York Times Book Review*:

Our mission is very simple: to publish lively, informed, provocative criticism on the widest-possible range of books and also to provide a kind of snapshot of the literary culture as it exists in our particular moment through profiles, essays and reported articles. There are many, many books published each year - hundreds stream into my office in the course of a week. Our job is to tell you which ones we think matter most, and why, and to direct your attention to authors and critics who have interesting things to say, particularly if they have original ways of saying them.

For the reviewer to be perceived as a respectable reader in the *Times* community, he/she must aim to write “lively, informed, provocative criticism” and to “have interesting things to say,” and to have “original ways of saying them.” This mission clearly drives
the rhetorical moves that the *Times* reviewer makes, such as avoiding the use of first
person or providing multiple details about the plot in order to substantiate the argument.
The reviewer is asked to write a piece that is “lively,” “informed,” and “provocative,”
and to write in a creative or eloquent way. This is surely the task for an expert, or for a
reviewer who creates the persona of an expert.

The Goodreads mission is quite different and thus establishes a different starting
point for the respectable reader in the Goodreads community. The website explains:

A place for casual readers and bona-fide bookworms alike, Goodreads members
recommend books, compare what they are reading, keep track of what they've
read and would like to read, form book clubs and much more....Let's make
reading fun again....[E]very once in a while you run into a friend who tells you
about this "great new book I'm reading." And suddenly you're excited to read it.
It's that kind of excitement that Goodreads is all about.

In the Goodreads community, respectable readers are both “casual readers and bona-fide
bookworms.” The task given to the Goodreads reviewer is to “recommend” (or, perhaps,
to not recommend) and “compare” books with others, as well as to spread “excitement”
about books and “make reading fun again.” The description’s inclusion of the words
“casual readers” and “fun” indicate that the atmosphere on Goodreads is open and
experimental, that it is a place where “fun” is the main priority. This informal attitude
clearly sets the tone for the rhetorical choices the reviewer makes, such as using first
person or using profanity, thus making it key in the reviewer’s construction of an
apprentice identity.

The common element, however, in both the *Times* and the Goodreads
descriptions, is the valuing and love of books. Tanenhaus explains that the goal of *The
New York Times Book Review* is, in a culture where other forms of media are dominating
our lives, to remind people “that books matter too - that reading...can be the best part of a
person's life.” Similarly, the Goodreads website explains, “Somehow, reading books seems to have gotten a bad rap. People are working too hard and not making time to read, people are watching TV because they can veg out and turn their brains off.” Therefore, although they are two separate and distinct review forums, the *Times* and Goodreads both have one main goal in common: to remind people of the joy that reading brings. Thus, in the writing of reviews, both the expert *Times* reviewer and the apprentice Goodreads reviewer are striving for this same goal, although they express this in different ways. A respectable reader in the *Times* community writes provocative and polished pieces of prose; a respectable reader in the Goodreads community writes personal and experimental pieces of prose. Yet each does so with the goal of reminding readers of the significant impact that books can have on their lives.

Therefore, because of this shared value, we must acknowledge that the *Times* reviewer and the Goodreads reviewer have equal potential to offer up intelligent, thought-provoking, and insightful commentary on contemporary fiction. Although we, as readers, cannot help but notice the reader-writer identity the reviewer has constructed, the primary goal of the review remains to offer up an opinion about a novel. Let us return, for a moment, to my colleague’s comment about Ishiguro’s novel, *Never Let Me Go*. He quickly stated, “Oh, it’s great.” This remark is very much like the casual, apprentice reviews on Goodreads. Had my colleague rated this novel on the website (he probably would have given it five stars) and had this three-word remark been the entirety of his review, he would have constructed a reader-writer identity of an apprentice and this identity would most certainly be a persona obscuring the real person behind the words. Had my colleague been asked to write a review of Ishiguro’s novel for *The New York*
Times Book Review, he would have constructed a reader-writer identity of an expert because of his byline (a high school English teacher with a master’s degree), because of his voice, diction, and error-free writing (either of his own doing or that of the copy editor), and finally because of his ability to thoroughly substantiate his assessment of the novel, as English teachers are quite capable of doing after teaching novels to multiple classes over multiple years. Depending on the rhetorical situation and the rhetorical moves he would make in a Times review or in a Goodreads review, my colleague (and his evaluation of Ishiguro’s novel) could be seen in two entirely different lights: either as an expert or as an apprentice. His identity would depend entirely on the community he had joined, either that of the Times or of Goodreads. Yet, one thing would not change. He would remain a respectable reader, solely by writing his review in a manner accepted or expected by the community members of the review venue.

Thus, when reviewers enter the rhetorical situation of the book review, they are, as Bayard explains, seeking “to find [their] bearings within books as a system” and I argue that they are also finding their bearings within their venues for reviews: the Times or Goodreads (10). They construct identities for themselves and thus present personas of respectable readers to the larger community of readers. Whether expert or apprentice, each reviewer reviews novels in order to be a part of a community of readers, and to foster the love of reading among others. We must remember that each reviewer has the potential to offer a valuable appraisal of a piece of contemporary fiction; we must remember that the identities of the reviewers are rhetorical constructs.
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# Appendix A:
Book Reviews Published in *The New York Times* (logged by date of publication)

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### Appendix B:

Number of Book Reviews Posted on Goodreads (logged by date of access)

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