Finding without seeking: the information encounter in the context of reading for pleasure

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Abstract

This paper examines nongoal oriented transactions with texts in order to investigate the information encounter in the context of daily living. Findings are reported from a larger research project based on intensive interviews with 194 committed readers who read for pleasure. The paper analyses interview responses that illuminate two aspects of the readers’ experience of reading for pleasure: (1) how readers choose books to read for pleasure; and (2) books that have made a significant difference in readers’ lives. The paper concludes with five themes emerging from this analysis that have implications for the information search process: the active engagement of the reader/searcher in constructing meaning from texts; the role of the affective dimension; ‘trustworthiness’; the social context of information seeking; and the meta-knowledge used by experienced readers in making judgments about texts. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The research on information seeking (IS) has typically constructed the searcher as a person in a state of uncertainty who queries an information system hoping to get answers that help with a specific goal/task/or problem (Vakkari, 1998). The searcher may be a member of the general public who wants to know the typical climate in Melbourne, Australia, in March in order to pack for a trip; a student who must gather material for an assigned school project on the biographical elements in Jane Eyre; or a research–scientist who wants a literature review on the role of C\EBP transcription factors in adipocyte differentiation in order to complete a
grant application. The question may be generated within the context of the information-searcher's own daily life or work-world or it may be delegated or assigned by others, as is usually the case with students. The job of searching may be done by the end-user or be mediated by an information professional. The success of the search may be evaluated in terms of its 'helpfulness' as determined by the person who originated the query or in terms of its 'correctness' or 'relevance' as determined by a panel of expert judges (Dewdney & Ross, 1994). Despite variations in the complexity of the answer being sought, the identity and search practices of the person who does the actual searching, the nature of the information system consulted, or the methods of evaluating search success, one thing is assumed: the first step in the information-seeking process is an articulated question. The information-seeker becomes conscious of an “anomalous state of knowledge” (Belkin, 1980) or a “gap in sense-making” (Dervin, 1980; 1989) or an uncertainty (Krikelas, 1983) and then takes steps to fill in the gap or reduce the uncertainty. In cases where the information need is fuzzy or the searcher is unaware of helpful sources, the term ‘browsing’ rather than searching may be used, but even here browsing is usually discussed as a goal-oriented, semi-structured search tactic to be used after some initial formulation of a query (Bates, 1979, 1989; Marchionini, 1995; Twidale, Nichols & Paice, 1997; in contrast, for a view of browsing as scanning without a specific goal, see Toms, 1998).

In short, in order to qualify as information-seekers in most IS research, individuals must experience a ‘problem situation’ and then formally initiate the search process by querying one of our systems: a reference service, an online catalogue, a database, a collection of books. The emphasis on goal-directed, problem-solving information is reinforced when the researcher frames the data collection by asking interviewees or respondents to think first of a specific incident in which they had a problem and took steps to resolve it or had an uncertainty and tried to clarify it. An exception to this problem-solving approach is research on what may be called community or citizen information or information related to ‘everyday life’, where the research subjects are often members of disadvantaged or marginalized groups. The research typically tries to explain or understand why nonusers of services are indeed nonusers, i.e. why they don’t ask questions even though it is assumed they have problem situations. In such research, the focus is often on the barriers — whether economic, cultural, class-based, or age-based and whether cognitive or affective — that makes it hard for members of outsider groups (Chatman, 1996) to seek information purposively from system-sources such as libraries, community information centers, or official helping agencies.

Two studies undertaken initially as Ph.D. dissertations represent to date the most substantial contributions to the literature about information that is accidentally encountered. Australian researcher Kirsty Williamson, whose thesis was a complex investigation of the information world of 202 older adults, concentrated in her article ‘Discovered by chance’ (Williamson, 1998) on what she calls “incidental information acquisition” as distinguished from “purposeful information seeking”. Williamson’s subjects, aged 60 and up, found that helpful “everyday life information” often “cropped up” when they were browsing through the newspaper or talking on the telephone with family or friends; it cropped up somewhat less often when they were watching television. In reporting how these seniors “monitored their world”, Williamson noted that “there were many examples of respondents acquiring information unexpectedly — where they were totally unaware of an information ‘gap’” (p. 31). Similarly Sandra Erdelez’s thesis,
reported in her article ‘Information encountering’ (Erdelez, 1997), was an exploratory study of the accidental discovery of useful information by students and staff in an academic setting. She surveyed 132 respondents and conducted further in-depth interviews with 12 of them selected as frequent information-encounterers. Erdelez reported that “super-encounterers” “believed in creating situations conducive to information” and that successful information-encountering experiences provided necessary “positive reinforcement” for continuing to create opportunities for serendipitous encounters (p. 417).

It is hardly surprising that, with these few interesting exceptions, the research field typically constructs the information-seeker as a person with an articulated question that is formally posed of an information system. After all, an important research goal is the design of better systems and services. We should, however, also acknowledge that this construction captures only part of the domain of information seeking and not necessarily all that is relevant to the design of better systems. We know, in fact, that in the course of everyday living people constantly seek, or at least encounter, and use textual information without ever posing a formal question to an information system. A fruitful research area may lie in interrogating these everyday practices. In the interest of investigating information-related activities that lie outside the standard scope of IS research, this paper reports findings from a larger research project based on intensive interviews with 194 committed readers who read for pleasure. In these interviews, readers were not asked about their information needs or how they went about searching for and using information; they were asked about their reading, how they went about choosing books to read for pleasure, and what value this reading has in their lives. The view of reading taken here, derived from reader-response theory (Fish, 1980; Goodman, 1997; Iser, 1978; Suleiman & Crosman, 1980; Tompkins, 1980), is that reading is a transaction between a text and a reader who uses both personal experience of the world and familiarity with literary codes and conventions to construct meaning from the black marks on the page.

From their accounts, a rich picture emerged that enlarges our understanding of the information encounter in the context of daily living. It turns out that when looking for books to read for pleasure, avid readers constantly scan their environments for hints and suggestions, using their previous experience with books and reading to help them interpret cues. In the course of their often very extensive reading, they normally do not think of themselves as involved in information seeking as such. Nevertheless when reading extended narrative forms, particularly biography, history, and fiction, readers bring to the texts their own individual concerns and interests, which act as a filter to highlight those aspects of the text that speak to their concerns. Readers play a crucial role in enlarging the meaning of the text by reading it within the context of their own lives. Through their act of making sense of texts and applying them to their lives, readers creatively rewrite texts (Fish, 1980). Readers choose books for the pleasure anticipated in the reading itself but then, apparently serendipitously, they encounter material that helps them in the context of their lives. In effect, these avid readers reported finding without seeking.

2. About the study

Evidence about the role of reading for pleasure as a source of valued information comes
from a transcribed set of 194 intensive, open-ended interviews with adult readers, undertaken as part of a larger study on reading for pleasure. The interviewed subjects were not randomly chosen but were deliberately selected as individuals who read a lot and read by choice. The study focused on committed readers who said that reading for pleasure is a very important part of their lives. This criterion means that most of the interviewees studied fall within the 10% of the North American population who show up in national reading surveys as ‘heavy readers’ — those who read upward of a book a week (Book Industry Study Group, 1984, p. 84; Cole & Gold, 1979, p. 63). Unlike nonbook readers who read primarily for information, heavy readers tend to say they read for pleasure (Cole & Gold, 1979, pp. 61–62). And because they borrow and buy far more books than their proportionate share, their impact on the world of literacy is far greater than the 10% figure their numbers would predict.

The demographic profile of the interviewees in my study resembled that of ‘heavy readers’, as consistently described in reports of reading surveys based on large-scale national samples. Previous studies conducted in Canada and the United States have found that heavy readers are more likely to be female than male; to be younger rather than older; and to have achieved a higher educational level than the population at large (Book Industry Study Group, 1984; Cole & Gold, 1979; Gallup Organization, 1978; Watson, 1980). Of the 194 people interviewed for my study, 65% were female and 35% were male. Interviewees ranged in age from 16 to 80, distributed as follows: age 16–20 — 3.6%; age 21–30 — 44.8%; age 31–40 — 18%; age 41–50 — 14%; age 51–60 — 11.3%; age 60–80 — 8.2%. The level of education was generally high.

I interviewed 25 of the readers, and the other 169 readers were interviewed by graduate students enrolled in successive offerings of my course on Genres of Fiction and Reading in the Masters Program of Library and Information Science at The University of Western Ontario. The student interviewers were instructed to pick as an interviewee the most readerly person they knew. Before they conducted and transcribed their interview, the student interviewers were trained in using open-ended questions and follow-up probes and were provided with a schedule of interview questions to be used as a guide for the interview. Using a chronological approach that started with the first thing the reader remembered reading as a child and worked forward to the present, the interviews explored, from the reader’s perspective, the whole experience of pleasure-reading including the following: factors that fostered or hindered reading in childhood; how the reader goes about choosing or rejecting a book; ways in which a particular book has made a difference; rereading; the reader’s idea of the perfect book; etc. The focus of the interviews was on what Krashen (1993) calls “free voluntary reading”. The analysis presented in this paper depends primarily upon interviewees’ answers to the following questions, interpreted however in the context of the entire interview:

How do you go about choosing a book for pleasure?
Has there ever been a book that has helped you or made a difference to your life in one way or another? [Probes: What difference did it make? How did it help you?]
How do you feel about rereading books?
3. Reading: an activity integrated into the texture of life

In the interviews, readers were asked, “What would it be like if for one reason or another you couldn’t read”. Given the selection criteria for participation in the study, interviewees were expected to claim that not being able to read would be experienced as a loss, but the typical response was unexpectedly intense. The majority of committed readers in the study said that being unable to read was unthinkable: “It’s a passion. I can’t deny it”; “It’s a physical need with me to have to read”; “If I were stuck on a desert island without books, I would go crazy”; “My freedom to read is absolutely sacred”. Readers spoke of the prospect of not being able to read in terms of absence and deprivation: “If I don’t have a book, I’m bare”. Reading for pleasure was so much a part of the reader’s identity that, as one reader, Jane, put it, “I wouldn’t be me. I wouldn’t be the person I am if I didn’t read or wasn’t able to read. It frightens me to think that something like reading can create you or at least influence who you are so much.” From previous survey research, we know that avid readers differ substantially from nonbook readers (those who say that they have not read a book in the previous six months). Nonbook readers find any kind of reading hard work (Yankelovich, Skelly & White, 1978) and view book-reading in particular as something to be prepared for psychologically and performed only when long blocks of time are available. Confident readers, in contrast, say that they find book-reading easy — it’s something they can do “just about anytime”.

Unlike nonreaders who claim they lack the time to read, the readers in my study said that they made time and built opportunities for reading into their daily routines. Although readers set aside certain times and places for reading, a favorite being in bed before going to sleep, many committed readers said that they can and do read anywhere: “I can tuck a book on top of the microwave and hold the pages open with a mixing spoon and read in the kitchen. I can read any place”; “I carry books with me… Reading is for every place — books in the bathroom, books in the bedroom, books by the television, and always in my bag.” In short, for these readers the experience of reading was very different from the “privileged apartness” that Steiner (1971, p. 155) says characterized the “classic act of reading” that “takes place in a context of privacy and leisure”. For the avid readers in my study, reading was interwoven into the texture of their lives, not separate from it. Tina (code names for the interviewees are used throughout) said with respect to Alice Walker’s books, “I read a book of hers and it will stay with me; I’ll be mulling it in my mind as I do the dishes.”

Readers found it natural and easy to turn to texts as a favored source of information. They used their own life experience to make sense of texts and conversely used texts to make sense of life in a wide variety of situations. Indeed a defining characteristic of these readers was that reading about a topic, rather than or in addition to asking somebody about it, was a preferred way of finding out. Hence Stella said, “If I find something happening in my life, a high point or particularly low point, my first trip is generally to the library to see if I can read something about it… And if I wanted to learn to do embroidery I’d probably first find a book about it as opposed to asking somebody how to do it.” At the time of the interview, Stella was reading gardening books because she was planting a garden; for the two years after returning to the church, she read “lots of books about theology”; and when she’s “really depressed”, she rereads L.M. Montgomery’s The Blue Castle to be cheered up. Similarly Diane said:
I always turn to books for any questions, and I always have. [If a doctor said I had a mysterious disease, I'd go and get a book on it… Part of how I would accept it would be to read everything there was on it… I’d do that with anything that I’d see as a problem. I’d start reading everything I can get on it. I'll start reading a bunch of books around the area and I don’t stop reading until I’ve somehow been reassured… I think it must have something to do with mastery. Until I’ve got hold of all the information possible, I feel out of control (Diane, age 37, Social Worker).

4. Choosing books to read for pleasure

For avid readers, the process of finding a book to read for pleasure encompasses much more than is usually evoked by a notion of browsing bookstock or searching a catalogue. In this regard, Savolainen’s study (1995) concerning the role of “way of life” in information seeking provides a useful framework for thinking about readers’ choices as a component of everyday practices. Previous studies of choosing books to read for pleasure, usually based on surveys with pre-established categories of response, tell us how often certain selection strategies occur but not what these strategies mean for the people who perform them. For example, summarizing the results of a survey of 500 fiction borrowers in four different British libraries who were asked how they usually choose novels, David Spiller reported the following responses: Author only — 11%; Authors/some browsing — 22%; Equal authors/browsing — 36%; Browsing/some authors — 20%; Browsing only — 11% (Spiller, 1980, 245). Used together with the results of large-scale surveys, open-ended interviews can elicit a depth of example and detail that can help us make sense of what readers actually do when they describe themselves as ‘browsing.’

Since currently library catalogues and indexing systems are ill adapted to the task of helping readers find books they will enjoy (Baker, 1996), the experienced readers in my study had to devise their own methods. These methods, we may suppose, are extensions and adaptations of everyday practices that they typically find useful in information seeking. When asked how they go about choosing a book to read for pleasure, most interviewees launched into an elaborate description, involving many interrelated considerations. Interviewees often started with their own mood at the time of reading and went on variously to describe how they find new authors or what clues they look for on the book itself. Notably the systems they described for choosing books usually depended on considerable previous experience and meta-knowledge of authors, publishers, cover art, and conventions for promoting books and sometimes depended on a social network of family or friends who recommended and lent books. We can consider this to be ‘behind the eyes’ knowledge (Smith, 1982) that the reader can draw upon when considering for selection or rejection any particular book that comes to hand. Past experiences with books and remembered information from reviews or from word of mouth are carried in the reader’s head and available to be called upon when the reader is browsing in a bookstore or library. They use knowledge in their head about authors, titles and genres; memories of what
The smaller the store of information in the reader's head, the more weight will be given to clues contained in the book itself. This conclusion is consistent with the results of previous studies that indicate that readers in general rely heavily on clues carried on the book. When Spiller (1980, pp. 248–249) asked borrowers in his study what helped them when they were browsing, 19% said they were attracted by the title of the novel, 27% said they were attracted by the cover design, 29% said they read parts of the text before borrowing the book, and an impressive 78% mentioned the blurb as important (many readers mentioned several factors). Likewise, in the Book Industry Study Group's study (1984, p. 133) of American readers, 29% said that the description or synopsis on the book jacket or cover was 'very important.'

In order to be alerted to the existence of new books that will provide the reading experience they want, it appears that committed readers typically put out antennae to scan their everyday environments for clues. They tuck away for future use in memory or on lists the names of books and authors mentioned in magazine and newspaper reviews; books given currency because they have been made into films or television productions; and authors and titles that come up in conversation. Recommendations are important, but only from a trusted source with tastes known to be compatible, such as certain reviewers, family members and "friends that know my taste", selected bookstore staff and librarians, and more recently Internet acquaintances. Each instance of a reader's engagement with a particular book takes place within a personal context that includes the following: the reader's literary competencies derived from previous experiences reading books; the reader's preferences developed during a lifetime of reading; and events going on in the rest of the reader's life at any particular time, which in turn relate to the reader's mood and time available for reading. One interviewee, Derek, emphasized prior experience as a factor in enjoying a book: "Sometimes you have to be ready for a book. There are some books it's not your time to read, or it's not their time to be read by you. Sometimes a book just has nothing to say to you, and that's probably because you have to have had some prior experience."

All these personal factors interact with each other when the reader is choosing 'a good book' to read. Marsha was typical in using an array of cues in concert with each other: previous experience with the author ("It's very safe to know that you've got an author that you like, and there are more books sitting there waiting... I like the fact that LeCarre is still writing"); the reputation of the book ("I always thought I should read important books"); the reputation of the publisher ("I decided that Penguins... were important books"); recommendations of friends and family ("So it's important for someone to recommend a book. I very rarely pick up a book that I've never heard of"); and clues provided by the packaging of the book itself ("I always read the blurbs on the back. I'm easily put off or become very cynical of something that's too glowing"). Taking this amount of care to avoid unsatisfying choices was worth the trouble because a bad reading experience threatened her pleasure in reading in general. Readers explained how they read their way into reading, following up a successful experience with an attempt to repeat the pleasurable experience by reading something else. Successful choices are therefore part of a self-reinforcing system that sustains the pleasure of reading itself, while disappointing choices kill the desire to read:
I think that’s why I’m so careful about [choosing a book]. I don’t just pick up any book and read it. Because if I get disappointed, then I get put off, and I get really mad. I get mad at myself for wasting my time. I get mad at the hours I spent reading (Marsha, age 26, Student).

5. Strategies for selection

The bedrock for choice is the reader’s mood: what do I feel like reading now? what will I want to read in the future (that I should borrow or buy now to have on hand)? Readers overwhelmingly reported that they choose books according to their mood and what else is going on in their lives. Short books, easy reads, and old favorites are picked when the reader is busy or under stress. At such times, rereading a childhood favorite is the quintessence of comfort reading. More demanding and unfamiliar material is chosen when the reader’s life is calmer. Wendy said, “It depends on my mood… Some days you don’t want a book that reaches too deep into you and other days you do.” And moods can fluctuate over time, as Larry explained: “As my mood fluctuates from day to day and even within the day, I’ll want to read one book as opposed to another.” Tess said, “When I’m really stressed, I will try to find a writer or a book that is really gentle, that has a gentle plot — like Barbara Pym or Jane Austen or early Trollope.” On the other hand, Anna said, “if my life is going through a calmer phase… I might set an external stimulus for myself and pick up something new.” In each of these cases, readers were quite specific about the kinds of books that would suit their mood, and often specified a dimension along which variation might occur: stressed out vs. relaxed; tired vs. rested; sad or somber vs. upbeat; wishing comfort and sameness vs. wishing novelty.

When readers wanted safety, reassurance and confirmation, they often reread old favorites or read new books by known authors that they can trust. At other times, they wanted to be amazed by something unpredictable, unexpected or new. At such times, readers reported that they might pick books on sheer impulse to introduce novelty into their reading and discover new authors or genres. One reader said she always checks the just-returned section of the public library first because “I place faith in people having chosen the popular novels and returning them.” Another described how she would occasionally “just walk along an aisle in a library, run my finger along the spines of the books and just go, ‘Stop now’ and pull it out”; unless she can tell it’s going to be something completely unappealing “like a war story”, she’ll read it, just as an experiment. Other tactics used to produce serendipity included randomly picking a different letter each time and examining fiction with authors’ names beginning, say, with A or S. Readers in the study adopted various strategies to establish the right balance, for each individual reader, between safety and the certainty of success on the one hand and novelty and surprise on the other. Since readers are reluctant in bookstores to indulge in what one person called a “cold buy”, libraries are a resource that supports readers in taking risks with new and unfamiliar authors, genres, or subject areas.

A final test for many readers is to read a sample paragraph or page, which was considered a good indicator of the writing style and level of literary competence demanded by the book:
“you see a title of a book that sounds interesting, open it up and scan random pages, just to make sure that the writing is at a fairly decent level.” In short, the majority of readers resembled Paul in reporting that they put a book through a series of tests and filters:

I read the first few pages, look at the back cover, look at the front cover, read what I can about the author, and get an impression of the book... The cover is important. The title. What I know about the author. What other people have said about it. Who it was that said that — is it The Times Educational Supplement or it is The Kodiak Daily Fishwrapper? I read all the information that is designed to make you interested in the book. Then I’ll open it just at random and read one paragraph on each page and then open it again. Maybe three or four times I’ll do that and just dip in. So the book is auditioning for me. It’s like an audition: the book reads a very small part but it’s only got that one chance to succeed (Paul, age 42, Librarian).

In summary, an analysis of readers’ statements suggests that a comprehensive model for the process of choosing a book to read for pleasure must include five related elements that come into play in concert with each other:

1. Reading experience wanted: the “what mood am I in?” test (familiarity vs. novelty/safety vs. risk/easy vs. challenging/confirmation of existing views vs. challenge by new perspectives).
2. Alerting sources that the reader uses to find out about new books (browsing, recommendations from interpersonal sources/reviews of advertisement/lists/serendipity). 
3. Elements of the book itself that readers take into account in order to match book choices to the reading experience desired (subject, treatment, characters, setting, ending, physical size).
4. Clues on the book itself used to determine the reading experience being offered (author, genre, cover, title, sample page, publisher).
5. Cost in time, money, or cognitive energy involved for the reader in getting intellectual or physical access to a particular book.

6. What readers say about how books make a difference in their lives

The question that was posed to readers, “Has there ever been a book that has helped you or made a big difference to your life in one way or another?” is a variant of a question on how an information source helps that Brenda Dervin uses in her sense-making approach (Dervin & Nilan, 1986, p. 22). The readers in the study were also familiar with the notion of “the book that changed my life” (see Sabine & Sabine, 1983) and some were unwilling to let that concept go unchallenged. When asked about a book that made a big difference, some readers said that they read to be entertained, not changed; that what they value is the pleasurable experience of reading itself and not some residue of knowledge or improvement that is left behind. Typical of the approximately 20% of readers in the study who did not find reading for pleasure helpful in the sense this paper discusses, Amy said, “I tend to read a book and forget about it” and Sidney claimed he “just read[s] to pass the time”. Another group of readers said that it was
not a single book that had made a difference but rather the accumulated effect of reading widely and reading a lot. The claim that no single book made a difference was possibly for some readers a way of protecting privacy, since identifying a particular significant book would entail self-disclosure. But many readers who said initially that they really couldn’t select a single book went on to talk at length about some title that they had read twelve times or that had intersected with their lives in some significant way. The question about whether readers ever reread books provided a useful triangulation with the question on the book that made a difference. In total, in their answers to these two questions, sometimes supplemented by material from elsewhere in the interview, more than 60% of the readers in the study provided sufficient detail about one or more particular books that it was possible to tell what sort of help that the book had provided.

The idea of the transformative book proved to be a useful construct because it elicited exemplary cases and provided a framework within which readers could talk about a specific book, which they selected as significant from the hundreds, and possibly thousands, of books they had read in a lifetime. Sometimes the encounter with the significant book was accidental, since the book was read initially for some other purpose. Lying behind each title was a story situated in the context of the reader’s life. Without the contextualizing story, we cannot understand why this particular book, and not another, performed its magic trick of helpfulness. The most commonly occurring claim (in one third of all cases) was that the book had opened up a new perspective, helped its reader see things differently, or offered an enlarged set of possibilities. To describe these book, readers used the metaphor of the “awakening” and referred to books that “opened my eyes” to a new perspective or “opened a door” on a new reality. In about one quarter of all cases, readers said the book was a model for living — the narrative representation of human experience offered examples to follow, rules to live by, and sometimes inspiration. In some cases, reading changed the readers’ beliefs, attitudes, or pictures of the world, which change in turn altered the way readers chose to live their lives after the book was closed. Other books reinforced the familiar or confirmed what was already believed. Often the reader talked about the way an experience in a book seemed resonant with their own experience, claiming that the book “sounded a chord” or “struck a key”. Another large group of readers said that the significant book provided reassurance, confirmation of the self, or inner strength. For books that offered comfort, especially childhood favorites that were constantly reread, readers used the metaphor of the book as a “friend” or as “comfort food”. Gender differences in readers’ selection of titles for commentary as well as in their interpretations of the narratives chosen are evident.

Seven categories are used below in order to cluster similar accounts offered by readers and illustrate common patterns of response. The categories were derived from the interview data and not constructed in advance, but they do invite comparison with Dervin’s sense-making categories used to code ‘helps’: “got picture[s], ideas, understandings; found direction; gained skills; got started or kept going; got connected to others; got support/reassurance; got rest/relaxation; got happiness/pleasure; and reached goal” (Dervin & Nilan, 1986, p. 22). The assignment of examples to the seven categories is admittedly problematic; for example Marie’s account (see example 2 below) of The Color Purple could easily be used to illustrate three of the categories: the central character provided a model for behavior; reading the book gave Marie an enlarged range of possibilities for action; and as a result she found the courage to
make a necessary change in her own life. Moreover a factor that cuts across all the categories is that the reader thinks that the chosen book is “secretly about me” (examples 3 and 5). Even in the 10% or so of the total cases where the reading has apparently expanded the reader’s disinterested understanding of the outside world, an aspect of self is often involved. For example, the three readers who singled out Leon Uris’s *Trinity* as a book that made a big difference by enlarging their understanding of the Irish question also mentioned that their own Irish ancestry heightened their interest in this historical subject (“I’m Irish, so that’s part of it” said Philip). Waples & Tyler (1931, p. xxiii) pointed out some seventy years ago that “people like to read about themselves”, but the evidence from the 194 interviewed readers suggests something more interesting. When the right match is made between reader and story, readers use the text to create a story about themselves. They read themselves into the story and then read the story into their lives, which then becomes a part of them. Jennifer said, “Anything I read becomes part of me. It reflects something in my life and I can connect it somehow with my life.” Sally stressed involvement and connection: “I want something that will involve me. I don’t want to be left outside. I don’t look for something I can pick up and put down and put away and put out of my life. Everything goes in and stays in. That’s the way I feel. It’s all working in there and it’s all part of me and part of what I am.”

An analysis of the specific titles singled out by readers as having made a difference in their lives indicates that, whether fiction or nonfiction, almost all have a narrative form. Their key feature is that they tell a story that readers can relate to their own lives. Whether biography, autobiography, history, or fiction, the book that is singled out, from among so many, as having made a difference is the one that tells the reader’s own story. Unlike literary critics who deconstruct the notion of character and prefer the distanced contemplation of the aesthetic signifier, most pleasure-readers expect books to represent characters both in fiction and nonfiction whose lives offer models for living. The following examples illustrate the range of ways that readers said a book had made a significant difference in their lives.

- **Awakening/new perspective/enlargement of possibilities.**
  
  (1) *A Female Eunuch* made me aware of things that I had simply taken for granted. When I was in my last year of high school and planning on going into nursing school, I remember one of my math teachers saying to me, “Well why don’t you apply to medical school?” and me saying, “Oh no, I’m a woman. I couldn’t go to medical school because, I mean, I’m a woman. I’m going to have children and I can’t have children and be a doctor.” (Rene, age 32, married, Physician and mother).

- **Models for identity.**

  (2) If the character becomes a role model to me, then I might even read the book a couple of times just to glean the characteristics and qualities that I would wish to make my own… *The Color Purple* had a very big impact on me in that it really helped give me the courage to make some major changes in my own life that I was quivering and hesitant about acting on… [An important book] heightens or increases or expands your own feeling about yourself and your place in the world. So it enlarges your range of possibilities. (Marie, age 34, Social worker)

  (3) I read *From Here To Eternity* in my early teens… I don’t read books more than once, but I read that book twice. It was powerful for me, because it was about people who were
struggling against the system. It tapped into the notion of rebelliousness. It’s about a man who won’t accept the system; people who were fighting against the framework. Another book that effected me tremendously — it isn’t a great novel — was Jack London’s *Martin Eden* [about a writer]. I wasn’t ready for these books; they overpowered me with the sense that they were coded to tap into my own experiences. They were secretly about me. (Nathan, age 50, English professor and novelist)

- **Reassurance, comfort, confirmation of self-worth, strength.**

  (4) *Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan made a big difference in my life. It’s about mothers and daughters, and my mother is very dominant in my life. I’ve always been this little submissive girl… At the time I read it, I guess I was 22. I was marrying a [Chinese] man my parents didn’t approve of, and it was just a big, huge emotional trauma for me. And reading Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club*… strengthened me, that I have to be true to myself, that I’m not going to let my mother break up my marriage. (Theresa, age 27, Graduate student)

- **Connection with others/awareness of not being alone.**

  (5) There have been times in my life when I will search out a book that mirrors what’s going on in my own life, simply because I think I’m trying to make a connection… After my daughter was born with Downs Syndrome, I found myself reading a lot of books written by parents who were going through situations where their children were ill or had been born with certain conditions. And I remember reading an autobiography by a man whose son was autistic… Sometimes when you are in a situation, you think that you’re the only person in the world who ever felt this way. And then you can go out, pick up a book, start to read it and go, “That’s me!” That is somebody else who is doing the same thing and felt the same way and maybe I’m not so… alone. It’s a way of reconnecting. (Truce, age 40, Librarian)

- **Courage to make a change.**

  (6) *The Book of Ruth* [by Jane Hamilton] was about a poor girl, who was growing up in an abusive home and married an abusive man and essentially was just struggling to find quality of life and respect for herself… And that book I related to on many levels. One because I’m at a point in my life where I’m having to make big choices and I can see myself in her struggle to get self-confidence. And the other reason is that I have a friend who had a very similar life. And when I read it, it was almost that I was understanding her life better, because she couldn’t talk about it. So it was almost like having a silent voice tell you about it. So I think that’s one of the ways that I relate to books — I look to see if there is something about my life or somebody else’s that I can pull out of it. (Petra, age 24, Student)

- **Acceptance**

  (7) Two or three years ago, my middle son was hitchhiking to Mexico, and then we didn’t hear from him. There were four nights that I didn’t sleep at all worrying about him… On the morning of the fifth day, a friend brought in a little book by Colin Wilson called *The Open Road* to show me the format… Wilson was talking about Tolkien’s open road and “The Song of the Road” in *The Lord of the Rings*, and how, when you are going on an
adventure, there must be danger. When I read that, I realized that for him, out hitchhiking, danger was a necessity, because it was an adventure. When I came to that understanding of what he was doing — that it wasn’t just hitchhiking but an adventure — then I was able to resolve my problem. So that was a real example of being helped by a book. But, you see, it wasn’t just the Wilson book; it was the fact that I had read all the Tolkien stuff before. It was an accident that the content of the book interested me, for that was not why it was given to me. It just came at the right time. (Tom, age 55, Professor)

- **Disinterested understanding of the world.**

(8) There’s probably about five or six books [that have made a big difference]. There’s a book called *Freedom at Midnight* by LaPierre and a co-author. It’s a fictional account of the partition of India… I must have read that book six or seven years ago, and I still have images of Ghandi and his hunger strike and his peaceful demonstrations. I’ve never forgotten the description of the destruction of so many human beings for an ideal. I hadn’t really known the story of India’s independence movement, but it was a very deeply felt book… It was really an important book for me. (Frances, age 46, Registered nurse)

What explains the ability of narratives to speak so aptly to the circumstances of readers, so that advice is taken by the reader though none is directly given by the text? A circular relationship between reader and text — what Paul Ricoeur (1974) has called a “reciprocity between text-interpretation and self-interpretation” — accounts for why readers so often reported choosing a book to read for pleasure and then finding in it insights related to themselves and their own problems. Sally said, “Books have different values depending on the stage of your life you’re at when you read them. Sometimes your life intersects with a book and you can really benefit from it… I think that when I approach books I look for how they address my life.” The reader’s own preoccupations work as a filter, so that readers pay particular attention to parts of the book — sometimes minor characters and subordinate themes — that address their needs. As Rebecca put it, “I feel that what I got out of books was definitely mediated by my own needs. There’s a process that goes on where you are thinking about certain things in your life, and you do pick out relevant bits and pieces from your reading that mean something to you.” Anna explicitly referred to a benevolent process in which wide and frequent reading, especially of fiction, produces answers to current concerns, without the need for active information-seeking:

I find that what I’m reading and what I’m thinking about as I’m reading help my whole adjustment to the world when I’m not actually sitting down reading. I feel that the circular nature of life and art is very important. I don’t separate them. What I’m getting out of the art is very important to the life. It’s often difficult to say to oneself, “There’s a problem that I’m working through now. I’m going to go out and look for books which deal with it.” But if you read widely and frequently, you can’t help but coming against the problems in literature which you find useful in life and vice versa. I don’t actively go seeking (Anna, age 35, married, Homemaker).
7. Discussion

What, if anything, does this picture of avid readers and how they choose and value books contribute to an understanding of the information search process? For one thing, these committed engagements with books, undertaken for their own sake and not for an extrinsic goal, merit attention for the way they exemplify everyday practices of meaning-making. Moreover the knowledge needed to design better systems and services is likely to include an understanding of these everyday practices. As is so often the case, more studies are needed of nongoal oriented information encounters. Nevertheless, from this investigation of one kind of engagement with books, some themes are emerging with implications for the information search process.

7.1. The reader/searcher is actively engaged in constructing meaning

Any theoretical model of information seeking that emphasizes matching of terms rather than the reader’s making of meaning is inadequate. Attention must be paid to the role of the reader in selectively paying attention to text and expanding the meaning of texts in the context of their own lives. What we call serendipity is not an entirely fortuitous event; it may be an accident that a particular text comes to the attention of a reader/searcher, but after that readers construct texts by foregrounding elements that address their own lives and concerns. So too do newspaper readers, according to a study conducted by Toms (1998). Of the 48 participants who were asked to scan and/or read a digital newspaper as they normally would, “[o]nly about 2% of the articles were selected because the participants were actually looking for a specific topic”. In contrast, the most frequently given reason for selection, accounting for 25% of articles read, was that the article was related in a personal way to the reader or to the reader’s family, friends or community.

7.2. The affective dimension is a critical part of the reader/searcher’s transaction with texts

Constructing the searcher/reader as a rational, goal-directed individual who is engaged primarily in problem-solving downplays the role played by feeling. The reported research with pleasure-readers suggests that the affective dimension is involved throughout the process, from choosing a book according to mood to valuing a book for its emotional support in providing confirmation, reassure, courage or self-acceptance. What readers said about risk-taking — that the choice of familiar and unchallenging vs. novel and challenging materials depends on the level of stress in the rest of their life — may turn out to be generalizable to goal-directed information seeking situations as well. Despite the general tendency to overemphasize the cognitive and problem-solving aspects of information behavior, support for the importance of the affective dimension can certainly be found in some previous research. Preeminent is Kuhlthau’s model (1993) of the Information Search Process, that demonstrates the interaction between cognitive and affective dimensions at every stage.
7.3. Readers/searchers give a strong weight to the value of ‘trust’

As a way of narrowing choices to a manageable number, readers welcome prior recommendations from others and strongly privilege known and “trusted” sources of advice. Trustworthiness is often assessed in terms of personal — indeed interpersonal — knowledge not just of the advisors (“friends that know my taste”) but also of the authors themselves. When readers talk of the book as a ‘friend’, they are responding in an interpersonal way to the voice perceived in the text (an element missing in impersonal writing styles that conceal the personality of the author).

7.4. Reading occurs within a network of social relations

Although often thought of as a solitary activity of privileged apartness, reading is in fact motivated and sustained by social relations and embedded in a social context. Avid readers not only read a lot themselves but also support, and sometimes initiate, the reading of others, passing on recommendations derived from reviews, choosing books at the library and bookstore for family members, and buying books as gifts for friends. Readers like to know what other readers have found helpful, which explains the popularity of ‘just returned’ shelves. We need to pay more attention generally to the communal and social aspects of the information encounter and build opportunities for collaboration among users into system design, as has recently been suggested by Twidale et al. (1997).

7.5. Experienced readers/searchers have a well-developed heuristic for making choices that depends on extensive previous experience

In a process that resembles pattern-recognition more than linear processing, experienced readers select satisfying texts from an enormously large field by using a variety of clues. Interpreting these clues depends upon a great deal of ‘behind the eyes’ knowledge that the reader brings to the particular text — knowledge about genres, authors, cover art, and the reputation of publishers; memory of reviews and advice from friends — as well as the ability to perform tests on the text itself by reading a sample paragraph or page. Being able to choose successfully from among a large set of materials, only some of which are suitable, is an important skill that is almost never directly taught but is learned by readers who teach themselves during successful interactions with texts. Each successful choice makes it more likely that the reader will repeat the rewarding experience by reading something further. Conversely, each unsuccessful choice decreases the likelihood of further learning based on interaction with texts. A problem faced by infrequent readers is that it takes a long apprenticeship in reading to build up the depth of meta-knowledge that experienced readers use to make successful discriminations. There is a role for intermediaries to augment novices’ knowledge so that their initial choices are successful.
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References


