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# Evangelists of culture: One Book programs and the agents who define literature, shape tastes, and reproduce regionalism



Wendy Griswold<sup>1,\*</sup>, Hannah Wohl<sup>1</sup>

Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, 1810 Chicago Avenue, Evanston, IL 60208, USA

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## ABSTRACT

The evangelists of culture are mid-level professionals who engage directly with the public. Sociological theories of cultural authority or popular demand fail to explain decisions made at this juncture. An analysis of 3110 selections made by 567 One Book programs, together with interviews with One Book program leaders from all 50 states, reveals that while those people working on the front line of culture both share the literary tastes of cultural authorities and recognize contemporary reader preferences, their choices do not reflect either. Instead, their selections are creative, the product of institutional needs, professional agendas, and a persistent tropism toward regional authors and themes. One Book programs perpetuate a culture of place – literary regionalism – that resists both elite tastes and market forces.

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## 1. Introduction

The reading class is that portion of the public who does some considerable amount of reading in their leisure time, reading that is not necessary for work, studies, or daily life.<sup>2</sup> Members of the reading class are self-aware, they see reading as almost sacred, and they encourage other people to read more. In this, they are cultural evangelists.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 773 988 8590; fax: +1 847 491 9907.

E-mail addresses: [w-griswold@northwestern.edu](mailto:w-griswold@northwestern.edu) (W. Griswold), [hannahwohl2011@u.northwestern.edu](mailto:hannahwohl2011@u.northwestern.edu) (H. Wohl).

<sup>1</sup> The authors' names are in alphabetical order; they worked equally on this research.

<sup>2</sup> For a review of the reading class, see [Griswold \(2008\)](#).

Many images can represent the outreach efforts of the reading class – educators, health workers, gift givers, the marketing wing of some literary-industrial complex – and this paper offers a religious metaphor: professional members of the reading class are evangelists, fighting at the front line of culture to convert people to reading. Examples include teachers, professors, writers, editors, publishers, journalists, and – the subject of the present research – librarians.<sup>3</sup> While they offer pastoral care to non-professional members of the reading class, they direct their outreach to non-readers (the reading class in general tends to associate the failure to read with ignorance, inequality, narrowness, and/or intolerance). Non-readers have endless sources of easy entertainments and gadgets, so evangelists believe they must be zealous, fighting such distractions and proselytizing to win over new readers.

We are particularly interested in the reading-class professionals who operate at the front line, dealing directly with the public. Behind them are the upper levels of an organizational hierarchy, managers who handle administration, logistics, and the flow of information. We might think of publishers, Library of Congress staff, university administrators, *New York Review of Books* editors, and directors of public library systems all as such.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, teachers, booksellers, lecturers, and librarians have direct engagement with the public, and they energetically try to influence its reading habits and tastes. This paper investigates their choices and the resulting cultural consequences.

## 2. The front line of culture

Sociologists tend to envision the direction of cultural influence as proceeding from either the top or the bottom of some socio-cultural hierarchy. The image of top-down control comes in two versions: the stratification version whereby elites mandate and control cultural productions and tastes, generally in support of the status quo and their own positions on top of it, or the culture industry version whereby gatekeepers channel cultural flows, here motivated by profit-seeking although the effect also supports the status quo. The bottom-up image sees cultural products and choices as forms of popular expression, and it too comes in two versions: one emphasizes markets wherein consumers vote with their wallets and the other emphasizes popular culture, often resisting elite domination, whereby the people's tastes and preferences just keep bubbling up.

These are ideal types, of course, and most theories are dialectical, but the point for the present analysis is that the flow of influence is seen as initiating at one extreme or the other of some hierarchy of social and/or cultural advantage. As suggested previously, one can envision this as a battle for hearts and minds, where the forces of enlightenment are indoctrinating the masses or, conversely, where people are occupying and defending their space of cultural freedom. Educational institutions look rather precisely like the former, while Internet hackers, leaders, and bloggers look like the latter.<sup>5</sup> The outcome of the struggle for cultural influence is determined either by the strategies of the generals or by the resistance of those the generals seek to overcome.

On the front lines are professionals, who are philosophically aligned with the enlightenment mission and who are in direct contact with the public that the mission seeks to influence. Teachers would be a familiar example, ministers and rabbis another, and librarians – the objects of the present research – yet another. While such people work to carry out the organizational mission, they have some room for maneuver, as when a priest looks the other way at parishioners using birth control or

<sup>3</sup> Non-professionals, especially parents, can be evangelists for reading as well, though they focus on small and typically intimate pools of potential converts rather than on the public at large. For the contradictory position of book industry professionals, see Miller (2006) and Thompson (2013).

<sup>4</sup> In our evangelist metaphor, these folks are roughly comparable to the bishops of many Christian denominations, people whose dealings are primarily with other members of the organizational staff rather than with congregants or potential converts. Sociologists (e.g., Abbott, 1988) have shown that in professions and organizations, the most prestigious positions are those at furthest remove from the people outside the organization, from the actual patients, clientele, public, congregants, students, or – in the case at hand – general readers. Universities encourage their faculty to engage in public service and community outreach, for example, but professional prestige does not accrue to these activities; instead it goes to research addressed to a small niche of other academics, far away from the public.

<sup>5</sup> The top-down view, essentially Marx's idea of the ruling class using culture to legitimate its dominance, is associated with the work of Bourdieu (1984) and his followers. The bottom-up view, which emphasizes people's capacity for resistance and agency, is associated with members of the Birmingham School (e.g., Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979) and with popular cultures studies (Fiske, 1987), Radway's (1984) study of the romance novel offering an exemplary case.

the teacher inserts her favorite books into the curriculum. At the same time, they operate in the public eye, and their jobs involve making their institutions (their schools, churches, libraries) attractive and avoiding controversy.

While there has been a wealth of sociological work on organizational operatives dealing with the public ever since [Lipsky \(1980\)](#) described how street-level bureaucrats worked and [Abbott \(1988\)](#) examined how higher professionals avoided the street level altogether, typically such research sees these positions as mediating between a set of rules and policies on the one hand and a local context of clients and situations on the other.<sup>6</sup> We suggest that mediation, the taken-for-granted metaphor, warrants closer scrutiny. Mediation occurs when someone or something intervenes between disputing parties to produce reconciliation in the form of an outcome acceptable to all. For example, in labor mediation, the mediator is a neutral third party who aims to negotiate a settlement, typically a compromise whereby each party gets part of what it wants. A culture-specific variant of mediation theory comes from the production-of-culture school with its emphasis on boundary spanners, gatekeepers, media outlets, and all the various roles and institutions that intervene between the producer and the ultimate consumer ([Hirsch, 1972](#)).

This mediation/mediators/intermediaries is inadequate and, in the case of professional front-liners, misleading. Cultural evangelists indeed resemble street-level bureaucrats, for both come in contact with the public and exercise discretion in the context of on-the-ground decision making. They have more freedom than street-level bureaucrats typically do, however, for they are professionals operating under a relatively general, flexible set of guidelines, they are looked up to by the public, and they are free from direct market or client pressure. Structurally, they indeed sit between cultural and/or organizational authorities and the public, but they are neither neutral nor especially constrained by rules. They have their own agendas based on institutional interests, professional identifications, and personal cultural preferences. Moreover, they are strikingly free, and it is perfectly acceptable for them to act with considerable independence. It was this free and creative aspect of front-line activities that we wanted to explore.

Our research question asks if reading-class evangelists align their decisions with the high-end cultural authorities (elite tastes) or with the consumers (popular tastes) – or if they make choices based on neither of these. In their conversion efforts, do they innovate, as we hypothesize, or merely carry out implicit or explicit directives from above or below? And if innovations occur, what do they look like, what accounts for them, and what is their impact?

### 3. Data and hypotheses

In order to address these questions, we needed to look not just at what the evangelists say about what they do but at the actual decisions they make. To do so, we have analyzed One Book programs and their books selections.<sup>7</sup> Since the idea of an entire community reading and discussing a single book was first launched in 1998 in Seattle, One Book programs have proliferated widely in the United States and elsewhere in the English-speaking world.<sup>8</sup> They come under various names – One Book, One Middletown; Books to Bridge the Region (Lake County, Indiana); Tacoma Reads Together; Books on the Bayou (Houston); Readin' in the Rain (Eugene, Oregon) – though most adhere to the “One Book,

<sup>6</sup> E.g., “we examine the programming practices that programmers use to determine what records will work for their station’s format as they mediate between record companies and audiences” ([Ahlkvist and Faulkner, 2002](#): 196). “Within trade publishing houses, acquisition editors engage in a diverse array of tasks and roles, the majority of which require active engagement in mediating between different values, not least of which involves selecting titles for the firm to publish and having a substantial degree of latitude in making these decisions” ([Childress, 2012](#): 607). For some recent work on front-line bureaucrats, all of which employ the mediation terminology, see [Maynard-Moody and Musheno \(2003\)](#) and [Watkins-Hayes \(2009\)](#); for an overview see [Maynard-Moody and Portillo \(2010\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> In this respect our research complements [Fuller and Sedo’s \(2013\)](#) recent study of “Mass Reading Events,” including One Book One Community programs, television books clubs, and reading outreach programs, which offers an acute analysis of the production side of these MREs, thus focusing on the selection process but not on individual selections.

<sup>8</sup> “One Book, Once Community” programs started in 1998 when Nancy Pearl, who headed the Washington State Center for the Book, launched “What If All Seattle Read the Same Book?” This and subsequent programs have proven irresistible, “tapping tapped into readers’ desires for intelligent discussions, libraries’ desires to increase visibility in the community, and mayors’ desires to associate their cities with the prestige of literature” ([Griswold et al., 2011](#)). “One Book” programs have proliferated in the U.S. and have spread through the English-speaking world.

One [geographic unit]" formula. While the Library of Congress offers encouragement and some resources, and while the National Endowment for the Arts offers competitive grants via The Big Read, local public library systems organize and run One Book programs.<sup>9</sup> These programs select a book for a specific period (usually several months), make it readily available, organize activities around it including but not limited to discussion groups, and promote it widely. The programs typically operate at the level of a town or city, though county, state, and regional programs also exist.<sup>10</sup>

Drawing on the top-down vs. bottom-up ideal types, we can sketch three different proto-hypotheses regarding the people who select the books for One Book programs. The first envisions them as *agents of cultural elites*, sharing the tastes of nationally recognized cultural authorities or, if not totally sharing them, at least seeing their jobs to be to transmit these tastes to the local community. There could be a number of reasons for this – indoctrination, class aspirations, hegemonic influence of the canon-builders, independently achieved tastes that match those of the elite – but the result would be the same: a close fit between the books and authors that the elite deem to be worthwhile and those that the front line operatives select for One Book programs.

The second envisions the planners of One Book programs to be *representatives of the general public* and therefore responsive to its tastes. Again this could be for several reasons – they share the preferences of the majority in their communities, they take their marching orders from public opinion, they want One Book programs to draw as many people as possible – but the result would be One Book programs closely aligned with popular tastes.

And the third envisions the front-line operatives as *independent actors*, not following either elite or popular leads. This could be because they are oblivious to both, because their decisions are not seen as consequential, because their institutional contexts shape their agendas, and/or because they have their own idiosyncratic tastes. The result would be One Book programs that adhere neither to elite or popular choices in any systematic way. Such programming might be random or might fall into identifiable patterns. If the latter were the case, the One Book decision makers, in carrying out their cultural evangelism, would be making selections that were not mid-range compromises but, instead, distinct innovations.

Beginning with the Library of Congress records and following up with Internet searches, we identified 567 One Book programs operating in every state. Our database is the list of books that these One Book programs have selected over a thirteen-year period, from 2000 through 2012. We uncovered 3110 book selections, comprised of 1506 books written by 1193 individual authors. We have collected data on book choices to indicate what those who selected the One Book titles believed would draw people – readers and non-readers, congregants and converts – into their programs.

Early in the research we conducted participant-observation at two One Book, One Chicago sites and we interviewed the librarians and city officials who organized Chicago's program. Once we had constructed the data sets, we randomly selected one program from all fifty states. We interviewed the librarians and others who ran the programs and oversaw the decisions about which books to feature.<sup>11</sup> We asked them about the process: Who made the selections, according to what process, what were the criteria and considerations, and what controversies emerged?

For comparison with the One Book program selections, we looked both at highly prestigious books and at extremely popular books. For the Prestigious Books, those that were held up by a leading voice of cultural authority, we used the *New York Times* lists for the year's best books, including both the *New York Times* "100 Notable Books of 2012" and the *New York Times* "The Ten Best Books of 2012."<sup>12</sup> For the Popular Books, the books bought by the public regardless of what the critics might have to say, we used the *Publishers Weekly* lists of the bestselling books of 2012 (online Appendix A).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For the Library of Congress's One Book resources, see <http://www.read.gov/resources/>. For the NEA The Big Read, see <http://www.neabigread.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> Many high schools, colleges, and universities run One Book programs as well, but these are not included in the present analysis.

<sup>11</sup> In most cases these were librarians, but in a few cases we spoke with community members who had been central to the decision making, for example by chairing the selection committee.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/books/review/10-best-books-of-2012.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/books/review/10-best-books-of-2012.html?_r=0) and <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/02/books/review/100-notable-books-of-2012.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Because the One Book program books have widely various publication dates, our data do not allow for a direct comparison of One Book selections, Prestigious Books, and Popular Books for any particular year.

#### 4. Prestigious, popular, and One Book authors

The following analysis focuses on authors, the people who write the books chosen for One Book programs. We compare them with the authors of the Prestigious Books and of the Popular Books in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, and place of birth. We examined how closely the authors of the One Book selections line up with the others as well as how and to what extent they are distinctive.

##### 4.1. Year born

Virtually all Prestigious Books (*New York Times* “Ten Best” and “100 Notable Books”) and virtually all Popular Books (Bestsellers) have living authors. Since these annual lists draw from that year’s publications, this is largely true by definition (occasionally something like a new translation of the *Iliad* makes it into one of the notable books lists and in June 2013 the National Security Administration surveillance scandal suddenly pitched 1984 back onto the bestseller lists, but such cases are exceptional).<sup>14</sup> Prestigious authors tended to be somewhat older than popular authors, their careers well established, their craft perfected. Seventy percent of the “100 Notable Books” authors were born in the first half of the twentieth century (although the N is small, the “Ten Best” authors were younger in 2012, with seven of the ten born after 1950). Popular authors were notably younger, with only a quarter of the Bestsellers written by anyone born before 1950.

Although not dependent on recent publication, and indeed avoiding very new books that have not yet appeared in paperback, One Book programs usually select books by living authors as well.<sup>15</sup> Of the twenty-five books most often selected, only two were by authors no longer living: *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald died in 1940) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Zora Neale Hurston died in 1960).<sup>16</sup> Half of the authors were born since 1950, and less than seven percent are from the nineteenth century or earlier.<sup>17</sup> The cultural weight of canonical dead authors does not seem to bear heavily in the decision-making. What is much more important is relatively recent buzz and the possibility of getting an author to come as a speaker. The typical One Book author is living, working, and maintains a website.

##### 4.2. Gender

Men write the majority of the Prestigious Books, as [Table 1](#) shows. Popular Books (bestsellers) show somewhat less of a masculine bias. One Book selections are virtually identical to the Popular books in this respect, with women writing forty-three percent of both. It is also notable that the book that is, by far, the most frequent One Book selection, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, has a female author (see online Appendix B for the most commonly selected books).

##### 4.3. Ethnicity

Minority authors write many of the Prestigious Books. Fourteen of the “100 Notable Books” authors are non-white; these include two Hispanics (one born in the U.S., the other in the Dominican Republic), two Native Americans, two South Asians (one Indian American, one British Indian), and eight Blacks (one South African, five African American, one French, one British). One “Ten Best” author, Zadie Smith, is a minority (Black, with a Jamaican mother and British father) ([Table 2](#)).

While the literary elites who select the Prestigious Books seek out or at least acknowledge minority authors, the market does not. Only one of the twenty-one best selling authors was not white: Sylvia Day, who writes steamy romances and describes herself as a first-generation Japanese American.

<sup>14</sup> Hendrix, Jenny. 2013. “NSA surveillance puts Orwell’s ‘1984’ on bestseller lists.” *Los Angeles Times* June 11. <http://www.latimes.com/features/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-nsa-surveillance-puts-george-orwells-1984-on-bestseller-lists-20130611,0,5672562.story>.

<sup>15</sup> We know the year of birth of 945, or 79.8%, of the 1184 One Book authors. The median year of birth is 1950.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Bradbury, whose *Fahrenheit 451* is the second most popular One Book selection, died in 2012 so he was a living author for almost all of the selections under consideration.

<sup>17</sup> Of the 945 authors with known birth dates, sixty (6.3%) were born before 1900.

**Table 1**

Authors by gender: One Book authors (1193) compared with Prestigious (*New York Times* Notable Books of the Year and Ten Best) and Popular (Bestselling) authors.

	Prestigious		Popular	One Book
	100 Notable Books authors	Ten Best authors	Bestsellers authors	One Book authors
Male	62 (62%)	7 (70%)	12 (57.1%)	682 (57.2%)
Female	38 (38%)	3 (30%)	9 (42.9%)	510 (42.8%)
Total	100 (100%)	10 (100%)	21 (100%)	1192 (100%)

Note: The 3110 One Book selections had 1193 individual authors. However *Coming Out the Door for the Ninth Ward* had a collective author, the Nine Times Social and Pleasure Club, so we are using 1192 in this calculation.

In terms of ethnic diversity, One Book selections do reasonably well, even a touch better than the Prestigious Books: sixteen percent are by minority authors. Minority authors also account for four of the twenty-five books most often selected (again sixteen percent). So the pattern with ethnicity is the *opposite* of what we saw with gender: One Book selections are more ethnically diverse than Popular Books, thereby resembling Prestigious Books, whereas they matched Popular Books in terms of gender inclusivity.

#### 4.4. Place of origin

While Americans, especially members of the reading class, worry about the country being insular or insufficiently cosmopolitan, none of the three categories of books seems to avoid foreign or foreign-born authors. Prestigious books, considerably more cosmopolitan than Popular Books or One Book selections, have over a quarter of the “100 Notable Books” and two of the “Top Ten” written by foreign authors. One Book selections and bestsellers are perhaps surprisingly global as well; sixteen percent of the One Book authors come from outside of the US, as do ten percent of the Bestseller authors.

A look at the regions of the United States where the authors come from suggests that Prestigious Books have a surprisingly strong regional bias. Forty percent of the “100 Notable Books” authors, and five out of eight U.S.-born Top Ten authors, were born in the Northeast (see Table 3; we have used bold type where the percentage of authors from a particular region is ten percent or more different from that of the population). Since only eighteen percent of Americans actually live in the Northeast, authors having experience of, and perhaps a worldview shaped by, that part of the country seem disproportionately influential. Bestsellers are less New York-centric, with a quarter of the U.S.-born authors from the Northeast, and One Book selections in between at thirty percent. Both of these have a

**Table 2**

Authors by ethnicity: One Book authors (1193) compared with Prestigious (*New York Times* Notable Books of the Year and Ten Best) and Popular (Bestselling) authors.

	Prestigious		Popular	One Book
	100 Notable Books authors	Ten Best authors	Bestsellers authors	One Book authors
White	86 (86%)	9 (90%)	20 (95%)	1002 (84.0%)
Hispanic	2 (2%)			40 (3.4%)
Native American	2 (2%)			16 (1.3%)
Black	8 (8%)	1 (10%)		76 (6.4%)
South Asian	2 (2%)			13 (1.1%)
East Asian			1 (5%)	29 (2.4%)
Arab, Middle Eastern, Central Asian				15 (1.3%)
Other				2 (0.2%)
Total	100 (100%)	10 (100%)	21 (100%)	1193 (100.1%)

Note: The Black authors include Africans, African Americans, and West Indians. The Nine Times Social and Pleasure Club is an African American New Orleans marching group who put out a book, *Coming Out the Door for the Ninth Ward*, following Hurricane Katrina. Because all of the members are African American, we are coding this collective author for ethnicity although we did not code it for gender.

**Table 3**

Authors by place born compared to 2010 population.

Place	Prestigious authors	Popular authors	One Book authors	Population 2010 (000)
US Northeast	<b>27 (40%)</b>	5 (26%)	<b>289 (31%)</b>	55,317 (18%)
US South	19 (28%)	<b>9 (47%)</b>	<b>241 (26%)</b>	114,556 (37%)
US Midwest	12 (18%)	3 (16%)	247 (27%)	66,927 (22%)
US West	<b>9 (13%)</b>	<b>2 (11%)</b>	147 (16%)	71,946 (23%)
Total US	67 (99%)	19 (100%)	924 (100%)	308,746 (100%)
Foreign born	25 (25%)	2 (10%)	179 (16%)	
Total known	92	21	1103	
Unknown	8	0	90	
Total authors	100	21	1193	

Notes: (1) Population statistics taken from United States Census Bureau, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin 2010," Table 11, Non-Hispanic White Alone Population and the Minority Population for the Regions, States, and for Puerto Rico: 2000 and 2010. (2) Bolded cells differ by 10% or more from that of the population.

tilt toward the Northeast, though not nearly as much as the Prestigious Books, but they diverge in terms of the South: Bestsellers favor Southern authors while One Book programs avoid them.

Since the median birthdate for One Book authors is 1950 and the mode is 1954, it is possible that the authors represent the population distribution at that time, rather than at the present. In the 1950 Census, 26.2% of the population lived in the Northeast, 29.5% in the Midwest, 31.3% in the South, and 13.0% in the West.<sup>18</sup> So when we take the mid-twentieth century as the reference point, the bias of Prestigious Books toward the Northeast region and away from the Midwest remains strong, as does the pattern of Popular Books favoring Southern authors. We see that the One Book selection authors mirror the population distribution of mid-century, never exceeding five percentage points difference (Table 4).

Overall we can say that when compared with the authors of Prestigious Books, One Book authors are more likely to be women, less likely to be from the Northeast, and equally diverse. Compared with the authors of Popular books, One Book authors are equally female, much more ethnically and nationally diverse, and less apt to be from the South. In other words, One Book authors do not systematically line up with the authors of either of the other two groups, the Prestigious or the Popular.

## 5. The books

While the analysis reported in the present paper focuses on authors, we can say a bit about the books. In a nutshell: Prestigious books are about history and social problems. They aim to inform. Popular books are about crime and sex. They aim to entertain. One Book selections are about diverse lives. They aim to expand readers' horizons and extend their reach of human sympathy.

The target reader for much contemporary writing is the educated middle-class American woman. Bestsellers typically feature this type of woman, often young, often under threat physically or romantically. For example, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is about a twenty-one-year old American college student, though its readership is largely older women and its author is British. Of the fifteen fiction bestsellers, ten featured women protagonists.

The typical participant in One Book programs is herself an educated middle-class woman.<sup>19</sup> This is also the profile of most public library professionals. One Book selections, however, are seldom about educated middle-class women. The fourteen most popular selections are, in order, about a young girl's encounter with race in 1930s Alabama, a fireman who burns books and then tries to save them in a future society, a male humanitarian promoting peace and education in Pakistan and Afghanistan, an Afghan boy/young man, a teenage boy scientist in a West Virginia coal town, an African American male teacher in the mid-20C south, a Vietnam War veteran, a muckraking woman writer, an autistic boy, a

<sup>18</sup> Hobbs and Stoops (2002). See also Figs. 1–7. Population Distribution by Region: 1900 to 2000. P. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Most private book club members are also well-educated middle-class women (Long, 2003; Childress and Friedkin, 2012).

**Table 4**

Authors by place born compared to 1950 population.

Place	Prestigious authors	Popular authors	One Book authors	Population 1950 (000)
Northeast	<b>27 (40%)</b>	5 (26%)	289 (31%)	39,477 (26%)
South	19 (28%)	<b>9 (47%)</b>	241 (26%)	44,460 (30%)
Midwest	<b>12 (18%)</b>	3 (16%)	247 (27%)	47,197 (31%)
West	9 (13%)	2 (11%)	147 (16%)	19,561 (13%)
Total US	67 (99%)	19 (100%)	924 (100%)	150,697 (100%)
Foreign born	25 (25%)	2 (10%)	179 (16%)	
Total known	92	21	1103	
Unknown	8	0	90	
Total authors	100	21	1193	

Notes: (1) 1950 population statistics from [Hobbs and Stoops \(2002\)](#). (2) Bolded cells differ by 10% or more from that of the population.

man walking the Appalachian Trail, a man coping with his unruly dog, a man visiting his dying teacher, a man who epitomized the Roaring Twenties, and a boy who launches a social movement for kindness. Twelve males, two females.

One Book selections are diverse, but their diversity is more one of geography than of gender. Unlike what we find in either Prestige or Popular Books, One Book authors represent the regional dispersion of the American population. Why would this be the case? Given that the front liners who chose them want to have programs that are both serious in terms of literary merit and successful with the community, why would their selections follow neither the Northeastern preferences of the Prestigious Books nor the Southern preferences of the Popular Books? To understand this, we need to look at how the people on front line think about their cultural selections.

## 6. Front-line decisions

One Book selections usually take place at the town or county level, individual library systems picking the book for that season. Two exceptions exist – The Big Read is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts, and a few states run statewide programs – but the majority of decisions are local.

The selection process varies in terms of bureaucratization and formalization, ranging from programs where a single person chooses the book each year, based on what he or she feels would work for that community, to programs with a selection committee and a series of meetings and votes. Programs that are well funded and/or serve a larger population tend to have larger committees, more institutions involved, and more formal selection procedures. Sometimes just committee members make suggestions and vote, while other times patrons are involved. Committees are sometimes made up only of library staff and other times made up of community partners, such as college and high school English teachers, booksellers, and cultural organizations. Committees tend to be not particularly selective about members, grateful for everyone who will volunteer their time. While committee members will initially promote their personal favorites, serious controversy over book selections is rare.

The criteria for selection are sometimes formalized, though often are implicit. Decisions made on the front lines of culture are *not* compromises between elite and popular tastes. While the librarians share the elite preference for “good literature,” this does not determine their decisions. While they share the popular preference for entertainment and accessibility, they refuse to select books with only these qualities. Instead they insert a particular set of front-line, institutional considerations. Public libraries must first and foremost serve their communities. Their success and their funding depend on measurables such as circulation, subscription, program attendance, grants, outreach to underserved segments of the community, and the satisfaction of local notables, including educators, journalists, officials, and opinion leaders. The librarians whom we interviewed repeatedly referred to seven criteria they and their committees were looking for when making their One Book selections.

### 6.1. Books that appeal to the community as a whole

Librarians and selection committees want to use the One Book program to reach wide segments of the local population, including those who are not regular users of library services. This means books chosen must be accessible, which in practice means not too “literary.” As a Louisiana librarian put it,

We were very careful to pick books that had a wide appeal and a fairly comprehensive reading level, because we have a low literate county, and we did not want to set people up for failure. So we picked doable books, books that had large print, movie, and audio versions, being mindful of our readers. Our population is about twenty percent functionally illiterate, and we were not going to do Dostoyevsky, we were not going to do a fat book that would scare people. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, kids and grownup read it, people who struggle to read can watch the movie. We did months of program related to race relations, the mentally ill, Southern food, ham, and we flew in the actress [who played] Scout, had mock trials, plays, music of the South. We try to mix it up, and it did almost kill us. So, the next year when we did *Fahrenheit 451*, we planned to do it in the spring. We had the book for area schools and gave away thousands of books. We had Ray Bradbury on telephone, and the auditorium was filled with people. The fire department was heavily involved, they delivered the books, we had a fireman’s calendar . . . A lot of people are afraid of science fiction and we were afraid the film would seem dated, but people gave it a shot.

### 6.2. Books that are non-controversial

Local communities vary in terms of what they find objectionable. Many librarians try to forestall religiously based objections; as a South Carolina librarian put it, “We know our audience pretty well. We live in a very religious area, so we stay away from books that have adultery and things like that.” Another worried that picking *Huckleberry Finn* as the One Book might offend the African American community (it did not). One Midwestern librarian reported that,

Because we are putting books in schools, we try not to choose issues with controversial topics, no language or controversial issues. We want to feel that we can support the selection as a committee if someone asks us, so we don’t go for gratuitous violence and sex, unless it has a purpose. *The Kite Runner* caused conflict because of violence, and *Georgia’s Key to the Universe*, because it got into some evolution stuff, so even when we think through whole process, things jump out from corners that we didn’t expect. But we’ve weathered all sorts of stuff.

### 6.3. Books that are available in multiple formats

Libraries serve communities, not just readers. Some members of the community have limited vision, or prefer audiobooks, or like movies, or read Spanish better than English. Selectors look for books that are available in all of these formats. Selected books must be in paperback editions so that the libraries can afford to disseminate many copies. This means that a just out, critically acclaimed, front-page-of-the-New-York-Times-Book-Review book will virtually never be a One Book selection. A Nebraska selector said:

Collection development staff pre-selected books, because they are very well read, and they collaborated on things that would appeal to large audience and had a wide variety of formats. So we put forth books available in English, Spanish, several languages, and audiobook, eBook, movie format. So we look at all of those pieces and what would appeal to the widest audience. That’s how they narrow it down. Just interesting topics that appeal to men, women, translate into a children’s theme, . . .

### 6.4. Books that appeal to teenagers as well as adults

There are two reasons for this. First, reading declines in the teenage years, even for children who were avid readers earlier, and libraries would like to turn this around for at least some youth. Second,

books that can appeal to several generations are likely to bring in greater program participation and thus be deemed successful. A typical response from Georgia:

We choose authors that we feel like would have community interest, who would appeal to both adults and high school students. We choose both fiction and non-fiction. Last year, we had Kelsey Timmerman, who wrote *Where Am I Wearing*. We thought that would appeal to younger and older people – it looks at clothing and where it comes from, and talks about global economy. We had a good turnout. We choose authors we can bring. Part of it is interaction with students and the community, so they come spend the day and visit schools and then give a lecture at night for the community.

#### 6.5. *Books that might interest men*

Again the same two reasons: Men read less than women, so getting them involved helps the numbers and encourages a wider range of community involvement.<sup>20</sup> Moreover librarians perceive that women are willing to read male-oriented books, while men are unwilling to read what they dismiss as chick lit. A southern librarian reported a notable success with Edgar Allan Poe:

We are having a lot of fun with the collection of Edgar Allan Poe, because any age can do Poe, we had an impersonator that we took all over town. We have good penetration to private, public, home schools, retirement community. Poe was interesting to men. I can't tell you how many men and boys were happy, and that was wonderful, because finding something that 7th grade boys and retired businessmen will read is hard. Everyone was happy with Poe, so I was happy with Poe. We have caskets lying around that people can take their picture in.

#### 6.6. *Books that suggest programing possibilities*

Some books seem to stimulate program ideas beyond just book discussion sessions (e.g., the casket photo-ops). Author visits are highly desirable and a main reason that One Book selectors prefer contemporary works. Organizers fret when an author is too expensive or not available, and they are delighted with personable, accessible authors, as in the case of this Illinois library:

We also want an author that can come . . . We want it to be an event across several months. Kathryn Stockett (*The Help*) was here for a few days. When we did *Water for Elephants*, because the author lived close she could come on two different days. It depends on the author and their schedule and where they live. When we choose *The Kite Runner* it was really quite interesting, because there were actually only 50,000 copies published at the time. We choose it before it became the success that it is today. But it was a book that resonated with us, it was a book that touched you, and we knew that people would fall in love with it and we were right, and by the time the author came it was already becoming the phenomenon that it is today. So that was very exciting, to be part of that before it became big.

#### 6.7. *Books that have a local connection*

Librarians stressed this over and over again: Ideal selections will have regional interest, they will be about the state or region, and/or they will have an author from that area. These professionals working at the front line of reading believe that books with regional interest garner more participation, since local readers feel a personal connection to books with familiar contexts and concerns. Moreover, librarians want to support local authors and they recognize that locals were more likely to be able to

<sup>20</sup> Gender differences in reading are strongest for fiction and literature, but are present in all typed of leisure reading. For example the American Time Use Survey found that men devote 0.52 h per week to leisure reading, while women devoted 0.71 h per week (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012: Table 11).

participate in author visits, an important feature given both the need for programming and the inevitable budgetary restrictions.

West Virginia: We look at authors that write about Appalachia, and West Virginia if possible. They are usually fiction, and it is usually their most recent book. We did *The Big Stone Gap*, about a small town in the Virginia area, so we used her book, because it was about community life. We have also done *The Miner's Daughter*, because it dealt with a young woman whose family lived in a coal-mining town. These all are really well-known Appalachian writers. Then we did *Colored People*, which is a non-fiction book by a West Virginia author.

Montana: We used to do one in the fall and one in the spring, but there is enough demand that we now do it five times a year. The organizer is one of the board members who started as one of the discussion participants, and took a liking to the program and wanted to facilitate it. He organizes the facilitators, and as a group we choose books. We generally choose local books, where the setting or author is from Montana or the region. We sponsor the High Plains Book Award that honors regional writers, so we try to choose some of the winners of that award.

Washington, DC: What we have is a very standard list of requirements: under 300 pages, multiple formats, needs to have some tie-in for Washington D.C., appeal to male and female readers, and appeal from teens to adults ... [Talking about current decision-making] one contender that I think is great is *Lost in the City* by Edward P Jones. He has written other books more recently that were very well received. These are all short stories set in D.C. He is an African American writer, and most of his characters are African American, and at the period it was set, D.C. was a segregated city ... An older reader is entranced by the quality of the writing, whereas a teenager could still get involved in the plot of the stories. We find that we are tending towards books that are set in D.C. In the past we have had both, and the set-in-D.C. books have worked better. The other book that seems like the next strongest contender is *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, which is set in D.C. and written by an Ethiopian immigrant. So that appeals to immigrant groups, and gentrification is a theme and that's a big deal here. It is situated on a borderline area of the city that touches on a black area, a white area, and the Washington Monument, so we think this would have an interest for a wide segment of the population.

Iowa: We tend to focus on books that have some kind of Iowa and Midwest connection, books that are newer, not classics, not the best seller, but those that have great merit and didn't get all the attention they might have deserved ... We choose a book several years ago, *Sing Them Home*, about a family in Nebraska, woman from a big city who winds up in a tiny town in Nebraska, in the story the woman's physical condition deteriorates, and we watch her as her life is taken by a tornado, so everything about that story seemed to fit the community. She was on a mission to change a town and comes up against small town minds, the family who loses a mother, we just were so struck by the colorful story, the imagination, and it was not widely read anywhere. I think there is a sense that the community of Iowa readers enjoys something that they can relate to closely.

## 7. Conclusion

One Book program selectors are cultural evangelists in two senses: (1) they promote reading, and (2) they promote a specific type of book. Free to make their One Book selections as they chose, the librarians have been strikingly innovative; they have come up with books that are not compromises between elite and popular tastes but, instead, are independent choices resulting from carefully

considered efforts to attract converts. This is particularly true of the regional tropism, whereby selectors repeatedly favor local, regional, place-based books and authors.<sup>21</sup>

As we have seen, the decisions librarians make at the front line of culture, as registered in One Book selections, do not conform to either elite or popular tastes. Librarians and selection committees are attuned to both prestigious titles and popular interests, but they exert considerable independence from both. They base their decisions on (1) institutional requirements and (2) a strong localism. The institutional requirements are straightforward. One Book programs in public libraries need to be accessible to everyone, to draw people in who might not otherwise be there, to come up with events that enhance the library's visibility in the community, and to offend no particular constituency.

The localism gets expressed in three different ways. First is a straightforward tie to institutional needs: An author who lives in the area is more likely to be available for a visit. Since this is a programming plum, such authors have an advantage when it comes to being selected.

Second, professional librarians and their committees understand their local communities. They want to attract participants as well as challenge them ("Our population is about twenty percent functionally illiterate, . . . we were not going to do a fat book that would scare people"). And they distinctly do not want to court controversy, so if adultery or evolution are problematic with the local sentiments, librarians will avoid books with those subjects.

Third, those who select the books are convinced that members of their communities want to read about their place, their region. They repeatedly select books, authors, or subjects that have some regional tie, and they reject elite guidance if suggested books lack it. A number of times we heard that libraries had started out following the NEA's Big Read but then had dropped out because the selections did not fit local interests.

Hawaii: The books for The Big Read, even though they are of interest, they are not really directly related to our experiential history. For example, *Grapes of Wrath*, none of that experience really directly deals with Hawaii. Minority relations here are really quite different than in other states.

Idaho: In recent times, when we were part of The Big Read, they looked at suggestions and voted on one. Now, they just toss around ideas of books that are important to the community, that people in the community would find interesting. We choose *Bel Canto* because Boise has a big music festival, so it is a big part of who the people in Boise are. They are musically inclined, very interested in music. Sometimes they go for Idaho authors, so one year, they did *Angles of Repose* . . . Sometimes they just start out with a thought: have you read a good book that you think would be good for Boise and why? The committee is made up of representatives from Idaho's newspaper, a Boise state university English teacher, and library staff from two different libraries in town. It just depends on who can come.

Kentucky: The first few years I was here we did The Big Read Program. We did *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Great Gatsby*. Living in Kentucky we had the challenge of picking books from list that would be compelling for our readers. For The Big Read, many of the books were older fiction and more literary fiction. That is not a reflection on people in area, that they don't like literary fiction, but part of the purpose of the program is to expose the book to people that don't usually read books. The literary people we know will participate, but we want to pull in

<sup>21</sup> Strictly speaking, One Book selectors are not cultural intermediaries because usually these librarians themselves have initiated their One Book programs. They have done this neither because of commands from above nor because of public demand, but because of their own cultural evangelism. Moreover, the popular conception of "cultural intermediaries" continues to mislead, for it gives too much weight to the parties at either end of the relationship chain and not enough agency to the front-line professionals themselves. See for example [Nixon and du Guy \(2002\)](#), [Negus \(2002\)](#), [Maquires and Matthews \(2012\)](#). One study in this area that does accord front-line operatives some agency is [Wright's \(2005\)](#) research on bookstore workers; although he adopts Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries language, he sees workers exerting some independence in their recommendations and handwritten reviews, though Wright does not analyze patterns of such recommendations, seeing them essentially as offering an illusion of cultural power that helps bookstores keep the wages low.

other people, appeal to the general population. The Big Read authors were often dead, and part of what we do to stir up interest is bring in the author . . . plus a challenge with The Big Read is having to match the 5000 dollars. We have small budget. The last couple of years we have chosen a book by Carolyn Wall [Sweeping Up Glass], which is based in Kentucky, although she is from Oklahoma.

There is something quite American about this decentralization of cultural decision-making (comparable to the American decentralization of education). These librarians and committees on the front line of reading are not rebels. Those who turn away from The Big Read are not cultural Tea Partiers who resent the federal government telling them what to read. The front line decision makers are neither rejecting the intellectual elite's ideas about what makes good literature, nor do they dismiss the people's ideas about what makes a good read. They are simply operating independently of both elite and consumer tastes. They are identifying and enacting local tastes that they find to be concerned with *this particular place* or *this type of place*. They are willing to take a broad view of what is regionally appropriate – a small-town Nebraska story can work in Iowa, a Kentucky-based novel is okay for a Kentucky program even if its author comes from Oklahoma – but they are not willing to let regional interests retreat in the face of centralized programming, cultural authorities, or a lowest common denominator of entertainment.

One Book programs define and reinvigorate a culture of place. They constitute yet another means through which literature and reading practices identify, confirm, and stabilize regional cultures (cf. Griswold, 2008; Griswold and Wright, 2004). While the cultural evangelists who run the programs see themselves as expanding horizons through the promotion of reading, their One Book selections paradoxically work to delineate and sharpen horizons as well. Cosmopolitanism and localism are not mutually exclusive but go hand in hand.

For some time now people have expected the digital age finally to eclipse place-based culture. Through digital media the dictates of prestigious authorities and/or the preferences of the market would be immediately and universally known, and the objects of their affections would become instantly available to everyone. All of this latter has come to pass: The *New York Times Book Review* can be and is downloaded everywhere on earth, and *Fifty Shades Darker* can be on your e-reader in seconds.

What has not come to pass is the corollary, which is that in the digital age culture would become homogeneous, losing local distinctiveness and a shared sense of place.<sup>22</sup> This has not happened, and one of the reasons it has not is that the people on the front lines of culture, the reading-class evangelists, retain and exercise considerable autonomy. They make their decisions based on their informed sense of what the immediate context of institution and community calls for, not on what the general public thinks it wants or on what centralized elites think it should have. Adapting to this context, the cultural evangelists nudge readers toward gender and ethnic diversity, and they push them firmly toward the local and regional, thereby reproducing and strengthening a literary culture based on and distinctive to particular places.

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<sup>22</sup> Other work on literary interpretation emphasizes its localness, analyzing book clubs and classrooms as “interpretive communities” (Childress and Friedkin, 2012; Fish, 1980); however, they have primarily analyzed localness in terms of interpersonal interactions rather than regionalism. Griswold (2008) has shown that the elite reading class cross-nationally has maintained an interest in regional literature despite their cosmopolitanism; this study expands on Griswold's findings by showing how regionalism is defended on the frontlines of culture for non-elite readers.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.03.001>.

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**Wendy Griswold** is Professor of Sociology and Bergen Evans Professor in the Humanities at Northwestern University. She is a Guggenheim Fellow and Member of the Institute for Advanced Study, and her books include *Regionalism and the Reading Class*, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria*, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, *Renaissance Revivals*, and *Literature and Social Practice*.

**Hannah Wohl** is a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University studying creative industries. She is writing a dissertation on failure in cultural production using the case of the contemporary art market.