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# Solitary act and social interaction: Adults reading science fiction and fantasy

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Kim G. Kofmel  
Graduate School of Library and Information Science  
University of Western Ontario  
<kkkofmel@julian.uwo.ca>

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*Reading has the appearance of a solitary act, performed by individuals who separate themselves from the current world by immersion in the fictional world, yet participants in a LIS study of adult readers situate themselves and their reading in a social context. Participants discussed their reading experiences against a backdrop of family, friends, librarians, teachers, co-workers, and the loosely organized science fiction/fantasy subculture, demonstrating the dual nature of reading for pleasure: an individual act carried out in apparent solitude and a social value enacted within a community.*

*La lecture semble être un divertissement solitaire fait par des personnes qui veulent se séparer du monde réel en s'absorbant dans un monde imaginaire. Cependant, les participants d'une étude en bibliothéconomie impliquant les adultes qui lisent la science-fiction et la fantaisie, placent ce genre de lecture, ainsi qu'eux-mêmes, dans un contexte social. Les participants parlaient de cette lecture dans le même contexte que la famille, les amis, les bibliothécaires, leurs professeurs, leurs collègues ainsi que la subculture peu organisée de la science-fiction et de la fantaisie. L'enquête a montré la double nature de ce genre de lecture : c'est un acte qu'une personne fait dans la solitude, et a qui également une valeur sociale dans la communauté.*

## Introduction

In his April 1996 article in Harper's Magazine, entitled "Perchance to Dream", novelist Jonathan Franzen talks of reading, writing and American culture in the last quarter of the 20th century and his own sense of despair as a writer and isolation as a reader. "Writing," for Franzen, "and reading too, had become a grim duty, and considering the poor pay, there is seriously no point in doing either if you're not having fun" (Franzen 1996, 54).

The concept of reading for pleasure underlies the Adult Readers of Science Fiction and Fantasy study, a qualitative study of self-identified readers of science

fiction and/or fantasy over the age of eighteen. The study, which draws on reader-response theory and the study of popular culture, uses the reading preferences and experiences of thirty-two readers to examine possible influences on continued reading in a particular genre. Critics writing on science fiction and fantasy, such as William Sims Bainbridge (1986) and Albert Wendland (1979), have suggested various possible text-based appeals for the genres, some of which are recounted by readers in the study, including their value as escape reading. An array of non-textual factors also emerged as possible influences on continued genre preference, including habit, category as filter, domain knowledge, and social contacts. The concept of social contacts as an influence is especially interesting in light of the use of the genres as an escape and of the apparent solitary nature of the act of reading.

### **Solitude and sociability**

Reading has the appearance of a solitary act. Silent reading, by its very nature, is performed by an individual, while simple reading for pleasure is usually carried out by a single reader concentrating on a single text. The image of the solitary or even isolated reader is an image with strong cultural currency: it appears in art in such paintings as Mary Cassatt's "Mrs Duffee Seated on a Striped Sofa" (1876) and Renoir's "Children's Afternoon at Wargemont" (1884), in the pervasive perception of the reading child as a loner in opposition to or excluded from the community of team players, and in the popular culture icon of the breakfast newspaper, the insubstantial yet effective wall between spouses, between parent and children. Reading under the bedclothes, reading books hidden under desks or shielded by other books, and reading in secret retreats and places of privacy, such as bathrooms, are all images of the reader in solitude. Reading at table during meal times is an act of separation, dividing the individual from the living community, and is often banned by authorities of that community, usually parents. Silent reading is even a coping mechanism for almost cooperatively resisting community, especially enforced accidental community. Witness the singularities, the privacies that readers of books and newspapers create around themselves in public transportation systems, whether subway train or airline terminal. Even in a crowded place, silent reading is something we do alone.

Silent reading is a skill, and reading for pleasure is a habitual practice, and both skill and practice are learned, they are acquired. Reading acquisition is socially mediated. Readers create other readers, and both the skill and the habit are harder to develop in a book/story/reading poor environment. The influence of other readers on skill and habit acquisition is demonstrated in the work of Shirley Brice Heath and that of Carlsen and Sherrill, among others. Heath's crosscultural work on

language development and literacy includes the article "What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school" (1982). Primarily a discussion of the means of making sense from books as a culturally influenced skill set, the article suggests that schoolchildren's success in learning to read (skill acquisition) is strongly affected by their preschool exposure to different patterns of relating books to reality, and the channels of that exposure are usually family members. In *Voices of Readers: How We Come To Love Books* (1988) Carlsen and Sherrill outline various influences on the acquisition of the reading habit, and many of the stories they relate are about family members who aided the acquisition of the habit, or about non-family members, including teachers, librarian and friends, who encouraged the habit in the absence of a supportive home environment.

These themes are replicated by the readers in the Adult Readers of Science Fiction and Fantasy study. Family influences on skill acquisition were reported as components of the reader history element of an interview. Readers commented on the presence and status of books in their homes, especially books designated as their own, and on the reading habits of their parents, older siblings, and other family members. A common experience was that of parents reading to them as children, usually at bedtime, although one participant, Mitch (philosophy student, twenty-nine) associated being read to by his parents with eating breakfast; the story, interestingly enough, was Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and he remembers the book as being stained with porridge. Activities specifically directed at developing reading skills were less common, although James (systems analyst, twenty-four) was a flash-card baby. The earliest reading events he recalls are flash card sessions with his mother. Readers also reported family influences on acquisition of the reading habit. Two of the most interesting examples are stories of grandparents. Anita (magazine designer, twenty-seven) relates her early conversion from television watcher to reader and then to bookworm through her grandfather's gift of a Nancy Drew book, and Heather (museum worker, thirty-three) talks of how *The Princess and the Goblin*, a gift from her grandmother, helped her over her fear of novels, which she called "big books".

What readers also related during the reader histories were the influences of other readers on the development of their reading tastes, on their acquisition of a genre preference during childhood and/or adolescence. A teacher, for example, helped Heather broaden her existing interest in science fiction television to include reading science fiction books, by recommending Asimov, Norton, and Clarke. Max (operations manager, thirty-three) credits Mrs. Little, the librarian in his public school, with introducing him to science fiction and fantasy, and even to horror. Tony (television producer, thirty-eight) found his way to science fiction and fantasy through comic books and the mediation of his friend David Church, whom he styles

as an "evil influence" in his life. Among the readers in the study "learning to read," in terms of skill and habit acquisition, was clearly socially mediated during childhood. Development of reading taste or genre preference was, for some readers in the study, also socially mediated during childhood or adolescence. For these readers, who have been reading for pleasure for fifteen, twenty or even thirty years, the reading habit has persisted despite competition for time from other hobbies, from other forms of entertainment such as films, television and the Internet, and from new adult responsibilities, such as jobs and parenthood. Their love of books remains, and so does the social background to their reading. It is, in part, due to the social aspect of their reading that they became involved in the study.

### **Adult readers of science fiction and fantasy: a qualitative study**

The study draws on reader-response theory, particularly the work of Radway (1984), Tompkins (1992) and Ross (1987, 1995) and is intended to develop a preliminary outline of the reasons people choose to read science fiction and fantasy, and of the range of reading desires satisfied by the genres. The topic and nature of the study grow out of a long-term experience with science fiction and fantasy, its texts, its people, its criticism and its research. Research on science fiction and fantasy is predominantly about the literature, its history and the psychological or sociological aspects of its readers. Such research is primarily text-based, anecdotal or oral history, or questionnaire driven, usually using closed vocabulary. Little differentiation is made between science fiction and fantasy, terms that are frequently concatenated or collapsed, and while there is work on reading preferences and reader attitudes, there is little specifically on the subject of reading science fiction and fantasy, in terms of process, reading experience and the function for the reader. One final characteristic of existing research is that the work involving human subjects draws participants from the easily identified pool of science fiction "fans", that is people who are members of clubs or convention attendees, who form a minority of the science fiction audience, estimated at only ten per cent, and are not even guaranteed to be readers of prose fiction.

The study focuses on the reading experience, preferences, and perceptions of self-identified adult readers of science fiction and fantasy, and is designed to include both fans and non-fans, and to elicit data in the readers' own language. The focus and the concerns with inclusion and language underlie the choice of qualitative research, the use of unstructured interviews and card sorts, and the accidental snowball method of selecting participants. The snowball method, in which participants performed introductions to other prospective participants, was employed specifically to find readers who were not fans. The unstructured interview focused on reading history, reading preference, and the perception of the

genres of science fiction and fantasy. Supplementary data on definitions of genre and subgenre were gathered by a card-sort and a book-selection exercise. A short questionnaire collected basic demographic and leisure activities information.

Thirty-two readers took part in the study, male and female, ranging in age from twenty-two to forty-six. Some are primarily interested in science fiction, some are primarily interested in fantasy, and for some, science fiction and fantasy is/are of secondary or tertiary interest. Most are associated in some way with the semi-formal social group called fandom, others are not although they are situated within a social group or network of readers, while a few seem to be solitary readers of science fiction and fantasy.

There are slightly more males than females in the study (eighteen/fourteen). Twenty-one are married or in marriage equivalents. Of those with life partners, fifteen said their partner also read science fiction and/or fantasy. This is not as dramatic as it sounds, as there are five couples in the study, which accounts for ten of the married readers and of the partners who read science fiction and fantasy. About two-thirds of the readers are in their thirties, which may be accounted for by the snowball sampling method.

Twenty-six have or are pursuing a university degree of some level. Educational specializations encompass social sciences, fine arts, commercial and professional fields, but science and technology and liberal arts are the areas of heaviest concentration. All but three of the readers were employed or self-employed at the time of the interview and those three are a recently severed executive, a full time student, and a full time parent.

The level of interest in science fiction and fantasy ranges from less than ten per cent of leisure reading right up to one hundred per cent. Reading science fiction and fantasy, by their own estimation, accounts for one hundred per cent of leisure reading for five of the readers (four male, one female). Science fiction and fantasy and horror account for one hundred per cent of reading for a further seven readers (four male, three female).

Readers were asked to indicate which genres they preferred from a list of general fiction categories. The genre indicated as the most preferred by the largest number of readers is science fiction (seventeen readers; twelve male, five female), with fantasy indicated by the second largest number of readers (eight readers; one male, seven female).

### **Connecting with the text, connecting with other readers**

Reading for pleasure for readers in the study does, primarily, function as a solitary act. It is generally silent reading, and it is carried out in available time, such as while commuting, during workbreaks, or during baby naptime, or in assigned time,

usually recreational time at home or while on vacation. How, then, are these silently reading adults, experienced practitioners of skills and habits acquired years ago in childhood, involved in a social activity? For those involved in "fandom" the social aspect is clear: they participate in or communicate with a subculture based at least in part on a reading interest. For others, the social aspect is less obvious, and primarily informal. It has two components: the context, or the social network(s) around the reader, and the process, or what the social network(s) mediate.

### *Social context*

Talking about reading involved talking about family for about two-thirds of the readers in the study. Parents and siblings figure strongly as channels for books and for information about books, even when the participant lived in a different city. Not surprisingly, life partners were mentioned frequently, even readers who had no current partner referred to previous partners. At the time of the interviews, twenty-one of the participants were married or in marriage equivalents. Five couples participated in the study, pairs in which both partners read science fiction and/or fantasy, and a further five readers said their partner also read science fiction and/or fantasy. Three of the participants were known to have children, and a fourth was expecting the birth of a first child. These readers talked about their children and their children's reading in relation to their own reading and to their role as channel or mediator in their children's reading and learning in general. For Tony, the expectant parent, there was a great deal of anticipation as he looked forward to sharing his favourite books and his love of reading with his child. These readers are extending their childhood reading socialization to include behaviour modeled by their parents, as they in turn model reading to their children.

Beyond the family readers connected with friends who read, and with co-workers who have similar reading interests. "Friend" is a fairly loose term, and makes no distinctions amongst friendships on the basis of length, intensity, or type of common interest, it was used without specification by readers during the interview. Co-workers included bosses as well as peer workers, and presumably some co-workers were also friends. Four women mentioned co-workers who shared their reading interest, and for two of them that contact was lost when the co-work connection was reduced, in one case when the co-worker went on disability, and in the other when the woman went on maternity leave. Even Jack (engineer, 36), who sees himself as an isolated reader of science fiction, functions as a resource for his co-workers, providing recommended reading lists to novice science fiction readers.

The readers included in the study appear to have little interest in formal organizations, and less in organizations related to reading. Readers were asked to indicate current membership in a variety of non-science fiction and/or fantasy

related organizations, ranging from historical recreation to local special interest and in similar range of science fiction and/or fantasy related organizations. At the time of the interview, twelve indicated that they belonged to no groups in either categories, seven indicated belonging to groups in both categories, eight to non-science fiction and/or fantasy related groups only, and five to science fiction and/or fantasy related groups only. The most frequently indicated (seven) type of non-science fiction and/or fantasy related group was local special interest group, a broad category which included organizations ranging from a mother-baby group to the Federation for the Advancement of Individual Rights. The most frequently indicated (five) type of science fiction and/or fantasy related group was science fiction and/or fantasy writers' group. Only one reader indicated belonging to a science fiction and/or fantasy readers' group, and none to a general readers' group.

Sixteen of the readers consider themselves associated with the science fiction and fantasy social group known as fandom. The degree of association varies widely, from readers who are actively involved in organizing regional events to those who are not so involved, but whose circles of friends are composed primarily of "fans." Fiona is an example of the latter. Her active participation in "fandom" during her teen years has strongly shaped her social life, despite her present attenuated connection. Most of her friends are from that group, and many of them may have been met through "fannish" activities, such as clubs, parties, and conventions. Fiona's circle of friends are not simply readers of science fiction and fantasy, many are "fans" in the active sense of the word. They share a culture not only of reading, but of science fiction and fantasy in all forms. Regardless of the degree to which they partake of the culture, they all know that they are not isolated individuals; no matter how unusual their reading interests appear to other people, they know they are part of a group. Fiona's attenuation of connection is not unusual, at least three of the readers who considered themselves not associated with fandom had previous interactions with fandom, and two others had ongoing interactions as a result of professional activities.

Some readers have more than just a personal or social aspect to their reading, they have a professional aspect. Writers, librarians, booksellers, infotainment providers; what, where and how they read are at times directed by the demands of their work. Some are also fans, although, interestingly enough, the three most involved in promoting science fiction and fantasy books are not. Indeed Sean, who manages a specialty store catering to the science fiction and fantasy market, states that his primary interest in reading science fiction is "professional", and likens his relationship to fandom to that of a "parasite". In opposition to this is Michelle, a reader who became a librarian and a fan who became the head of a special collection. Like the other professionals, she is immersed in her material, and moves

in a universe of readers and writers, forming part of a specific constellation. Michelle began reading science fiction at age seven or eight, fantasy at nine or ten, and became active in the fan community in the 1970s, joining clubs, attending and then organizing conventions. At the time of the study, she said that "I still identify myself as part of the community, although I wouldn't call myself a fan."

The readers in the study are aware of their family, friends and co-workers as fellow readers. They are aware of organized and informal groupings of other readers, even if they don't interact with them. They are also aware of a greater universe of readers, unknown and unnamed, a sort of ubiquitous "they" or "other readers" to whom their own reading, opinions, and actions might be compared or against whom they may be judged. The "other readers" are often invoked as part of acknowledging the potentially idiosyncratic nature of their answers to the interview questions as when Max, discussing the elements he considers necessary to distinguish science fiction from horror says "somebody who's really into horror might disagree, but that's the way I look at it."

### *Social process*

Family and friends act as channels for adult readers to learn about new genres, directly or indirectly. Directly, family and friends may recommend, give as gifts, or loan the reader books in a new genre. They may indirectly expose the reader to a new genre, physically by the availability of their own books, or intellectually by demonstrating their own interest in and valuation of the genre. Among the readers in the study genres adopted as adults were usually not science fiction or fantasy, such as Anna's cultivation of horror after moving in with her partner, an avid horror fan whose own collection provided a horror-rich environment, or Heather's growing interest in humour writing, resulting in part from a friend's Christmas gift of a Dave Barry collection.

In much the same way, family and friends are channels for maintaining the established interest in science fiction and/or fantasy. Again, family and friends loan books, give books, recommend books and authors. Additionally, while for most of these readers school is over and teachers no longer play a part in their lives, the workplace may replace the school environment in some respects. Co-workers who share the reader's interest in science fiction and/or fantasy may express that shared interest through mutual discussion and recommendation of books, or exchanges of actual books. Similarly, where the bookstore has a greater importance than the library as a source for science fiction and fantasy, the bookstore staff may have a role in helping the reader with selection decisions, recommending books and authors that best fit with the reader's expressed interests, and occasionally assisting experimentation. Readers in the study mentioned bookstore staff in the context of



habitual shopping, which allowed the formation of relationships between the readers as regular buyers and the staff members as regular advisors. These relationships seemed especially common in specialty bookstores. Jules (systems analyst, thirty-three) describes his regular visits to a local specialty SF bookstore and his reliance on (and willingness to accept) recommendations from the staff, whom he has sorted by area of expertise, such as horror and fantasy. At the time of the interview, he felt that there was no one he could really depend on for science fiction, since the staff member whose science fiction tastes had best meshed with his had left and "there's no one there, really, anymore, 'cause Rico's more cyberpunk than anything else."

While reading materials physically change hands through some of the social connection, the primary material exchanged in these contacts is information and opinion, primarily about books and authors. An example of the kind of information shared and the use made of the information arose in the course of this study involving the Gor books, by John Norman. Various readers mentioned the Gor books, although only one reader (a man) volunteered the information that he actually reads them, albeit with the riders that they are "morally reprehensible" and "pretty campy," and he "wouldn't recommend them to a lot of people." The general consensus amongst the readers mentioning Gor is that the books are trash, sexist and badly written, and the excoriating of the series is not confined to these readers, at least two parody/pastiches of Gor are in circulation on the Internet.

Amongst a small subset of the readers, however, the shared knowledge of Gor goes beyond the general awareness of the series. Heather goes so far as to say "I don't have to read one." What she knows has been acquired from other readers, and supported through a procedure called "The John Norman Random Page Test", which was also described by Ian (her partner) and obliquely referred to by Tracy, an associate. A randomly selected Gor book is opened to successive random pages, and according to Heather "no matter what page I tell him [Ian, who is conducting the test] to look at, there is an incident where a woman is being treated very badly, violently, whatever." In this case, the shared knowledge allows Heather to avoid an unsatisfactory reading experience.

An added element of social context for readers associated with "fandom" is the manner in which they conceptualize their relationship to the writers. In Darnton's model of the communications circuit (Darnton 1990, 112; a simplified version is shown in Fig. 1), the segment of the circuit linking the reader as ultimate recipient/consumer of a work and the writer as initial sender/producer is shown as a broken line, indicating indirect and possibly intermittent connection and feedback. Such feedback presumably closes the cycle of the work and contributes to further works. In this study, readers associated with "fandom" and the

"professional" readers appear to conceive that segment of the circle as more direct, less intermittent, than those not so associated. There is a greater perception of the writers as people, living, breathing human beings, who impinge on their own lives and on whom they can in turn impinge. This may be due in part to the opportunities afforded by the conventions for meeting writers, or at least for seeing them in the flesh, and to the avenues of correspondence available in amateur publications. It may also derive from the visibility of the amateur writing segment of "fandom", and from the self-replicating feature of science fiction and fantasy writing, whereby fan writers become professional writers. Readers who see other readers begin as amateur writers and undergo the metamorphosis to professional, could, understandably, have less of a conceptual distance between their personal selves as readers and writers as people.

The self-replication is probably not unique to science fiction and/or fantasy, but there is a definite awareness of it amongst fan readers. Alf (technical writer, twenty-seven), probably the most "fannish" of the fan readers in the study, specifically mentions it while describing his procedures for buying books, saying that he deliberately buys "authors who were, who are much better known as fans than as authors", regardless of quality.

In the interviews, it was more common for readers associated with "fandom" and the professional readers to comment on liking or reading a writer because of a social connection, or to have a negative reaction to a writer because of personal experience with them, or to pointedly separate the writer and the writing, as when Michelle says of Gene Wolfe "I like him as a person, he's an acquaintance inadvertent, you know, almost a friend. He's a lovely human being, but I can't abide his fiction."

In addition, readers associated with "fandom" and the professional readers were both more likely to show hesitancy in making negative comments about writers, without reassurances of anonymity. The direction of the feedback may not be one-way. These readers are aware not only of the potential effect of their comments on the writer in question, but also of the effect on their relationship with the writer in question. Rico (bookstore clerk, twenty-two), while discussing Neil Stephenson's sense of humor in his writing compares it to three authors of humorous science fiction and/or fantasy whose work he characterizes as "dopey shit." Rico names the authors and says "Don't tell these people I said this. [laughs] Some of them are friends."

In contrast, the readers not associated with "fandom" offered information about writers gleaned through other sources, rather than personal experience, like Janet, who comments on what she views as Asimov's attitude of superiority. "I understand," she says, "from reading interviews about him [Asimov] that he does

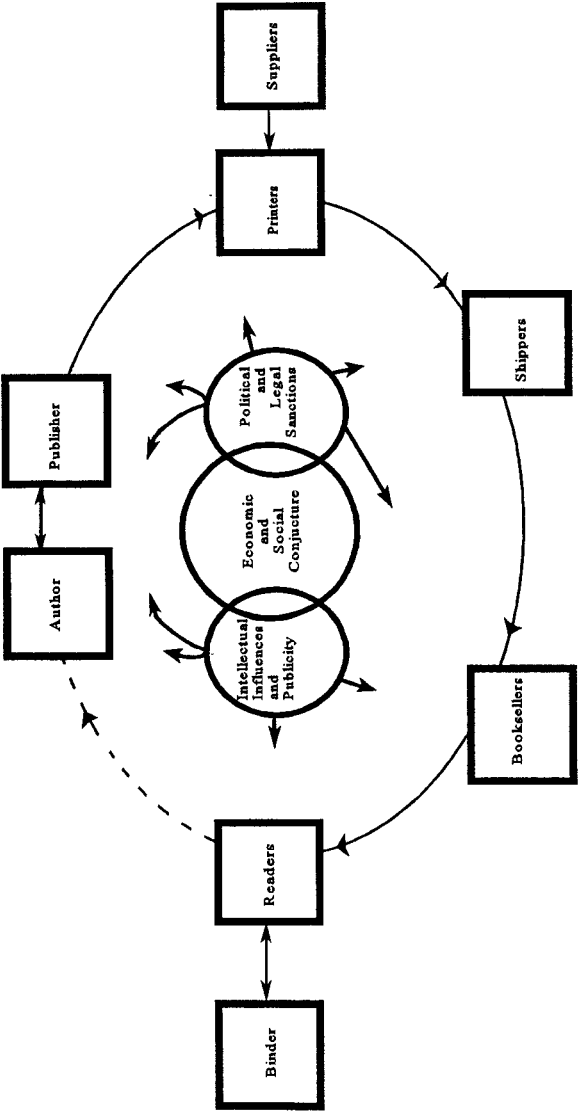
have reason to think he's great, 'cause he was um, a scientist and had all these incredible degrees and all this, but I don't like being talked down to even in a book." While capable of commenting on the writers as individuals, sometimes derisively, they gave little or no indication that they could impinge upon the writer or the writer on them, in any fashion but through the books.

For readers connected to the Internet, the distance between author and reader may shorten in a similar fashion. Many authors, such as Mike Resnick, Martha Soukup, Stephen Brust, and James Gunn, are active online in newsgroups and mailing lists, and readers who read their postings or enter into correspondence with them may also have a more personalized view of the author, similar to the fan or professional attitude. Although online activities related to reading were mentioned by some readers in the study, the concept did not emerge as a strong theme. Reading-related sites and services on the Internet have, however, been identified as a source for information for readers advisory librarians (Chelton 1993, 37).

### Summary

But what of Franzen, the desperate, isolated reader-novelist? Dedicated to the printed word, suspicious of the emerging cybercultures, and protective of something he calls "serious reading" Franzen recovers his hope through the recognition of his own nature as a writer and a reader, and his membership in related communities, both real and imagined, a recognition he arrives at with the assistance of Heath's work. "Without . . . a sense of belonging to the real world," writes Franzen, "it was impossible to thrive in an imagined one" (Franzen 1996, 54). Franzen's article is littered with references to other writers and other readers, some named, some not, encapsulating his situation as an individual in a web of communication. Franzen's specific community is built on and around "serious reading", what could be called art literature, and probably does not include many of the titles that Fiona and Alf and Heather and the other readers in the study enjoy, but it is a community, and it is about reading for pleasure.

As Franzen discovers, despite the apparent isolation of the reading act, reading for pleasure is ultimately not an asocial activity. Readers are created by other readers, create new readers in their turn, and may become writers, the creators of text. They seek out readers as friends, and value readers met by chance. Whether associated with fandom or simply dealing with friends and family, the readers in this study act as members of various reader communities marked by shared interests and shared information. The participants in the Adult Readers of Science Fiction and Fantasy study demonstrate both facets of reading for pleasure: an individual act carried out in apparent solitude and a social value enacted within a community.



**Figure 1** Simplified rendering of Darnton's Communications Circuit.  
Robert Darnton. 1990. *The Kiss of Lamourette*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.  
Page 112.

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