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‘Ummmmm, guys? Don't microwave your books’: Readers, Authors, and Institutions in #PandemicReading Tweets

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Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has prompted countless changes to everyday life: many started working and studying from home; retailers began touting masks as the ultimate fashion accessories; toilet roll continues to periodically fly off store shelves. Locked down in their homes, people have discovered and rediscovered hobbies to keep themselves busy when hospitality and entertainment venues have closed or are operating in accordance with strict social distancing regulations. When other people are no longer accessible, some have found that books may stand in for interpersonal interactions.

Since June 2020, the intra-European READ-IT project team has been soliciting photos and commentary related to what they call #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves. Accepted through the READ-IT online portal (read-it.in-two.com) and Twitter, submissions have been plentiful and diverse. In this paper, I focus on these Twitter submissions in particular, given my personal preference for the platform’s added element of interactivity. Twitter allows insight not only into what, where, and how people are reading, but also how others may respond to those practices through likes, comments, and retweets.

The #PandemicReading Twitter hashtag has actually predated both the READ-IT initiative and the declaration of a global pandemic itself, with the first public tweet being from 29 February 2020; this tweet adds to a reading list entitled ‘What to Read During a Pandemic’. ‘Other possible pandemic reading options,’ Brian Faughnan (@BrianFaughnan 2020) suggests in the tweet: ‘Love in the Time of Cholera, Contagion, 100 Years of Solitude, Far From the Maddening Crowd’, and so on. Further, many seem to be using the hashtag without awareness of contributing to READ-IT’s campaign. For this reason, only tweets that were public at the time of writing are referenced in this paper. It should also be noted that #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves are active hashtags on Instagram, although Instagram posts have not been included here due to scope. Further studies may wish to consider Instagram posts with these hashtags. Such research may be most effectively undertaken by scholars with expertise in visual studies to respond appropriately to Instagram’s image-centric interface.

While scrolling through the publicly-available Twitter submissions to #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves, I categorised individuals based on my interpretations of their contributions. Of course, as reading always is, my interpretations are subjective and undoubtedly reflect my own perceptions and expectations of pandemic reading. The three broad categories that I have identified, and which direct the course of this paper are:

1. Reactive Readers
2. ~~Excited~~ Resilient Authors
3. Digitally-Engaged Institutions

Each of these categories is discussed in turn, following a description of this project’s methodology.

It should be noted that this is not a conventional argumentative paper. Rather, it is an exploration of what is happening right now, and conclusions are contingent upon circumstances. It is taking tea with our peers. It is being welcomed into others' homes and catching glimpses of lived experiences behind closed doors. Academic literature is referenced when relevant, but emphasis here is on popularly-circulating material intended for broad readerships. I have opted to use recent news articles and reports instead of more scholarly resources to support my study. This choice is not only in response to a lack of peer-reviewed scholarship on current pandemic reading practices, but also in an effort to provide up-to-date evidence of the current state for any future researchers who may have the pleasure of reviewing this work. Consider this paper a curated romp through quarantined madness, a blurry snapshot of unprecedented instability. Using tweets tagged with the #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves hashtags as its starting point, this paper surveys the many ways in which readers, authors, and institutions are adapting – and even thriving – in a global pandemic.

Given that these are English-language hashtags, engagement with them appears to be dominated by those within Anglo-Western contexts. This paper's scope is therefore defined by such contexts.

Methodology

Scholars continue to debate the most appropriate ways of analysing social media data, and it is not the place of this article to thoroughly review the literature related to this debate. My methodology, detailed below, is loosely informed by Alessandro Caliandro's five proposed analytical concepts for social media ethnography: community, public, crowd, self-presentation as a tool, and user as a device. There are, to be sure, many reasons why people tweet (Java et al. 2009), as well as many potential imagined audiences to whom people tweet (Marwick and boyd 2010). However, I believe that the tweets referenced for this study reflect *self-presentation as a tool* for building a sense of *community* online when offline communities are less accessible due to social distancing. This community is akin to a digital story circle, to draw upon an analogy from a 2014 article by Hilde Stephansen and Nick Couldry (1224): 'a constellation of agents, processes and digital infrastructures that enables narratives to emerge and be recognized.' By engaging with established globally-used hashtags like #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves, Twitter users contribute their own perspectives to a constellation of letters. This constellation may, in some scholars' (Nabity-Grover, Cheung, and Thatcher 2020) views, differ substantially from that of pre-pandemic circumstances. Nevertheless, Twitter has long been framed as an 'imagined community' despite most of its users never having met each other physically. One 2011 article observes using Twitter as a simultaneously collective and individual experience. Individuals may not receive immediate bidirectional feedback on posted tweets, as they would in embodied conversations. However, individuals nevertheless tweet to intended audiences – audiences who may eventually provide feedback through comments, retweets, and likes (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011).

Yet there is ongoing discussion about how to approach social media research in ways that accurately reflect online discourse while respecting posters' rights to privacy, especially when posts have been harvested without explicit consent. While Twitter (n.d.) itself is generally quite supportive of academic research using the platform, advice for best practice is currently conflicting. All tweets analysed for this paper were public at the time of collection; tweets that have been made private since collection have been removed from the analysis. Given that discomfort from 'participants' in Twitter-based research has been documented (Fiesler and Proferes 2018), all tweets from general members of the public posting in casual capacities have been paraphrased, except in one instance wherein explicit consent from that Twitter user was acquired to reprint his tweet verbatim. Moreover, dates of these tweets' postings and collection have been removed. Tweets from public-

facing figures tweeting in clearly professional capacities (e.g. an author) or from institutional accounts (e.g. a department in a public university, a bookstore) have not been anonymised; the former, because these individuals demonstrate keen awareness of tweet reuse for potentially positive publicity; the latter, because tweets are not attributable to any single individual. No tweets including sensitive subject matter were present in the dataset.

For this study, data were first collected using an approach common in the digital humanities: web scraping. Web scraping refers to the systematic extraction of data (such as tweets) from websites. Through automated means, data that meet pre-set criteria are collected – scraped – from selected surfaces of the Web (such as Twitter). Web scraping may also be called web mining or data mining, although the latter terms tend to refer to deeper and more statistical ways of collecting data.

There are numerous free online tools available for web scraping. For this study, tweets were collected using Netlytic (netlytic.org), which can scrape comments from various social media platforms. Netlytic then visualises that data in word clouds, stacked graphs, name and chain networks (who mentions whom and who replies to whom, respectively), and topical treemaps. Netlytic operates in a graphical user interface that requires no specialised coding knowledge, and its website features free resources explaining how to interpret visualisations for those who may be unfamiliar with such representations.

SocioViz (socioviz.net) is a similar and more well-known tool, but its free version has temporal limitations (past week only). Netlytic does not have such restrictions, but warns that tweets older than 2 weeks will typically not be returned; indeed, in the initial Netlytic scrape, only a week's worth of public tweets were returned. SocioViz also constrains the number of tweets one can scrape to 100. Netlytic likewise constrains the number of tweets one can scrape, but this number is a much higher 2,500. Netlytic was therefore selected for this study due to its wider temporal and numerical reach, but SocioViz is nevertheless a useful tool for many academic and pedagogical purposes. There are numerous other methods of scraping tweets available (for example, by developing a program in Python), but the use of a predeveloped tool was preferred for this project given that scraping was primarily being used to accelerate data collection rather than confirm hypotheses. The use of bespoke programs may be more suitable for similar projects with greater focus on quantitative trends or with specific visualisation goals. Entire books have been written about scraping techniques for various social media platforms. Matthew Russell and Mikhail Klassen's *Mining the Social Web* (2019) is an especially good starting point for those wishing to explore the potentials of such methods.

63 tweets including #PandemicReading and two tweets including #PandemicBookshelves (neither case sensitive), all posted between a one-week period in September 2020, were first scraped at the end of that month. Netlytic's automatically-generated visualisations for these datasets were then reviewed and discarded. Given the dominance of tweets from the READ-IT Twitter account, as well as from the personal accounts of those affiliated with READ-IT, these visualisations were skewed towards institutionalised academic messaging. Moreover, visualisations did not account for images or GIFs included in tweets, meaning that a substantial portion of tweets were insufficiently represented. Regardless, the generated visualisations collectively served as a valuable starting point for establishing broad categories of tweets using the specified hashtags.

More relevant tweets from outside the scraped time range were collected by using Twitter's search function to return public tweets including #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves (again, neither case sensitive). By sorting returned tweets using the 'Latest' filter, tweets are presented from newest to oldest, and one can simply scroll backwards in time. This method is simpler – and in

many ways more effective – than using a scraping tool, as it permits the collection of tweets with attached images. Also, tweets are presented in a chronological narrative of sorts, rather than automatically categorised according to algorithmic pattern recognition. Further, this method permits consideration of likes and comments on, and retweets of, tweets – both integral aspects of the Twitter experience. Indeed, this study favoured such close and contextualised reading of tweets, despite initial quantitative measures being invaluable for collecting relevant tweets and loosely identifying linguistic trends within the generated dataset. It is worth noting, though, that while likes, comments, and retweets were considered in this analysis, those included in this dataset were not deemed significantly valuable enough to justify including in the following discussion.

The 65 tweets collected from the September 2020 scrape, as well as approximately 50 additional tweets collected from manual 'Latest' searches, were individually read and coded according to emergent patterns across the dataset using a thematic analysis approach (outlined in Braun and Clarke 2006). The three recurring themes that arose from this coding were: (1) readers; (2) authors; and (3) institutions. Tweets collected in subsequent scrapes on in mid-October 2020 and early January 2021 affirmed the suitability of these identified themes. For the presentation of these findings, adjectives – reactive, excited, and digitally-engaged, respectively – have been added to these codes to indicate the general sentiments that I identified within the tweets, although these adjectives are intentionally vague to accommodate a wide range of responses. These adjectives also streamline the analytical direction of this paper. Future studies may find alternative adjectives – or none at all – to be more meaningful.

This research was self-contained, and was not part of larger research project. I hoped to capture a moment in time, and to analyse collected data from a perspective rooted in book history and digital media scholarship. Of course, there are many kinds of readers, authors, and institutions using the #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves hashtags, and this paper highlights only a few. Still, the tweets presented in the analysis below were considered representative of broad trends in the available tweets. For readability, tweets are collectively referred to as '#PandemicReading tweets', given the significantly greater popularity of this hashtag over the #PandemicBookshelves hashtag.

Reactive Readers

#PandemicReading tweets show that readers are engaging with a wide range of textual genres, only some of which are mentioned here. Readers are, however, taking some strange precautions before they begin reading. In one tweet, a reader admits to disinfecting and cordoning a book borrowed from a friend before reading it. 'Ummmmm, guys? Don't microwave your books,' reads another tweet, which is accompanied by a photo of a library book opened to display burnt RFID labels (@WritePubSell 2020). Although microwaving a book may seem excessive, such precautions actually do align with guidance provided by news sources. One September 2020 article from *The Telegraph* (Steafel) cites a clinical lecture as stating that 'your mindset needs to be that everything, everyone, everywhere is contaminated. And whatever you handle is a potential risk.' Another April 2020 article from *Healthline* (Seladi-Schulman) reports that the coronavirus can last on printing paper and tissue paper for up to three hours, and paper money for up to four days. An October 2020 article from *Good Housekeeping* (Krstic) reminds readers that laboratory conditions for testing the virus' lifespan differ substantially from everyday conditions, and that the virus can often not live as long in those everyday conditions. At the same time, this article reports that the virus can live more than four days on paper money, up to 28 days. With such news reports occupying prominent spaces in people's search histories and minds, decisions to disinfect, set aside, and/or microwave reading material seem less outlandish than one may initially think.

'Classic' books are some of the most prominent across the #PandemicReading hashtag. In an essay for *The New Yorker*, Evan Kindley (2020) writes about why Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* resonates

with ‘readers under quarantine’ as Clarissa Dalloway grapples with returning to everyday life after influenza. Indeed, some readers are using this time to return to the classics, even if those classics are not reflective of current medical circumstances: for example, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Animal Farm*, and *Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit*. A report in *The Economist* (Author Unlisted 2020, ‘The old stories’, 22) notes increased sales of classic literature across the UK, with ‘weighty tomes […] doing particularly well.’ As Adam Roberts (2020) recommends in a *Spectator* article encouraging readers to pick up Victorian novels, ‘what I’m recommending is taking lockdown as a chance to experiment with a different kind of reading: something less propulsive and jittery, something more attuned to a slower rhythm. […] You have nothing to lose, and an elephant’s parade of slow masterpieces to win. Come now, you have all the time in the world.’ Although readers tasked with home schooling children may disagree with Roberts’ belief that time is an infinite luxury, and Victorianists may scoff at his broad description of their objects of study as ‘slow’, Roberts’ article highlights two valuable purposes of reading for pleasure: slowing down in a fast-paced and stress-inducing world, and entertaining the unfamiliar. Many of the books showcased in #PandemicReading tweets and book recommendation articles facilitate escapism, transporting readers from their homes to alternative worlds where they can adventure, relax, or experiment.

Yet there are also those readers who have turned to books that reflect the uncertainty and bleakness of the times. Tweets from these readers include images of books with titles like *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*, *The Fireman: The World Will Burn*, and *Not the End of the World*. This last tweet features a quotation from the novel, written by author Kate Atkinson: ‘The city ran out of diesel and gin. People burnt musty old paperbacks on bonfires and drank rum. There was a festive atmosphere generated by communal terror.’ This festive atmosphere is exhibited in tweets from those readers who are combining #PandemicReading with other indulgences. One tweet includes an image series of objects representing numerous hobbies taken up by the poster while in lockdown: a nonfiction thriller about infectious diseases, a knitted blanket, and mouth-watering scones. Another tweet displays Philip Ziegler’s *The Black Death* next to a just-as-mouth-watering glass of Scotch. Indeed, alcohol appears to be a common recurrence in #PandemicReading tweets, and one Twitter user has embraced this link by simply posting an uncaptioned photo of *Mr. Boston’s Official Bartender’s and Party Guide*. Increased alcohol consumption has been officially reported elsewhere, with research from the United States finding that between April and June 2020 sales of alcoholic drinks increased by 24% from the same period in 2019 (Forster 2021), and the BBC reporting 5,460 alcohol-related deaths during the first nine months of 2020, a 16% increase from the same time the previous year (Author Unlisted 2021, ‘Alcohol deaths’). Perhaps it is best to limit one’s consultations with Mr. Boston.

Although Twitter is a predominantly textual platform, #PandemicReading tweets often feature visual accompaniments. Evidently, many readers are excited to show others what they are reading or – what seems more probable, given the sizes of some book piles – what they plan to read. Responding to a post requesting that Twitter users share photos of six nearby books, one tweet includes an image of titles in both English and Spanish, fiction and nonfiction, spanning a range of subjects, placed next to an e-reader displaying the front cover of Gerald Martin’s *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*. All but one of the books pictured are more than 300 pages, and some could be classified as textbooks. It seems as though this reader is using time in isolation to increase their knowledge of world history, while occasionally dipping into classic fiction. Other readers are opting for alternative subjects to learn, with one Twitter user posting sharing a photo of a business memoir borrowed from the library while asserting that time in lockdown will be used to catch up on reading. Other readers have selected more popular works of fiction, or some combination of works that offers a variety of opportunities for education and escapism. Affirming such variety, one article about lockdown reading habits on the UK’s National Centre for Writing’s website reminds us that ‘[o]ne of the pleasures of reading is that there is no wrong or right way to do it’ (Ainley 2020).

While this may be so, there are still those who have chosen to eschew leisure – and perhaps pleasure – in favour or more academic pursuits. Subjects, reflected through both books and articles, include: library studies and information management; sociology (particularly related to social narrative of viral diseases); the history of science; Western Asian conflict; online teaching; and countless others. While these texts are perhaps not the 'slow masterpieces' that Adam Roberts had in mind, their presence in #PandemicReading tweets draws attention to the heterogeneity of reading practices and the ways in which individuals are choosing to spend time in lockdown.

All this is to say that people are reading a diverse range of titles for varied reasons. Nielson reports from both India (Anderson 2020) and the UK (Author Unlisted 2020, 'Reading Increases') show significant rises in numbers of adults reading and buying books, as well as time spent reading and listening to audiobooks. Countless news articles and blog posts recommend books for reading in lockdown. Precise data about reading publics and book sales are always elusive, but #PandemicReading tweets are clearly part of a larger societal celebration of the printed word's reliability and relatability in a time of general unease. This celebration is affirmed in early published results of 'The Lockdown Library Project', which found that nearly 60% of 860 survey participants were reading 'more than normal' while in lockdown, with most surveyed readers discussing their reading with others (Boucher, Giovanelli, and Harrison 2020). These same researchers (Boucher, Harrison, and Giovanelli 2020) observe, however, that 'reading frequency was further complicated by a quality vs quantity snag. People spent more time reading and seeking escape, but an inability to concentrate meant they made less progress than usual. In short, people spent more time reading but the volume they read was less.' Whether one was an avid reader pre-pandemic or has adopted reading as a pandemic hobby or necessity, #PandemicReading tweets affirm and reinforce the value of the printed word for individual gratification and growth.

Resilient Authors

But readers are not the only ones engaging with #PandemicReading. Established and amateur authors are continuing to release books, write fan fiction, and chat with their readers. 'If anyone wants a signed copy of my best-selling and award winning book, Troll Hunting, I will brave the outside world and post it to you!' author Ginger Gorman (@GingerGorman 2020) tweets, posting a photo of freshly-printed copies of the book filling a cardboard box. 'In these times you need something to take you away... #DeadSwitch #Scifi #Thriller #Suspense #Space #Alien #Fiction #PandemicPaperback #ReadingTime #CoronaVirusCompanion #PandemicReading', posts author Stello (@StelloThe 2020) about his new *Dead Switch*, whose cover is displayed in a short accompanying video. Popular historical and romance author Susan Wiggs (@susanwiggs 2020) asks: 'Have you ever picked up a book based on the title alone? What was the title? #nosy #pandemicreading' Other Twitter users praise fan fiction writers for their work, emphasising the genre's escapist potential.

An article on e-book platform BookBub (Urban 2020) confirms that authors are proving themselves to be incredibly resilient during this time. Acknowledging the current crisis, authors are being flexible about their launch dates and parties, offering their books for free or at discounted rates, and engaging with current and prospective readers in innovative ways. As shown in the above-cited tweets, authors are also reaching out to readers directly through social media platforms to advertise their works and establish more personal relationships that may otherwise have been facilitated through in-person meet and greets. This is all despite – and likely informed by – the very real threats and negative implications of pandemic restrictions on authors and cultural industries related to the book market. As the European Writers' Council asserts on its website, '[e]veryone is [sic] the fragile book and cultural chain will be hurt massively [by pandemic restrictions], but mostly the freelancer writers and translators, the solo employees and the small-sized companies, like mini- and midi-size publishing houses and independent book stores' (Author Unlisted 2020, 'COVID-19'). In the academic publishing sphere, the journal editors of *Public Policy and Administration* have explicitly

referred to peer reviewers requesting more time to read submissions, as well as 'an alarming drop-off in submissions from women' in particular (Baker, Dunlop, and Ongaro 2020, 363). The editors cite a *Nature* article by Alessandra Minello (2020), who elaborates upon gender-based inequities exacerbated by the pandemic: inequities that contribute to constrained writing time.

Notwithstanding such challenges, there appears to have been a substantial increase in submissions to publishing houses (Barnett 2020), and established fiction authors have been changing their novels in response to medical and social developments (Flood 2020). New authors have also seen their debut books published during this time. Some authors have been releasing children's books that explicitly respond to COVID-19 circumstances, with the UK's National Literacy Trust affirming the particular psychological and educational value of reading for children in lockdown conditions, despite a continued gender divide with girls reporting greater enjoyment of reading than boys (Clark and Picton 2020). Other authors have been publishing poetry inspired by current events, with scholars observing the unique potentials of poetry for coping with crises (Thomaz 2020).

Fan fiction communities have also again proven themselves to be vibrant spaces for authors to share their work and participate in intertextual and transmedia exchange. Writing and reading fan fiction have been heralded as 'way[s] of coping with the anxiety and isolation of quarantining' (Cam 2020) and 'means of finding a modicum of control in a situation that feels wildly out of hand' (Haasch 2020). Popular websites for fan fiction such as Archive of Our Own (archiveofourown.org), FanFiction (fanfiction.net), and WattPad (wattpad.com) host substantial collections of user-uploaded work, with reader comments, directly addressing COVID-19 and/or life in quarantine. In an article comparing works of fan fiction to rabbinic texts, Rebecca Epstein-Levi (2020) provides an elegant and perceptive explanation of fan fiction's particular value during the current pandemic. 'Such acts of imagination can powerfully shape real-world relationships of genuine care and support. The ability to draw a convincing portrait of a better world is, after all, a crucial skill for making a crisis feel just livable enough to keep on for a little bit longer,' Epstein-Levi writes. 'The exchanges that spaces like fandom and textual cultures like the study of rabbinic tests make possible show us that an interaction doesn't need physical proximity to be deep, substantive, and life-giving. They remind us of the broad range of ways we can connect with one another in personal, pedagogical, intellectual, and political relationships.' Through overt (e.g. posting comments) and covert (e.g. reading works of fan fiction) interactions within fandoms, individuals may find comfort in knowing that they are not alone in their appreciation for particular media texts, in their continued and ever-deepening expansion of story worlds, and in COVID-caused isolation. Of course, fan fiction has long enjoyed popularity, and even pre-pandemic scholarship about fan fiction recognised the genre's value – and at times challenges – for online interaction and imagination (Thomas 2011). When this world gets too much, digital fan fiction communities may serve as safe spaces for both reflection and escapism, offering temporary relief for likeminded individuals from across the globe.

Digitally-Engaged Institutions

Institutions, however, must focus their attention on the world in its current state. Businesses and organisations have altered their conventional practices in light of recent events, and subsequent expectations for social distancing and digital access, to maintain relevance. In one tweet, George Mason University's English department (@GMU_English 2020) advertises a virtual 'Literature for a Pandemic' 'Profs and Pints' event: an informal academic lecture that would usually be hosted in a local pub. In another tweet, Chicago bookstore The Book Stall (@thebookstall 2020) encourages those who may have taken up running as a hobby during gym closures and regulation adjustments to read literary fiction about running. A staff member from a US school library excitedly shares a photo of a book display with minimal need for physical contact with the materials; all of the books have been replaced with laminated pictures of books' front covers. Book descriptions are placed between the books, serving as a subtle nod to social distancing measures. People and books alike are avoiding physical contact wherever possible.

Libraries have been especially adaptive during the pandemic. As one author and parent declared in an opinion piece for *The Washington Post* (Smith 2020), 'Covid-19 took away our family's second home: the library.' Yet another US source (Rosenblum 2020) asserts that 'Despite COVID-19, King County libraries still put on a show,' and *National Geographic* highlights library-run initiatives across the US including virtual book festivals, StoryWalks (wherein stories' pages are placed along half-mile stretches to encourage both outdoor exercise and reading), bookmobiles and smaller book bike equivalents, and podcasts (Kaplan 2020). In the UK, a recent Carnegie UK Trust report on UK public library services shows that libraries have had a largely positive impact on those who have engaged with them during national lockdowns (Peachey 2020). This report details some of the many ways public libraries have enhanced digital offerings and redirected their attention to meet changing needs (by, for example, producing 3D-printed personal protective equipment in library-based makerspaces). UK public libraries have continued to service their communities despite barriers like social distancing regulations and municipal budget constraints. As observed in the Carnegie report's Executive Summary (Peachey 2020, 4):

> Covid-19 has not changed the strategic priorities of library services so much as sharpened their focus. It has also made staff acutely aware of the levels of need and vulnerability in communities. […] It is clear that public library services have tremendous potential to support individuals and communities as the UK navigates the considerable challenges ahead. It is, however, equally clear that the sector needs to continue to adapt and innovate and requires adequate funding and support in order to fulfil its potential and deliver for individuals and communities across the UK.

There is, of course, always room for improvement in public services. Despite current funding and support levels, though, libraries are quickly and gracefully adapting practices to facilitate education, work, leisure, and culture in a time of constant uncertainty.

Booksellers have likewise adapted to ever-changing circumstances, and by the end of 2020 many businesses were reporting buoyant sales due to lockdown restrictions on other forms of entertainment, responses to social justice movements (in particular, the murder of George Floyd, which spurred renewed interest in books about antiracism), and cost-cutting measures like job cuts (Flood 2021). Booksellers also reported the positive financial effects of online sales, kerbside pickups, and deliveries (Dubinski 2020). Nevertheless, New York City's iconic Strand bookstore (@strandbookstore 2020) tweeted an appeal for help from its customers in October 2020, sharing that the shop's revenue had dropped nearly 70% compared to the previous year. This drop is despite replacing in-store events with online readings, a book-of-the-month programme, curated book boxes and personalised selections, private guided tours of the shop's rare books collection, and 'books by the foot' sold as decorative backgrounds for video calls (Piccoli and Harris 2020). Booksellers' varying experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic on their business are worth of further and more pointed study.

Then, there are those businesses just trying to have a bit of fun. Uncharted Books, a rare and used bookstore in Chicago, posted a 'BOOKLOVERS IN QUAR' image to its social media pages, encouraging followers to identify which quarantine duck they were (@unchartedbooks 2020). This author identifies as a mix of Maureen – a plump plush duckling 'exclusively reading emotional support children's books from their teenhood and/or escapist genre fiction' – and Keeping It Together Duck – a shocked-looking plush mallard declaring that 'if we throw books at the emotional difficulty it's like the emotional difficulty isn't there'. As another example of online fun, Henry Sotheran Ltd, a rare book and print shop in London, has been consistently posting humorous lockdown-related tweets along the lines of (@Sotherans 2020):

> it never ceases to fascinate me how contrary the english mind is

> open the doors, put a sign out saying “we’re open, come in” and the public avoids you like the plague
>
> lock your door, turn the lights down and it's people mouthing “ARE YOU OPEN” through the grille until sundown

Not all tweets related to institutional COVID-19 responses (including the Sotheran’s tweet above) use the #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves hashtags. However, these hashtags have been, and continue to be, used by institutions in Anglo-Western contexts as they constantly readapt to changing guidelines.

Conclusion

It may be~~It is, to be sure,~~ somewhat self-indulgent to engage in research that considers online discussions about reading practices when one is an active reader and conversation contributor oneself. Indeed, two studies from the UK’s Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that from 28 March to 26 April 2020 individuals reported an average of only 28 minutes a day reading (presumably for leisure) (Author Unlisted 2020, ‘Coronavirus’), and only an average of 21 minutes a day from 5 September to 11 October 2020 (Author Unlisted 2020, ‘A “new normal”?). While studies mentioned above show people reading more during lockdown, these ONS results suggest that either reading rates were exceptionally low to begin in pre-pandemic circumstances, or different studies have different – and unclear – criteria for what constitutes ‘reading’ (e.g. distinguishing between reading for work, leisure, childcare, and so forth). These studies may also not be representative of the general population. Participants of the aforementioned ‘Lockdown Library’ project, for example, volunteered their time in response to calls for participation: calls that were presumably advertised where the researchers believed readers were. Although it is important to document changing reading habits for both current and future understanding (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2019), we must also recognise the unseen presence of non-readers, as well as readers who may not be participating in online discussions about their reading. Neither the ability to read nor access to reading material or technology for tweeting about such material can reasonably be assumed across geographical and demographic borders (Ouvry-Vial 2019). Many groups are often omitted from scholarship about reading and books, but their perspectives may prove valuable additions to ongoing conversations, or may spark new conversations altogether. For example, the perspectives of children, who are not well represented on Twitter, are omitted in this paper save for brief acknowledgement under the ‘authors’ section. All this is to say that one must remain mindful that hashtagged tweets, tweets more generally, and the available research and news sources offer only a snapshot of commentary about pandemic reading, authorial, and institutional practices.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the particular value of reading for many individuals. Shortly after the pandemic was declared, author Ann Patchett described one of her recent reading experiences in a short essay for *The New York Times* (2020) about ‘Why We Need Life-Changing Books Right Now’. ‘I felt as if I had just stepped through a magic portal, and all I had to do to pass through was believe that I wasn’t too big to fit,’ she writes. ‘This beautiful world had been available to me all along but I had never bothered to pick up the keys to the kingdom.’ From the beginning of this pandemic, books have been framed as distractions (à la Adam Roberts) and escapes (e.g. fan fiction) from lockdown, as friends in isolation, and as means for keeping connected to a world that has seems ever-more shut off. Medical research has even affirmed bibliotherapy as an effective way of treating psychological distress, boredom, and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic (Stip, Östlundh, and Abdel Aziz 2020). More anecdotally, Siri Hustvedt extolls the particular value of reading fiction during this time in an article for *Literary Hub* (2020), writing that ‘[w]hen it is good, literature moves the personal into other territory altogether and in the process

becomes collective.' As we have seen through #PandemicReading tweets, though, it is not just fiction that has served to bind us as we cope with the international trauma of a global pandemic. The words of others, bound together in physical tomes or digital bytes, remind us – regardless of genre – that we are not alone, and that this situation is not permanent. As one Twitter user has quoted from Lance Morrow's *Evil: An Investigation*, '[w]ords are conjurations; there is a healing power in stories, if only because words take us away to other lives and places—the consolations of alternatives are, if only temporary, a way of thwarting fate.'

But books do not only transport us to imagined worlds. They teach us new things, and help us make sense of our world as it was, as it is, and as it will be. They serve as communal spaces of gathering for readers, authors, and institutions alike, all of whom have had to constantly adjust to ever-changing governmental regulations and social restrictions. We are alone in own homes, but we are alone together – reading, tweeting, and persevering. To slightly adapt one #PandemicReading tweet including an image of a popular young adult novel, a carton of India pale ale, and a bottle of hand sanitiser, we have everything we need to survive.

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