



Review: *READING NOVELS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC* by Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, and Johanne Gormsen Schmidt, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, 224 pp., ISBN 978-0192857682, h/bk £71.00, e-book £54.62.

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This review shows how in *Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, and Johanne Gormsen Schmidt offer a pioneering exploration of the pandemic's influence on readers of fiction in Britain and Denmark. Employing a productive mix of literary sociology, ethnographic research, and textual analysis methods, the authors reveal how literature became a source of comfort and interest amid European lockdowns. Their work extends beyond conventional literary studies, addressing methodological conflicts and examining the socio-economic disparities between the two nations. Despite its manifold merits, the book could do with a more inclusive canon and a sustained discussion of racialized experiences. Nevertheless, it provides a highly valuable contribution to literary sociology and ethnography, giving a platform to a range of perspectives on pandemic-era reading habits.



In *The Body by the Shore*, a novel which is set ten years after the Covid-19 pandemic, Danish-Indian author Tabish Khair has one of his characters declare: ‘What a virus it was; it changed everything’ (2022: 206). Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, and Johanne Gormsen Schmidt wouldn’t be so sweeping, recognizing as they do some continuities between pre- and post-Covid circumstances. Yet the pandemic undeniably had a cataclysmic impact on many aspects of life, prompting these co-creators to research reading habits from March 2020 to March 2021.

The resulting book, *Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic* (2022), focuses on the experiences of fiction readers in Britain and Denmark amid the pandemic’s challenges. The book’s innovative blend of literary sociology, ethnographic fieldwork, and close textual analysis enables thick descriptions of how and why readers from different cultural backgrounds selected and interpreted novels during the pandemic.

To adapt a vintage advertising slogan of Davies, Lupton, and Schmidt’s funder, Carlsberg Lager, *Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic* is probably the best literary pandemic book in the world (so far). Indeed, the work illustrates how a project can transcend the sum of its parts when a research team has money and time to explore urgent and exhilarating ideas.

The geographical case studies might seem to rest on a random pairing of Danish and British readers. However, the book successfully sheds light on a unique moment in Europe and affords clarity as to why Denmark and the UK were chosen as case studies (apart from the researchers’ nationalities and the fact that Carling is a Danish foundation). Davies, Lupton, and Schmidt prove that these countries share close literary markets. High English literacy rates in Denmark mean that successful novels from the UK tend to do similarly well in Denmark. A similar pattern is observed for crime fiction travelling the other way. However, the two nation-states diverge significantly in terms of internal socio-economic disparity and work-life balance. Denmark excels, ranking high in the EU for income equality and short working hours, whereas England lags behind in both aspects. Despite literary alignment, then, the gap between these countries’ social and work-related conditions is substantial. The writers commendably reveal the cracks rather than trying to paper over them.

The abundance of interdisciplinary content within this book has been meticulously crafted to supplement rather than supplant conventional arts, humanities, and social science scholarship. Throughout the authors conduct deft ‘close listening’ (Rubery, 2016: 5) on interviews with readers of fiction who shared insights into their reading experiences during the pandemic. One interviewee stated, ‘If you can’t travel, you need to travel through the minds of others’ (129). In saying this, the respondent pseudonymized

as Sofia captured the importance of seeking solace and adventure through literature amid the grounding of flights and tough quarantine laws around the world.

Yet there are also timely close readings which complement the interviews. These include the astute textual analysis of Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), adapted by the BBC into a lockdown hit TV show, which opens the book's chapter on the romance genre. Davies, Lupton, and Schmidt observe that 'romance in literature has so often imagined love coming more easily to a certain kind of loner' as with both of the lovers Marianne and Connell in *Normal People*'s (123). This loner identity is mapped onto the unexpected solitude experienced by the project's respondents while they sheltered in place away from their usual social networks.

Readers shared their thoughts on classics like Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), relating the novel to their lockdown experiences. Sofia also spoke about the travails of being confined with a partner for extended periods. She noted that when you 'live the same life and have very little to talk about' (131), even the most passionate relationships can start to feel dull. Ultimately, though, she flirted with the exciting but destructive idea of an affair through novels rather than with another person. This suggests the way in which ordinary readers turn to literature as a guide and a social release valve, especially at periods of turmoil.

Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic engages in a rich discussion of methodological conflicts within the field of literary studies. It adeptly navigates the complexities of these method wars, while avoiding getting caught in the crosshairs. Presenting a balanced perspective, the researchers expose a 'false binary' amid such heated discussions (173):

books emerge in this light as mattering differently in certain constellations than in others: just as no glove, matchstick, or map is intrinsically useful, or meaningful, except in action, no book, one can point out, means anything except in the situated conditions of its reception. [...] On the other hand, literary critics retort, novels have their own history and their own significance. They are not gloves or matchsticks. (40–41)

Pursuing the matchstick idea, the authors introduce actor-network theory, inspired by the work of the French philosopher Bruno Latour (2005), as a lens through which to examine pandemic reading. Actor-network theory, as Latour explains, extends social assemblages so as to make all objects, even books, actors in their own right. This theoretical perspective is illuminating in a time shaped by that tiniest of objects, the germ. It also provides some neat links to thing theory, among other philosophical approaches. However, the framework leaves room for further exploration of its applicability to the

distinctive context of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, before he died in 2022 Latour himself published a post-lockdown rereading of Franz Kafka, claiming that the experience of Covid is ‘as if we’d changed worlds and nothing resonated as it did before. This is what gives people coming out of lockdown the feeling they’ve undergone the same metamorphosis as Gregor [Samsa]’ (2021: n.p.). Davies, Lupton, and Schmidt’s volume may be interpreted as grappling with what Covid’s metamorphoses mean for reading as a leisure activity. In future work, it is to be hoped that these authors extend their ideas as more fiction and theory becomes available for analysis.

The book excels in its temporal analysis, focusing on a particular time – the lockdown period. This in-depth exploration of lockdown by experts on time is a valuable resource for rethinking our approach to what we might call, following Jack Halberstam, the ‘queer time’ of pandemics. In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam defines queer time as provisional, precarious, and contingent, as people with AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s rethought ‘the conventional emphasis on longevity and futurity’ (2005: 2). During the pandemic stage of HIV/AIDS, communities formed around risk, disease, and unconventional life choices. So too did Covid-19 witness nonconformist economic practices and an uncanny sense of temporality. These worldviews and activities go beyond non-normative sexuality or gender and may or may not endure in the so-called new normal.

The chapters within the book are thoughtfully constructed, with discussions ranging from readers seeking accounts of past plagues to the experience of reading outdoors; the themes of confinement and domesticity; and the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Davies et al. connect these topics to specific literary works, from the novels of Jane Austen to Claudia Rankine’s genre-defying *Just Us* (2020). That said, the lack of representation of writers of colour in discussions of outdoor reading and classic literature, alongside racialized authors’ confinement in the chapter entitled ‘Reading About Race’, warrant scrutiny and critique. The writers account for this as a limitation on the part of their respondents. Although diverse in relation to age and social circumstances, these interviewees were self-admittedly mostly white women. However, the discussion of race might have been threaded throughout to ensure a more capacious examination of the subject. For example, to avoid a kind of quarantining of the minoritized, authors of colour like Kazuo Ishiguro, with his acclaimed work *Klara and the Sun* (2021), could have been considered in the chapter on ‘the question of allegory’ in plague literature.

The book includes noteworthy analysis of audiobooks, with reference to Matthew Rubery’s ground-breaking work (2016). Davies, Lupton, and Schmidt provide a fresh perspective on the changing landscape of literary consumption. The talking book

emerges as a practical solution when one is home a lot tackling ever-increasing domestic tasks or wanting to make the most of limited opportunities for outdoor exercise.

The rapid production of anthologies like the New York Times' *The Decameron Project* and of Ali Smith's *Summer* to capture the zeitgeist in 2020 demonstrates the writers' leading-edge work in situating fiction within the broader socio-political landscape. Additionally, the exploration of book groups is commendable, although the work is somewhat uncritical in its examination of the Duchess of Cornwall's involvement in one such group.

Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic is an expansive, theoretically suggestive, and very engaging exploration of literature during an unprecedented global crisis. It presents multifaceted perspectives on the complexity of finding time for reading amid a global crisis. Above all, the volume contributes significantly to the fields of literary sociology and ethnography as well as criticism.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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