

DUTIFUL READER, OR...

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Dutiful Reader, or...

Dutiful Reader, or a Part-Playful, Part-Earnest Experimental Autofiction on the Fascinating and Inexhaustible Subject of How Reading is Variousy Learned, Conceptualized and Practiced, which Takes Account of Socio-Political Forces and Historical Change and Whose Mode of Narration is Meandering and Discontinuous, Juxtaposing, neither Arbitrarily nor with Adherence to a Predetermined or Obvious Logic, Autobiographical Fragments, Personal Observations and Reflections, as Well as Extensive Citations Drawn from Diverse Genres and Contexts, to Create a Potentially Unendingly Expanding and Reshaping Narrative-Assemblage Designed to Be Evasive of Prediction and to Generate Increasingly Complex Feedback Loops between the Writerly Text and the Reader, Who Will Encounter during the Course of Her/His/Their Wondrous, Experiential and Transformational Adventure, *Inter Alia* and in No Particular Sequence, a Child Reading Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* Alone in Bed on a Night His Mother Has Gone Out, Twelve Members of a Jury Reading an Obscene Book Pre-trial in a Room at the Old Bailey, Malcolm X Teaching Himself to Read in Prison by Diligently Copying out the Pages of a Dictionary, Anthropologists, Police Officers and Laypeople Reading Human and Nonhuman Bodies Sometimes with Deadly Consequences, the Second Reading of a Bill in the U.K. House of Commons to Tackle Illiteracy by Introducing a Phonetic Teaching Alphabet, Harlem Renaissance Author Nella Larsen Inspecting the Hands of Children Readers in the Lower East Side Library Where She Worked, and Primary School Teachers Reading Evidence of Terrorism in Poor Spelling, and All of Which Concludes with the Startling Revelation of Why the Cat in the Hat wears White Gloves, Dutiful Reader Having Finally Executed His Duty and Reached the End of the Book.

by Simon Lee-Price

The Cat in the Hat by Dr. Seuss is the first big book Dutiful Reader ever read from cover to cover in a single sitting. Or should he say a single *lying*, since he reads it curled up in bed on an evening his mother has gone out?

Dutiful Reader is not alone. Shortly after the book's publication in 1957, a reviewer for the *New Yorker* wrote: "it is really the sort of book children insist on taking to bed with them."¹

Henry Miller recommended reading on the toilet, and "the more ramshackle the toilet, the more dilapidated it be, the better."²

Later in life, Miller condemned lavatorial reading and wrote: "I know of no better place to read a good book than in the depths of a forest. Preferably by a running stream."³

"Of course," points out Italo Calvino, "the ideal position for reading is something you can never find. In the old days they used to read standing up, at a lectern."⁴

At the 1960 obscenity trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence at the Old Bailey, jury members were required to read the offending work from cover to cover. They were allocated a "special room with deep leather armchairs."⁵

The Cat in the Hat, the sixteenth book by Dr. Seuss (a.k.a. Theodor Geisel), begins with an absent mother and ends upon her return.

Dutiful Reader struggles with the book's rhymed anapaestic dimeter. (All his life he will stumble over meter.) He tells himself: *I'm not allowed to go to sleep until I finish this book.*

Within three days, all the jury members at the *Chatterley* trial had finished the book. Does this mean they read it?

Dutiful Reader's mother always tells him he could read before he started school. *Why can't I remember learning to read?* he still wonders.

James Pitman, grandson of Sir Isaac Pitman, the inventor of Pitman Shorthand, postulates that learning to read in English, due to the vagaries of English orthography,

might be experienced by a child as a type of betrayal and “prepare the ground for doubt about the adult world of teachers and parents.”⁶

“The mother’s eventual task is gradually to disillusion the infant,” writes psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, “but she has no hope of success unless at first she has been able to give sufficient opportunity for illusion.”⁷

“On account of our lying alphabet,” writes Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “it would be better to teach children to read in Latin or Greek.”⁸

Asked how he had so successfully learned Latin as a boy, Dr. Samuel Johnson, whose dictionary influenced the standardization of English spelling with a bias toward etymology at the expense of phonetics, replied: “My master whipt me very well. Without that, Sir, I should have done nothing.”⁹

Some of the children in Dutiful Reader’s primary school class struggle with even the easiest primers. At reading time, these “backward” or “slow readers,” as they are variously called by educationalists, stand at the teacher’s desk and make desperate guesses at the words printed on the page. Dutiful Reader is always on hand to read aloud the daunting symbols for them.

On their first school visit to the local public library, Dutiful Reader’s teacher explains to the class there are two types of book: fiction and nonfiction. Thus is Dutiful Reader inducted into the adult world of classification, in this case in its elementary binary form.

Henry Miller, we are told, was a precocious reader and read *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, and James Fenimore Cooper’s books as a child, “though he would not have been able to borrow the Twain books from the local Brooklyn Public Library as both were excluded from the Children’s Room in the belief that they would corrupt childish minds.”¹⁰

A librarian survey of children users of a branch of the New York Public Library in 1908 cites one young boy as saying he preferred “‘dirty books,’ by which he meant books that were quite literally besmirched with dirt. ‘I always pick for real dirty ones, then the little spots I get on ’em don’t show.’”¹¹

In 1923, Nella Larsen, later a leading light of the Harlem Renaissance, was appointed as a senior library assistant in the children’s department of the New York Public Library branch in Seward Park on the Lower East Side. Larsen was the first African American woman ever to graduate from library school.

The end of racial segregation in public libraries in the Southern United States was officially marked by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Louisiana* in 1966. The court of all-male, all-white justices was split 5:4.

One afternoon when Dutiful Reader comes indoors from playing with friends, his mother tells him to go and wash his hands, to get ready for a surprise. It is a twelve-volume set of encyclopedias for children, with parchment-colored hardback covers and gilt-edged pages.

The Cat in the Hat wears white gloves. Are they for reading?

Comics, in contrast to the shiny encyclopedia volumes, Dutiful Reader reads lying on his stomach on the carpet or outside on the grass, fingers sticky with sherbet and chocolate goodies purchased with his pocket money. Or is this only a sweet and manufactured memory? Has his mind been colonized by the fantasy of how young British boys once greedily consumed *The Dandy* and *The Beano* and *The Warlord* and *Tiger*?

If truth be told, Dutiful Reader enjoys reading his sister’s weekly *Misty* just as much as his war and adventure comics. As he grows older, he takes a clandestine interest in her Mills and Boon romance novels too.

During a debate in the British House of Lords shortly after the *Chatterley* trial, the Earl of Craven described Lawrence’s novel, then on general sale for three shillings

and sixpence, as one “with a filthy reputation known to every schoolboy troubled by desire.” He worried that such children might purchase it “with intent to indulge in a feast of mental, and probably physical, impurity.”¹²

In *Nausea*, Jean Paul Sartre writes regarding the municipal library in Bouville: “... certain volumes are marked with a red cross; these are the forbidden books—works by Gide, Diderot, and Baudelaire, and some medical treatises.”¹³

(Note: Sartre’s Autodidact, while he reads silently in the municipal library in Bouville, nibbles on a chunk of Gala Peter, the original Swiss milk chocolate.)

Among the varied reading material and sweet wrappers strewn around in his sister’s messy bedroom are books from the Malory Towers series by children’s author Enid Blyton. The pages provide Dutiful Reader a window into the secret life of girls.

Alberto Manguel, who was employed to read aloud to the nearly blind Jorge Louis Borges, responded greedily to Enid Blyton’s casual references to jelly: “a mysterious substance which I had never seen but which I knew about from Enid Blyton’s books, and which never matched, when I finally tasted it, the quality of that literary ambrosia.”¹⁴

Dutiful Reader thinks that by “jelly,” Manguel, who uses American English, surely means “jam.” Between jelly and jam there is a world of difference for Dutiful Reader.

In primary school, Dutiful Reader, a precocious reader, is often asked to stand up and read out a prayer or religious parable during morning assembly. He does so eagerly, until one morning, for a reason he is still trying to uncover, the desire fails him and thenceforth he refuses ever to stand at the front and read aloud again.

In *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, published in the United States in 1955, Rudolf Franz Flesch, the author of this soon-to-be bestseller, expressed his contempt for primers: “horrible, stupid, emasculated, pointless, tasteless little readers” that portrayed unfea-

sibly well-behaved children engaged in “unexciting middle-class, middle-income, middle-IQ children’s activities.”¹⁵

Flesch was convinced that the phonics method rather than the look-and-say method was a more effective way to teach reading, and produced 72 word lists parents could use with their children. Geisel drew from Flesch’s word lists to write *The Cat in the Hat*.

In Birmingham, Alabama, says Angela Davis, “if we needed go to the toilet or wanted a drink of water, we had to seek out a sign bearing the inscription ‘Colored.’ Most Southern Black children of my generation learned to read the words ‘Colored’ and ‘White’ long before they learned ‘Look, Dick, look.’”¹⁶

In her 1922 application to library school, Nella Larsen, the daughter of a Danish migrant mother and herself a fluent reader of Danish, included among the books she had read in the previous two years Lothrop Stoddard’s *The New World of Islam* and Knut Hamsun’s *Growth of the Soil*.¹⁷

Stoddard, a eugenicist and Nordicist, was also the author of *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*, published in 1920.

Hamsun won the Noble Prize for Literature in 1920 for *Growth of the Soil*. In 1943, from his home in Grimstad, Norway, he sent his medal to Josef Goebbels, the chief propagandist for the Nazi Party who had once turned his hand to writing a novel.

During the first reading of the Simplified Spelling Bill in the British House of Commons in 1953, Conservative MP and publisher James Pitman presented an early version of what would later be called the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.). The alphabet of 44 characters provided a system for spelling English words phonetically. Pitman created his alphabet to help combat “backward reading,” which, he believed, existed on such a “huge scale” in the U.K. to amount to a “national liability.”¹⁸

Anticipating the *Chatterley* trial would end in an acquittal, Pitman's company, Western Printing Services, printed 200,000 copies of the novel ready for Penguin to distribute to booksellers.

More than 4000 primary schools in England adopted Pitman's i.t.a. for teaching reading. Among these is the Catholic primary school Dutiful Reader attends, where, in the words of W. B. Yeats's "kind old nun": "The children learn to cipher and to sing / To study reading-books and history, / To cut and sew, be neat in everything / In the best modern way."¹⁹

In 1967, one educationalist predicted with the "smugness of the cocksure soothsayer" that i.t.a. would be the standard alphabet for English by 2022.²⁰

Dutiful Reader sifts through these fragments of his life and reading in the hope of uncovering what lies beneath his transformation from an obliging child entertainer—who like the glove-wearing Cat in the Hat demanded of his audience "Look at me!"—into a painfully self-conscious schoolboy who will choke with anxiety whenever his turn approaches to read aloud in class.

Despite his acquired aversion to reading aloud, Dutiful Reader will end up as a university lecturer. The etymology of lecture is *lectio*—reading—which "indicates a lecture (in its origin) was no free discourse on a given subject. It was always based on a textbook or manual from which the teacher read a passage before offering his personal commentary on it."²¹

Dutiful Reader still remembers the shiny Robertson's golliwog pin badge his mother wore on the lapel of her navy duffle jacket but not her teaching him to read. Perhaps it is the much-maligned i.t.a. and not her vaunted teaching skills that should take credit for his early and seemingly effortless entrance into the republic of letters.

Enid Blyton's illustrated *Noddy* books, published in the 1950s, featured golliwogs as villains. In the 1980s, Mr Golly, the proprietor of Toytown garage, was replaced by a teddy bear.

The Robertson company used an iconic golliwog image on its jam jar labels until 2001.

In 1967, Pitman estimated “some 800 different titles” were available in i.t.a.²² His own company published many of them. Dutiful Reader can still see *Littl Sambaë* [sic] displayed on the shelf in the reading corner of his primary school classroom.

The Cat in the Hat is 62 pages thick, contains a total of 1,702 words, and uses 220 different words. There are no obscenities or obvious racial epithets among them.

Crown prosecutor Mervyn Griffith-Jones told the jury at the *Chatterley* trial that, in the novel, the word “fuck” appears 30 times, “cunt” 14 times, “balls” 13 times, “shit” 6 times, and “arse” and “piss” 3 times each.²³

Due to their explicit content and language, obscenity trials were often heard before all-male juries. At the *Chatterley* trial, the defense team waived their option to have an all-male jury.

‘Wog’ is a word Dutiful Reader once had to hear read aloud in an English class in his single-sex comprehensive school. It is an acronym for Western Oriental Gentleman, the flustered teacher explains to thirty sniggering boys, who all know wog is short for golliwog.

Originally it was spelt *golliwogg*, being a Dutch word.

The golliwog character was created in 1895 by Dutch-American children’s authors Florence Kate Upton and her sister Bertha and based on a “black-faced minstrel doll” owned by the family. As with i.t.a., the golliwog character was never copyrighted.²⁴ In the U.K., the golliwog has proved to be considerably more popular and enduring than i.t.a.

The word ‘lit’ appears once in *The Cat in the Hat*, in the sentence: “Said our fish as he lit.” It is the past tense of ‘to light’ and in this context means to fall and settle or land on. Dr. Seuss resorts to this archaic usage of lit in order to provide a word to rhyme with ‘it’ and ‘bit’. Not even Flesch would have dared suggest he use instead the much more useful and everyday word ‘shit.’

In French, ‘*lit*’ can mean ‘reads’ or ‘bed.’

Dutiful Reader *lit au lit*.

Jane Johnson, the recently brought-to-light eighteenth-century British pedagogue, was happy to include ‘shit’ in a set of rhyming words she used to teach her children to read. Bizarrely, for Dutiful Reader, Johnson rhymed ‘dirt’ with ‘slut.’²⁵

A more wholesome image of maternal preschool pedagogy, stemming from the Late Middle Ages, is provided by the dyad of beatific St. Anne teaching her young daughter the Virgin Mary to read. Its counterpart is the stern schoolmaster with his tonsured head and birch—a sign that he’ll take no shit.

During the reading of the Simplified Spelling Bill, a number of MPs blamed poor literacy skills on lack of discipline in schools and the declining use of corporal punishment. Opined the Right Honourable Member for Edinburgh South: “I was not a very clever boy at school, but I was taught to spell and when I did not spell correctly I got the tawse—an instrument which was just as effective as the stick.”²⁶

“In learning to read,” wrote Frederick Douglass, recalling the time of his enslavement, “I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.”²⁷

Civil Rights activist Ruchell Magee spent 67 of his 83 years in various U.S. prisons, and was finally released in 2023. In praising Magee’s resilience, Angela Davis wrote: “The schools in Louisiana had not taught him to read and write. Behind walls in Cali-

fornia, by using the Constitution of the United States as his reader he conquered his illiteracy.”²⁸

“Where else,” wrote Malcolm X, “but in a prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day?”²⁹

Sometimes it is the books that are locked away. When Henry Miller was a young man, “many basic psychoanalytic texts were still housed in a guarded room of the New York Public Library, where they could be read in a cage only by those who had the special permission of the librarian.”³⁰

In a study of censorship in the U.K. published in 1983, John Sutherland reported that the British Library “still has its special table of shame, at the head of the North Gallery, for ‘readers of special books.’”³¹

The American Library Association keeps a record of “challenged books.” A challenge to a book can lead to that book being restricted or withdrawn from the library. In 2022, the third most challenged book was *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison.³²

At the *Chatterley* trial, it was observed during swearing in that five of the twelve jurors read aloud “with some difficulty or hesitancy” the words of the printed oath.³³

The reading aloud by school children labeled as “backward” or “semi-literate” has been described as “barking at print.”³⁴

The day after Lawrence’s novel went on sale, the Earl of Craven stopped at a motorway service station where, he later reported to his peers in the House of Lords, “at every serving counter, sat a snigger of youths. Every one of them had a copy of this book held up to his face with one hand while he forked nourishment into his open mouth with the other. They held the seeds of suggestive lust, which was expressed quite blatantly, by glance and remark, to the girls serving them.”³⁵

The Abuse of Literacy was Richard Hoggart's preferred title for his seminal work on mass culture, but the lawyer for the publisher, Chatto and Windus, objected: "I don't like this name and it makes the contents of the Book much more damaging and dangerous." After extensive revisions, the book was finally published in 1957 as *The Uses of Literacy*.³⁶

Thomas Hardy's *The Trumpet Major*, a novel read aloud without difficulty or hesitancy by the teacher in Dutiful Reader's English class of thirty sniggering teenage boys, contains the suggestive line: "'O, good God!' ejaculated the trumpet-major."³⁷

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, another Hardy classic read aloud by Dutiful Reader's meticulously straight-faced English teacher, the eponymous mayor beholds "the unattractive exterior of Farfrae's erection."³⁸

The self-abuse of literacy?

The true test of erotica, according to W. H. Auden, is that it produces sexual arousal. Consequently, Auden's definition of pornography is "any material that will give a male an erection." He adds: "I would give it to a jury to read and then I would say: 'Will the male members please stand up?'"³⁹

At the *Chatterley* trial, Griffith-Jones famously asked the jury: "Is it a book that you would even wish your wife or servants to read?"⁴⁰ Members of the jury sniggered. Three of the members were women.

(Apropos the municipal library in Bouville, there is a table reserved for women readers.)

It is alleged that the mother in *The Cat in the Hat*, a *mater abscondita*, is engaged in "extramarital adventures." The sequel, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, published in 1958, provides some evidence to support this suspicious interpretation: Mother and Father sleep in separate bedrooms.⁴¹

Lady Chatterley's Lover centers on an adulterous relationship between an aristocratic woman and her gamekeeper that breaches the boundary of social class. It also includes several bouts of anal intercourse.

In his summing up for the prosecution, Griffith-Jones read aloud from an incriminating passage: “‘It was a night of sensual passion, in which she was a little startled and almost unwilling: yet it pierced again with piercing thrills of sensuality, different, sharper, more terrible than the thrills of tenderness.’” In his choice of words to the jury, Griffith-Jones comes across as either a de Manian reader of sublime simplicity or a cunning linguist with a school-boy proclivity for innuendo and double entendre: “Not very easy, sometimes, not very easy, you know, to know what in fact he is driving at in that passage.”⁴²

Riffing off Auden, Dutiful Reader likes to say that the true test of sentimental fiction is that it brings tears to your eyes.

Late in life, Henry Miller recalls how his otherwise austere and castrating Germanic mother “wept copiously” throughout a stage performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that she took him to see as a child.⁴³

Very likely the eponymous Uncle Tom and the other African American characters were played by performers in blackface, as was the rule in such stage productions at the close of the nineteenth century.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is sado-masochistic pornography, or can be read as such. Freud observes: “In my patients' milieu it was almost always the same books whose contents gave a new stimulus to the beating-phantasies: those accessible to young people, such as what was known as the ‘Bibliothèque rose,’ *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, etc. The child began to compete with these works of fiction by producing his own phantasies.”⁴⁴

On Saturday mornings, Nella Larsen would arrive at the Seward Park library to a long line of waiting children. Dutiful Reader is brought to the verge of tears as he reads in

a biography of Larsen: “After the children had crowded in, they filed past the circulation desk to return books and got the familiar greeting, ‘Hands, please?’”⁴⁵

The kids on *Sesame Street* can still reduce Dutiful Reader to tears.

“Tears are signs,” writes Barthes, “not expressions.”⁴⁶

Nella Larsen, long since retired from librarianship and writing, died alone in her Manhattan studio apartment in 1964.

One of the encyclopedia volumes that Dutiful Reader reads with his scrubbed-clean hands is categorical about the five races of man and how to distinguish them.

Dear Reader, which race do you belong to?

In rabbits, writes Norwegian eugenicist Jon Alfred Hansen Mjøen, “a most striking external sign” of a cross-breed is one erect and one drooping ear. “Of course,” Mjøen goes on to explain, “rabbits are not necessarily any the worse for having one upright and one lop ear, but this character is very useful as a symptom of disharmony in general. Why should only the ears be affected? We ought to be suspicious in regard to every organ.”⁴⁷

Bugs Bunny wears white gloves. Should we be suspicious?

In Larsen’s novella *Passing*, the protagonist Irene sits in a racially segregated restaurant fearing she is an object of suspicious glances: “Absurd! Impossible!” she tries to reassure herself. “White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro.”⁴⁸

Mickey Mouse wears white gloves. Is he trying to conceal his hands?

Miller's literary alter ego, the antisemitic Dion Moloch, is an inveterate people watcher: "There were Negresses he had glimpsed on the street, not necessarily pale ones, either, who proved more enticing—some of them, at least—than any white woman he could think of. He had even followed them on occasion, wondering if he could screw up sufficient courage to engage them in conversation."⁴⁹

Dutiful Reader discovers Miller's writing at fourteen as choice excerpts in a chapter of Kate Millett's feminist classic *Sexual Politics*. It is certain that Dutiful Reader was the intended reader of neither author.

Writes Toni Morrison: "Readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white."⁵⁰

To appreciate the effects of this read *The Bluest Eye*.

It has recently been brought to attention that: "In the fifty Dr. Seuss children's books, 2,240 human characters are identified. Of the 2,240 characters, there are forty-five characters of color representing 2% of the total number of human characters."⁵¹

Deary me, Reader ...

Julie B., whom Dutiful Reader encounters at seventeen, is nothing like Malory Towers's Darryl Rivers or any of his other literary crushes, which by now include Cossette from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Arthur Schnitzler's Else, and Wolfgang Goethe's Charlotte. Nor is it love at first sight: there is no Barthesian "scene," or "sign of love's suddenness." Julie B. grows on him by increments like an overplayed pop song.

Larsen and Miller were both born in 1891. Some of the years they lived and worked in Brooklyn and Manhattan during the 1920s overlapped. It is a matter of speculation whether they ever rode in the same subway or trolley car or whether Miller ever followed Larsen on the street and screwed up the courage to talk to her.

Geisel relocated to Manhattan in 1926. Did he ever check out Larsen's palms?

Dutiful Reader suspects Julie B. was a backward reader at school. He and she are both on a training scheme for unemployed youth in Liverpool city center. He dreams about making films. She supplements her training allowance by singing with a cover band one evening a week at a nightclub in Norris Green.

One day, while partners in a drama game, Julie B. tells Dutiful Reader she reads the dictionary each night to increase her vocabulary. Perhaps this is the *scene*: Julie B. alone in her bedroom, diligently and futilely reading?

Futilely reading? Dutiful Reader has yet to discover that Malcolm X, while an inmate of Norfolk Prison Colony, turned himself into a proficient reader by diligently copying out the pages of a dictionary, starting with aardvark, in "slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting."⁵²

In a combination of rationalism and pragmatism, the Autodidact in *Nausea* uses the arbitrary sequence of the alphabet to guide his reading of the many books at the municipal library in Bouville. It is not clear whether he proceeds strictly by author surname and, if so, where books like the Bible or the Qur'an would fit into the sequence. Or a dictionary for that matter.

Julie B. *lit au lit!*

Dutiful Reader cultivates his Barthesian ravishment by Julie B. during extended lunch hours at Liverpool Central Library, where he discovers *Manwatching* (later renamed *Peoplewatching*) by zoologist Desmond Morris.

"Sometimes things occur to me—I daren't call them thoughts," says the Autodidact. "It's very strange. I'm sitting there reading and all of a sudden, I don't know where it comes from, I get a sort of revelation."⁵³

“If I were reading a book and happened to strike a wonderful passage,” writes Henry Miller, “I would close the book then and there and go for a walk. I hated the thought of coming to the end of good book. I would tease it along, delay the inevitable as long as possible.”⁵⁴

Is Miller in fact describing mental edging?

“There are many small signs by which one person indicates attraction to another,” explains Morris. These include: “looking a little longer than usual into the other’s eyes,” executing “small, touching movements” and “sitting directly facing the other, with an ‘open’ body.”⁵⁵

After an hour of gazing into Julie B.’s dark and liquid eyes in the Crown pub on a Friday evening, Dutiful Reader rides home in ecstasy to an interminable weekend of writers block.

As they sit in the foyer and fill in their weekly training record, Dutiful Reader teaches an attentive Julie B., the loved being, a new word: ‘Lunula.’ Now she wants him to teach her a new word every day. She keeps an open body and her knees apart, he notes, encouraged.

In Antebellum America it was a punishable offense to teach an enslaved person to read or write. A white woman, Margaret Douglass, was imprisoned for a month in Norfolk, Virginia for teaching free black children to read. She pointed out that some of the black children in her school were scarcely distinguishable from white children, their fathers “being, very probably, among her real persecutors.”⁵⁶

Julie B.’s right hand lights briefly on Dutiful Reader’s forearm and he notices her red-lacquered fingernails as he teaches her the word of the day, one he has recently learned from Miller: ‘Lucubration.’

An abuse of literacy?

Riding the crowded elevated line from Manhattan's Lower East Side—"the heart of the ghetto"—to his parents' home in Brooklyn, Miller strategically used his copy of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* to strike up a conversation with the woman seated beside him, "a voluptuous Jewess with enormous liquid eyes and the frankness which comes from sensuality."⁵⁷

In 1926, Nella Larsen spent an evening at the newly opened Savoy Ballroom in Harlem as the dance partner of anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski. She was chosen for Malinowski because "she danced well" and "could keep up an intelligent conversation."⁵⁸

"How can we know the dancer from the dance?" asks Paul de Man, quoting the closing line of W. B. Yeats's "Among School Children." De Man intends to ask: How can a reader distinguish a literal question from a rhetorical question?⁵⁹

How indeed?

For Clifford Geertz, "thick description" provides one solution to interpretative ambiguity. What, after all, is the meaning of a wink? "Doing ethnography," he says, "is like trying to read a manuscript [...] foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries."⁶⁰

During the morning tea break in the foyer, Julie B. crosses her denim-clad leg away from Dutiful Reader, who has smuggled himself beside her on the couch. She swings her foot impatiently toward the door. For an adherent of Morris, this is an unambiguous sign that their chaste courtship is approaching an end.

The very next day Dutiful Reader despondently reads Julie B.'s lips as she sits at the other side of the foyer chatting with his rival.

Stephon Clark was shot dead in the backyard of his grandmother's house in Sacramento in 2018 by police who apparently misinterpreted his iPhone for a gun.

To ensure their safety when interacting with police, African American parents advise their children “to keep their hands visible at all times.”⁶¹

The thickness of black lives.

“I can’t breathe.”

“Usually,” writes bell hooks, “white students respond with naive amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where ‘whiteness’ is the privileged signifier. Their amazement that black people watch white people with a critical ‘ethnographic’ gaze is itself an expression of racism.”⁶²

When he was a seventeen-year-old high school student in Springfield, Massachusetts, Geisel wrote a play called *Chicopee Surprised* and performed in it in blackface.⁶³

Does such a revelation change the way you see him?

When you know Darth Vader is voiced by the African American actor James Earl Jones does it change the way you hear him?

Does knowing Paul de Man wrote antisemitic essays during the Nazi occupation of Belgium change the way you read him?

“When you read a brilliantly elegant and ironic novel by Jane Austen,” asks Edward Said, “do you think of colonial slavery [...]?”⁶⁴

“The future political alignment of the emerging nations of Africa [...] may be determined by the language in which they do their thinking,” wrote John Downing, founder and president of the United Kingdom Literacy Association in 1962, “and if this is to be English, then we should consider [...] whether some system for simplifying the learning task such as that provided by i.t.a. should not be more widely tested.”⁶⁵

An abuse of literacy?

To take account of both imperialism and resistance to imperialism, Said advocates “contrapuntal reading,” which requires “extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded.”⁶⁶

For Toni Morrison, a “dark and abiding” Africanist presence “informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature,” including those texts from which race is seemingly excluded.⁶⁷

We must, then, learn to read for traces, the fingernails, down to the lunula.

Seated at the big table in the municipal library in Bouville, Antoine Roquentin uses the cover of reading a newspaper to secretly observe the Autodidact, who strokes with his forefinger the upturned palm of the schoolboy sitting beside him.

What about the Autodidact’s other hand, the one under the table? The excluded one, the one Roquentin cannot see? What might trial prosecutor Griffith-Jones say Sartre is “driving at” here?

Put your hands where I can see them!

Don’t shoot!

When Geisel visited the Houghton Mifflin offices in Boston in 1955 to discuss an idea that would turn into *The Cat in the Hat*, the elevator he rode in was operated by Annie Williams, “an elegant, petite” African American woman with a “secret smile.” As part of her uniform Williams wore white gloves.⁶⁸

Geisel, the descendant of German migrants, was subjected to anti-German hate as a schoolboy in Springfield, Massachusetts during World War I. During World War II, he depicted Japanese Americans as a threat to national security and supported their internment under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066.

As a university lecturer in the U.K., Dutiful Reader is required by the *Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015* to be on the “‘front-line’ of radicalisation-spotting”—i.e., to read the student body with a hermeneutics of extreme suspicion.⁶⁹

An eleven-year-old primary school pupil was suspected of radicalization because a teacher mistook the word ‘alms’ for ‘arms’ during a classroom discussion. In a different case, a nursery worker was convinced a four-year-old Muslim child had drawn a picture of his father with a *cooker bomb* when the child was actually referring to a *cucumber*. Another young Muslim boy fell under suspicion because he misspelled the word ‘terraced’ as ‘terrorist’ when writing about the type of house he lived in.⁷⁰

Since the death of the author and ‘his’ surrogates, we are afraid a book (or anything else for that matter) might mean whatever a reader wants it to mean.

According to Stanley Fish, “no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one” and this would include a non-ironic interpretation of a Jane Austen novel.⁷¹

Hoggart, a star witness for the defense at the *Chatterley* trial, described Lawrence’s novel as a “highly virtuous” and “puritanical” work. Under cross-examination by Griffith-Jones, he elaborated: “Puritanical in its reverence.” “What! Reverence to the balls?” screamed Griffith-Jones. “Reverence to the weight of a man’s balls?” “Indeed yes,” replied Hoggart, undaunted.⁷²

Apropos the politics of interpretative communities, Franz Fanon contends: “The symbols of social order—the police, the bugle calls in the barracks, military parades and the waving flags—are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message ‘Don’t dare to budge’; rather, they cry out ‘Get ready to attack.’”⁷³

Reader, which community hails you?

And do you pronounce ‘Seuss’ to rhyme with ‘voice’ or with ‘goose’? The critical “difference of a breath or an accent,” Jacques Derrida might say.⁷⁴

Inside an elevator in the Houghton Mifflin building on a spring day in 1955, it has been plausibly contended, Geisel’s “imagination, steeped in blackface performance, transformed the white-gloved, brown-skinned Mrs. Williams into the white-gloved, black-and-white-skinned (or -furred?) Cat in the Hat.”⁷⁵

In any event, Mickey, Bugs and co., according to Nicholas Sammond, all sport white gloves as a vestige of their minstrel origins. Other tropes and traces of blackface minstrelsy include “sartorial,” “bodily,” and “verbal excess.”⁷⁶

The fragments keep piling up and to what end?

“In the end one experiences only one’s self. Said Nietzsche. Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage.”⁷⁷

The mystery of Dutiful Reader’s glossophobia must endure another night. Time to close the covers. Dutiful Reader has earned his sleep.

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