

Reading the Romance, Building the Bestseller: A Q-Technique Study of Reader Response to *The Bridges of Madison County*¹

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ABSTRACT: Based on a reader response case study of Robert Waller's astonishingly popular romance novel, the research reported here demonstrates not only that readers' subjective experience of the same text can and do vary dramatically but also how it is that such understandings, in their naturalistic condition, are amenable to public inspection and reliable calibration as operant factors. In the course of the case study, the "convergently selective" character of the appeal of Waller's all-time bestselling romance is addressed in light of the four factors our analysis uncovers as alternative constructions of the novel and its meaning. The four factors are seen as comprising the subjective foundations of a "conversational structure," energized by diverse constitutive sentiments and their interaction, in a manner that is generally playful and pleasurable, albeit in different ways, to parties to the conversation. Implications for enhanced understanding of the mass appeal of Waller's work, and for reinvigorating reader response research more broadly, are discussed.

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Reader Response and the Popular Romance Novel: *The Bridges of Madison County*

The astonishing popularity of *The Bridges of Madison County*, by Robert Waller, has revitalized a long-standing curiosity and concern about romantic fiction and the reach and roots of its appeal among readers. In this paper, we follow our own curiosity on such matters by exploring reader response to Waller's bestseller through the vantage points afforded by Q technique and its attendant methodology. We begin by distinguishing between the story of the novel's remarkable reception among members of the reading public (which we here refer to as "the story of the novel"), on the one hand, and the rather simple tale of unrequited love that comprises the "story in the novel," on the other. We then place our approach within the context of prior scholarship devoted to popular romantic fiction, outlining in the process the Q study which we undertake. The results of our research are then reported, followed finally by a discussion that endeavors to appraise the significance of our project within the larger set of concerns raised anew by the unparalleled appeal demonstrated by Waller's tale.

The Story of the Novel

Waller's first novel, *The Bridges of Madison County* was released without fanfare in April, 1992 and by August was atop the New York Times Bestseller List where it remained for nearly two years. In June, 1993 it was named the "all-time word-of-mouth bestseller" by the editors of *Publisher's Weekly*. Within two years, it had sold over 10 million copies world-wide, making it the all-time leading bestseller for a hardcover novel. In 1995, the movie version of the story, co-starring Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep and directed by Eastwood, opened to favorable reviews and large audiences, thereby helping to extend to 162 weeks the eventual duration of the book's presence on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. Whether a literary work of art or not, Waller's romance must be considered, without qualification, as a communications *tour de force*, a veritable phenomenon unto itself.

Underpinning such spectacular sales figures over this time are countless stories testifying to the deep, almost cult-like devotion displayed by many readers to the events and characters Waller depicts. For instance, so great was the enthusiasm of BOMC's vast readership that droves of fans descended on the small south-central Iowa town of Winterset in search of the farm where Francesca Johnson (the heroine)

lived (which does not exist) and the covered bridges Robert Kincaid (the hero) was there to photograph (which do exist). In the meantime, the corporate headquarters of *National Geographic*, for whom Kincaid works in the story, reported hundreds of inquiries seeking in vain to locate prior issues of the magazine in which they might find the photos of Madison County taken by the fictitious hero in the novel. Further catalyzing -- and capitalizing on -- the spectacle, Waller himself recorded an album of songs ("The Ballads of Madison County") to accompany the book. Throughout, the scope of media attention devoted to Waller and his story was enormous: Oprah Winfrey, to cite but one example, filmed an entire show in front of one of the "bridges" in Madison County, and Gary Trudeau, to note another, devoted an entire week of *Doonesbury* to a spoof of the novel.

Not all of the response, however, was positive. In addition to Trudeau's satire, John Leo (1993) characterized BOMC's popularity as "written proof of people's private desperation," and Pauli Carnes (1993) proposed that BOMC was "pornography for yuppie women." *Chicago Tribune* columnist Jon Margolis (1993) condemns the book as "an insipid, fatuous, mealy-mouthed third-rate soap opera with a semi-fascist point of view." And Frank Rich, drama critic for the *New York Times*, sees BOMC as a "backlash book, celebrating narcissistic hit-and-run flings for men and pointless marital misery for women" (cited in Leo, 1993).

How is it possible that the same piece of literature can elicit such vastly divergent, yet so strongly felt, appraisals? In large part, it is this question which prompted the present investigation. Our purpose is twofold: In the first place, we want to probe reader response to Waller's novel in search of clues for its immense popularity. Second, and not altogether separate, we seek to extend the case, made initially by Stephenson (1972, 1980b) and by Brown (1977, 1990), that Q methodology is not merely consonant with the purposes of reader-response research but also suggestive of a harmonic convergence of the concerns of the humanities, on the one hand, and the methods of science, on the other.

The Story in the Novel

Waller's novel is set in Madison County, Iowa in August, 1965. The hero is fifty-two year-old Robert Kincaid, a world-traveling photographer for *National Geographic*, who has driven his pickup truck from Washington state to south central Iowa to shoot a series of pictures of the area's quaint covered bridges. Temporarily lost in the country-side, Kincaid has a chance encounter with a local farm wife, forty-five year-old Francesca Johnson (the heroine), who volunteers to accompany Kincaid in locating a particular bridge. As it happens, Francesca is all alone on the farm for four days, her husband and children having left home to attend the Illinois State Fair. It also happens that Mrs. Johnson, who had come to Iowa twenty years earlier as an Italian war bride, had for some time felt "compromised and alone" within the confines of her quite passionless marriage to her husband Richard. For his part, Kincaid was a man with few attachments other than to his craft, his photographic equipment and his pickup. The heart of the story is devoted to the narrator's reconstruction of "the affair" between Robert and Francesca along with Robert's "proposal" that Francesca leave behind her unfulfilling life in Iowa and run away with him to places far and wide. The invitation is entertained but ultimately turned down. Instead, Francesca places fidelity in front of passion and romance, choosing to live out the remainder of her days on the farm outside of Winterset, Iowa. During one day in August for every year thereafter, however, she would gather props and remembrances and pay ceremonial homage to her romantic interlude by staging a solitary ritual recalling the original seduction. Over the course of those two and one-half decades, Mrs. Johnson attempted to locate Kincaid only once, and then unsuccessfully, after the passing of her husband.

Two final points are in order about this simple story. First, notwithstanding the brevity of the actual affair between Robert and Francesca, Waller leaves little doubt that theirs was much more than a fleeting romance or momentary concession to impulse. As Robert remarks upon learning that Francesca must stay with her family: "[I]n a universe of ambiguity, this kind of certainty comes only once." Second, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the author's framing device for the novel. Waller-the-narrator's reconstruction of the romance is packaged, in pseudo-documentary fashion, as a truthful re-creation that he, as the teller, was able to piece together from a letter Francesca left for her children, describing the affair, that they

read only after her death. Remarkably, and yet crucial to establishing the account's credibility among readers, the narrator agrees to tell the story of Robert and Francesca only in response to an invitation to do so by the late heroine's children!

Prior Research on Popular Romantic Fiction

The body of scholarship dedicated to deciphering the meaning and appeal of romance novels is by no means of one piece (Barlow, 1992; Hovet, 1986; Kinsale, 1992; Modleski, 1982). Indeed, the legacy of literary criticism vis-a-vis the genre is largely one of unresolved issues. There is nonetheless a common methodological denominator in most such work, namely, reliance upon text-centered critical exegesis (Hazen, 1983; Krentz, 1992; Mussell, 1984; Thurston, 1987). The major problem with this approach, as Janice Radway (1984) has argued, is that ". . . literary meaning is not something to be found 'in' a text. It is . . . rather, an entity produced by a reader in conjunction with the text's verbal structure" (pp. 10-11). Accordingly, in her own research Radway sought to correct for this curious neglect of actual readers. Toward this end, she consulted a group of forty-two female readers of romance novels and solicited their understandings of what constituted "good" or "failed" love stories.

It is both instructive and ironic that Professor Radway's argument and alternative approach are introduced by citing the comments of real readers showing "that these readers do not understand the books in the same way" (p. 4). What Radway is referring to in noting the diversity in subjective interpretation is what Blumer (1955) defines as "convergent selectivity" (see also Stephenson, 1967). At issue is a divergence in underlying perspective and motive in what appears to be the common behavior of a mass of individuals. Applied to the phenomenon of romance reading, convergent selectivity implies, simply, that different readers will find appealing different aspects of the same story, or possibly even read different stories from the same book.

What gives irony to this point is that Radway's recognition of the importance of convergent selectivity (though not labelled as such) is quite strikingly contravened as a consequence of the particular kind of reader-response methodology she employs. Specifically, she administered questionnaires to her 42 romance readers and taped some 60 hours of intensive interviews with her key informants, all in an effort to construct a "composite Smithton Reader". Furthermore, since her informants were compulsive readers of romances, Radway sought their

advice on the difference between "failed" and "successful" romantic narratives. But rather than take the reflections of her readers as the raw material for analysis, she elects to employ "Propperian" techniques in an effort to discern the common elements of plot structure that distinguish good from bad romances as judged by her readers. In our view, therefore, Radway's approach -- while a step in the right direction -- ends up abandoning the very domain she sought to highlight at the outset: the internal, inherently subjective vantage points of her individual readers.

Q Methodology and Reader Response

Following Stephenson (1972, 1980b) and Brown (1977, 1990), our approach begins, like Radway's, with what actual readers have to say about Waller's romance. In the parlance of Q methodology, the volume of subjective commentary on such issues is referred to as a "concourse" (Stephenson, 1980a). As one might expect for a volume recognized as the "all-time word-of-mouth bestseller," the concourse on BOMC is of massive proportions. To develop a reasonably representative replica of the larger "conversation" about the book, while reducing the size of the statement sample to manageable proportions, we made use of a provisional sampling schema (in this case a 3 X 3 balanced factorial) wherein statements were classified according to two dimensions, each with three levels, implicit in the larger BOMC concourse. The first dimension has three evaluative categories, running from (a) positive-affirming to (c) negative-critical with intermediate (b) mixed or null in appraisal. The second dimension pertains to topical focus and also houses three types of references: those pertaining to (d) characters, (e) plot and/or setting, and (f) the overall appeal and/or effect on the reader excluding reference to particular plot or character ingredients. Cross-classifying these two three-leveled dimensions produces a nine-celled framework for sampling the vast commentary spawned by the book. Each of the nine cells in this design was fitted with four statements for a final Q sample of $N = 36$ items.

Reader-Respondents

Fifty-eight readers, most of whom were secured via word-of-mouth notice, served as participants in this research. Our sample of convenience appears to fit the demographic profile for regular readers of romance novels with one exception: whereas men comprise only 1-2%

of the traditional market of romance readers, they comprise 22% of our sample (Hovet, 1986). Over the period from April through July 1993, each of our readers was supplied with a deck of the BOMC Q sample with each of the N = 36 statements of opinion randomly numbered and typed one to a card. Each respondent modeled his or her opinion by sorting the statements, in standard Q-sort fashion, according to the opinion continuum displayed in Table 1. As with any Q sample, readers are modelling meanings and interpretations from their own subjective perspective.

Table 1
Opinion Continuum for BOMC Q sort

Most Unlike					Most Like			
My Point of View					My Point of View			
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4
(3)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(3)
[number of items per pile]								

Findings at First Blush: Four Readings of Waller's Romance

Each of the 58 completed Q sorts was intercorrelated with the others and the 58 x 58 correlation matrix factor analyzed via the centroid method. The seven unrotated centroids extracted initially were then rotated judgmentally in the quest for "simplest structure" (Stephenson, 1953). Four factors survived rotation, and the final rotated factor matrix, with loadings for each respondent on each of the four factors, is presented in Table 2. As a preliminary matter, it is worth underscoring several features of the aggregate pattern of loadings.

Table 2
Rotated Factor Matrix

Factor loadings*											
#	1	2	3	4	Gdr	Age	IA	Edu	Occ	Hrs Rd	Disc Book
47	81	-14	-15	-11	F	4	N	MA	educ	6-8	1-2
10	79	15	-02	35	M	4	N	PHD	educ	1-2	5+
15	78	-06	-04	07	F	3	Y	BA	educ	6-8	3-4
02	78	00	-20	15	M	4	Y	PHD	educ	1-2	3-4
54	77	06	05	00	F	4	N	MA	educ	8-10	5+
21	76	01	-16	21	F	5	Y	MA	educ	8-10	5+
57	76	20	-15	13	M	4	N	MA	busi	2-4	0
13	74	-24	-07	27	F	4	N	PHD	educ	4-6	3-4
01	73	27	11	16	F	4	Y	BA	educ	1-2	1-2
29	73	-08	-02	06	F	6	N	HS+	cler	8-10	1-2
09	73	11	09	-08	F	4	Y	BA	hswf	4-6	5+
51	72	14	-13	09	F	4	N	BA	educ	2-4	1-2
26	70	19	-26	32	F	5	N	MA	busi		
16	69	23	-08	25	F	3	Y	PHD	hswf	8-10	3-4
30	68	03	-16	09	M	5	N	MA	educ		
22	68	09	-08	28	F	5	N	MA	educ	4-6	1-2
12	66	18	-30	04	F	4	Y	MA	educ	6-8	5+
53	67	-11	-04	15	F	4	N	BA	educ	4-6	
55	66	28	-25	-09	F	3	N	BA	busi	2-4	3-4
28	66	-07	05	12	M	2	Y	BA	busi	8-10	1-2
45	64	08	-12	-11	F	3	N	BA	educ	10+	5+
58	64	17	-24	05	F	6	N	MA	cler	6-8	5+
19	64	39	-20	-27	F	5	Y	BA	educ	4-6	5+
36	63	16	-06	20	F	5	Y	MA	educ	10+	5+
11	63	17	-21	31	F	4	Y	BA	educ	10+	5+
03	62	30	-07	24	F	3	Y	MA	educ	4-6	5+
43	61	23	-19	-24	F	3	N	MA	busi	4-6	3-4
25	59	11	-06	-10	F	4	N	MA	educ	1-2	1-2
17	59	28	-22	20	F	5	Y	BA	hswf	8-10	5+
38	59	14	00	08	F	3	N	HS+	hswf	4-6	0
49	58	32	-28	07	F	4	N	BA	educ	4-6	1-2
14	55	-08	01	43	F	4	N	PHD	educ	4-6	5+
05	54	16	-25	09	F	5	Y	HS+	cler	4-6	5+
50	53	41	-06	12	F	4	N	BA	busi	4-6	3-4
52	51	-22	24	-02	F	5	N	BA	busi	6-8	1-2
46	50	22	-50	15	F	3	N	BA	busi	4-6	3-4
33	47	08	-02	06	F	3	N	BA	busi	10+	1-2
04	-29	75	28	-06	M	4	Y	PHD	educ	1-2	5+

Table 2 (continued)

24	12	69	-13	01	F	6	N	HS+	cler	8-10	3-4
40	13	66	04	02	F	5	N	MA	busi	8-10	1-2
48	31	56	13	14	F	4	N	BA	educ	2-4	5+
39	-28	40	37	09	F	4	N	PHD	educ	2-4	1-2
56	39	42	-15	30	M	5	N	PHD	educ	4-6	3-4
31	40	65	-05	-13	F	5	Y	MA	educ	10+	5+
44	49	52	17	-02	F	4	N	MA	busi	4-6	1-2
41	42	47	38	-11	F	2	N	MA	busi	10+	1-2
27	-21	-07	75	07	M	6	N	PHD	educ		
08	-18	22	72	-03	M	5	Y	BA	busi	10+	2-3
34	-22	12	51	-10	F	3	N	MA	busi	6-8	0
07	-42	38	60	-17	F	4	Y	BA	busi	2-4	5+
35	-47	07	60	-06	F	5	N	PHD	educ	10+	3-4
18	-03	09	-04	70	F	6	N	BA	hswf	6-8	3-4
42	32	00	-19	49	M	3	N	MA	busi	2-4	3-4
06	37	23	-36	45	M	5	Y	HS+	busi	8-10	0
37	28	32	-10	23	F	6	N	HS+	cler	8-10	3-4
20	-36	29	21	11	F	5	Y	BA	educ	10+	5+
32	-30	19	19	-36	M	4	N	PHD	educ	8-10	1-2
23	10	37	34	-12	M	3	N	PHD	educ	4-6	0

*Two place decimals omitted. Age: 1=-20, 2=20-29, 3=30-39, 4=40-49, 5=50-59, 6=60+. IA: Y or N. Hrs. Rd: Per week for pleasure. Fav. Aut: Favorite author, yes or no. Oth Bks: Read other books since *BOMC*, yes or no. Disc. Book: No. of discussions about *BOMC*. See Movie: Likely to see movie on scale from 0-9, 9 most likely.

In the first place, the fact that there are *four* factors rather than merely one serves to underline the importance we have attached to the principle of convergent selectivity: Each of the four factors represents, in effect, a distinctive understanding, interpretation, or account of *BOMC*. A loading on a given factor indexes the degree to which a Q sort (person) is correlated with the viewpoint represented by the factor. A given Q sort (person) is considered *defining* for a particular factor when its loading exceeds statistical significance ($\pm .40$, $p < .001$) on that factor only. Consequently, only 3 of our readers provided Q sorts whose perspectives on *BOMC* were sufficiently idiosyncratic to avoid association with at least one of the constructions of the novel uncovered here. This attests to the adequacy of the four-factor solution: While we gain substantially in parsimony moving from fifty-eight to four separate readings, we are able to do so at only a slight cost in information lost.

Respondents are arrayed in Table 2 according to the magnitude of

their saturation on each of the four factors. Hence Factor 1 is far and away the most populous of the four stances vis-a-vis the novel, and, by our findings, the point of view taken by these readers would appear to be the dominant construction of BOMC. Though containing fewer subscribers, the remaining three factors are no less consequential in defining the range of subjective response elicited by this book. While we can make no claims that the four constructions thus brought to light are entirely exhaustive of all possibilities, we do contend that in these factors and the schematics they embody are clues not only to the range of reactions to BOMC among its readers but its wide appeal as well.

We now turn to an examination of the viewpoints themselves. For our interpretations, we rely primarily upon the factor score composites for each type -- i.e., model Q sorts produced as a weighted average of the contribution to each factor exercised by each defining variate. Also of use in this regard are the insights of selected respondents themselves when asked after Q sorting to comment on their ranking of the statements.

Findings in Focus: Reading Readers' Stories as Text

Factor A: "Swept Away"

Of the four factors, Factor A affords the sharpest illumination for the deep affection elicited among so many readers of this romance. That nearly 60% of our readers are located on Factor A is, we believe, clear warrant for treating this as the "dominant story" behind the immensely popular response to BOMC. The story told by Factor A is itself, like the story spawning it, a tale of romance. Consider, for example, the three statements receiving the highest scores by this factor. (Scores for A are shown to the left of each statement, while for comparative convenience scores for Factors B, C, and D respectively appear in parentheses following each item. Finally, for those wishing to make finer distinctions than the rank-scores allow, z-scores for each statement on each factor are bracketed in serial order following each of the statements.)

- +4 (1) Both Francesca and Robert seemed like real people to me.
I found myself identifying with the both of them. (-4, 0, +2)
[1.81, -1.67, 0.02, 0.69]
- +4 (7) As I read on about Francesca and Robert's affair, I found myself wondering what I would do if I were in their situation. (-3,

+1, +1) [1.61, -1.51, 0.34, 0.29]

- +4 (11) Kincaid was an interesting character for the lead male role in a romantic story. He seemed to combine the traditional "cowboy" manliness from days gone by with a New Age sensitivity seldom displayed by American men. It's an attractive, albeit uncommon, combination. (-1, -1, +3) [1.49, -0.14, -0.26, 1.42]

Factor A's readers are clearly identified with the principal characters, finding them both credible and authentic and, in Kincaid's case especially, intriguing as well as attractive. The personalized, romantic quality of Factor A's reading experience is revealed elsewhere in the high rankings assigned statements suggestive of being drawn in by the author's choice of setting and framing device for the story:

- +3 (19) I suppose a part of me wanted them to run off together and live happily ever after. On the other hand, I admired the strength and the courage they showed in not doing so. Francesca did the right thing by staying with her husband and family in Iowa. (-2, +1, -1) [1.03, -0.83, 0.27, -0.41]
- +3 (25) Could the same love story be set in New York, L.A. or Chicago? I doubt it. There's something about the unadorned, earthy beauty of rural Iowa that allows the natural and honest character of the lovers' feelings to shine through so clearly. (-2, -1, -2) [1.38, -0.88, -0.52, -1.06]

The reference to the "honest character of the lovers' feelings" in statement 25 echoes sentiments that permeate Factor A's more general appraisal of the novel. And it is the total absence of duplicity, deceit, and insincerity that makes the brief affair between Robert and Francesca the stuff of lasting romance.

- +2 (10) The appeal of the story is not hard to account for: People aspire to relationships defined by honesty and sincerity, by truth and beauty. What Robert and Francesca found, if only for four days, was rare for its time and even rarer for ours. (-1, +1, -4) [0.98, -0.37, 0.44, -1.64]

Elsewhere in the statement scores we find that Factor A credits not only the characters but the author himself with sincere, thoroughly pure motives in creating the story. Since many such items are even more salient in the arrays of the other factors, however, we will postpone their presentation, to avoid redundancy, until we turn to those

interpretations. For the time being, let us note how Factor A readers respond to suggestions that cast a shadow of doubt on the stature and stability of the heroine:

- 2 (12) Waller's depiction of Francesca's annual ritual commemorating her affair—with the cigarettes, love letter, brandy, photos, and all—struck me as more sordid or perverse than as tender or loving. (-1, 0, 3) [-0.88, -0.74, 0.23, 1.36]

In simple terms, BOMC is a romance that "works" for these readers; it works in a way that draws them into the story, through what appears to be a rather strong identification with both the hero and the heroine. Francesca and Robert are "real people" to these readers; more than a few of them, in fact, were willing to confess in follow-up interviews that they thought BOMC was actually a true story and not fiction at all! Before turning to the remaining factors, it is important to point out that of the 34 persons whose Q sorts define the first factor, 30 are women and 4 are men. Whereas two-thirds (30/45) of the women readers load significantly on Factor A, less than one-third (4/13) of the male readers resonate to this version of the story. Considerations of sample size, particularly the small number of male readers in this research, argue against making too much of these differences. Such standard disclaimers aside, however, it appears that the difference in literary response due to gender differences among readers may well be appreciable with respect to romantic fiction.

Factor B: "A Curious Phenomenon"

For readers on Factor B there is scant evidence of the deeply personal involvement in the story and the characters that marked Factor A. That is not to say that Factor B's readers did not enjoy the story, however, as scores for the following three statements make plain.

- | A | B | |
|----|----|---|
| +3 | +3 | (4) Literary flaws or not, the story itself was gentle and kind, the two main characters were sympathetic and the setting charming. In all, it was a nice, pleasant book to read. (-1, 0) [1.15, 1.28, -0.44, 0.07] |
| 0 | +2 | (2) The story held my attention while reading it. Since then, however, I can't say I've really thought about or reflected on its deeper signifi- |

cance. (0, -3) [-0.14, 1.02, -0.15, -1.45]

- 0 +4 (32) I had a generally positive reaction to the book, but I couldn't really say what it was that I liked and disliked about it. I just basically liked it, and I see no purpose served by trying to pick it apart after the fact. (-4, 0) [-0.03, 1.58, -1.72, 0.06]

Our readers are virtually unanimous in acknowledging the brevity of the book as a virtue. The statement calling attention to this is given a high positive ranking by all four factors, but in no case higher than for Factor B which placed it at the very top of all thirty-six items from the Q sample. Hence it is that Factor B's "generally positive" reaction takes on the appearance of a cost-benefit calculus: a pleasant, quick read, the book did not demand much in the manner of a taxing investment of intellectual energy. In consequence, the measure of enjoyment extracted from Mr. Waller's romance is of a more reserved and much less emotive character than is the case for Factor A. Referring back to the series of statements suggesting a strong psychological identification with the characters of Francesca and Robert (especially items 1, 7, and 19), all of which were given high rankings by Factor A, it can be seen that all are assigned sharply negative scores in the array of Factor B's composite Q sort. And more so than the other factors, Factor B expressed particular difficulty in conjuring up a credible image of the hero of the story:

- 3 +1 (21) I had trouble visualizing the Robert Kincaid character. Whether poor writing was responsible or not, he just seemed a little fuzzy or unusual, especially for 1965. I can't wait to see who gets the part for the movie. (-1, 0) [-1.08, 0.64, -0.16, -0.24]

At the same time, despite a host of disclaimers disavowing any special insight into the remarkable reception given the novel, Factor B does see a possible clue in the author's use of middle-aged characters rather than the more youthful lovers one usually encounters in the pages of romantic fiction.

- +2 +3 (22) One thing I found appealing was that Robert and Francesca find one another at a point in life approximating middle age. It's a warm thought

that such feelings and experiences are accessible,
and at such depths, for folks in their 40's and
50's. (-1, +1) [0.78, 1.11, -0.59, 0.33]

Otherwise, Factor B seems thoroughly perplexed at the book's stunning success. In this respect, Factor B, as we shall see, is rather like Factor C in confessing bewilderment at the BOMC phenomenon. For B, however, this is a sense that borders on a bemused, curious kind of perplexity; for C, the sense of puzzlement is rather more antagonistic.

Factor C: "A Bridge to Begrudgement"

The third construction of BOMC is far and away the least friendly of the four perspectives. Indeed, it conveys a critical tenor toward the story and its status as a best-seller that borders on being outright caustic. As indicated already, the story from Factor C is one that begins with the same feelings of bewilderment at the novel's success expressed by Factor B.

A	B	C	
0	+2	+3	(8) I've been surprised by how many of my friends and acquaintances have read this book. It's become something of a conversation piece -- on the order of the weather or maybe politics. (+1) [0.05, 0.75, 0.95, 0.51]
-2	+4	+4	(33) I can't for the life of me figure out what all the fuss is about this book. As far as I'm concerned, all the hullabaloo is much ado about nothing. It's simply not that big a deal! (-4) [-0.83, 1.58, 1.71, -1.65]

The identical score of +4 given by Factors B and C to item 33 likely derives from a subtle difference in the meaning attributed by each to the same language. Factor B appears to be expressing a fairly straightforward sense of confusion, as if to say that it just "didn't quite get it." For C, this is not enough: for persons of this sensibility, an engaged reading experience, for a romantic novel no less than for a complex philosophical argument, invokes an inherently critical frame of mind. The unwillingness of Factor C to disengage critical capacities in approaching BOMC is revealed in its rejection (-4) of statement 32 (see above). This item is found on the exact opposite side of the factor array for B and hence reveals the core contrast between the rival approaches to pleasure reading at issue in these two accounts.

This is not to say that Factor B is entirely uncritical in its appraisal of the book. Indeed, we see in the identical scores given a pair of items below hints of a shared reservation -- which remains partial for B -- with the quality of Waller's writing and the purity of his motives in crafting the story:

- | A | B | C | |
|----|----|----|---|
| -4 | +2 | +2 | (3) Mr. Waller depicts the "mating dance" of Francesca and Robert in plodding detail, but he fails to develop them as believable characters. (-1) [-1.69, 0.85, 0.83, -0.43] |
| -1 | +3 | +3 | (18) While reading the book, I couldn't help but wonder whether Waller was being honest in the sentimentality or just marketing mushy feelings out of hard-nosed commercial calculations. (-1) [-0.66, 1.18, 1.48, -0.28] |

The full force of Factor C's critical wrath cuts a much wider swath than suggested by these concerns alone. In short, BOMC has little to recommend it as a contribution to American Literature. Its astonishing commercial success is therefore a source not of amusement to these readers but deep irritation and lament. One reader on Factor C went so far as to correct one of us upon referring to Waller's "book," insisting that it did not deserve to be so labelled. Instead, she preferred to call it a "publication." Even employing more charitable criteria appropriate to a first novel does not soften the bite of condemnation for the quality of the work as a whole.

- | A | B | C | |
|----|----|----|---|
| +1 | 0 | -4 | (16) In all honesty, I liked this book a lot more than I thought I would. (+1) [0.50, 0.16, -1.91, 0.50] |
| 0 | 0 | -4 | (17) Granted, this is hardly a lasting contribution to American literature. But, for heaven's sake, it's only Waller's first novel. And for a first-time effort, it's a pretty decent piece of writing. (+1) [0.37, 0.16, -1.91, 0.50] |
| -4 | -2 | +4 | (15) A truck named Harry and a dog named Highway? If this is all it takes to write a best seller, maybe publishers should start combing the local Junior Highs in search of the next crop of literary stars! (-1) [-1.83, -0.83, 1.85, -0.40] |

But it is for matters more fundamental than even the quality of writing that Factor C voices its loudest indignation. In the minds of these readers, BOMC is flawed in concept, dangerous in message, and very possibly malevolent or, at best, suspect in intent. The large bones of contention can be seen clearly enough in the rankings earned by the following statements:

A	B	C	
+1	+1	+2	(26) The story-line is almost completely implausible. A world-class mystic/photographer and war-bride/Iowa farm wife magnetically drawn to one another in a chance encounter? Unlikely, yes; but isn't such almost always the case with love, when we pause to think about it? (-3) [0.35, 0.31, 0.62, -1.09]
-4	+1	+4	(27) Much of the book is pure baloney: quasi-mystical talk of a shamanlike photographer overwhelming the modest Mrs. Johnson with his "sheer emotional and physical power." Such trite and sexist stereotypes are out of place -- even in mid-1960s Iowa. (-3) [-1.71, 0.37, 1.88, -1.27]

In the eyes of these readers, Waller's romance is not simply a shrewdly packaged but ultimately harmless little fantasy of unrequited love. To the contrary, it is a deplorable book because its implicit messages -- about feminine ideals, about marital fidelity, about the nature of romance and honest intimacy between men and women -- are all unredeemably retrograde in character. Finally, our third factor exceeds the others in the extent to which it detects a commercial calculus in Waller's choice of middle-aged lovers for the chief characters:

0	0	+2	(9) The ages of the star-crossed lovers -- older than is typical for this fare -- made me a little suspicious. Was this written with a target audience in mind, namely, a vast cohort of baby boomers now approaching fifty? (-2) [0.28, -0.02, 0.89, -0.64]
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Factor D: "Francesca's Choice"

The three readers whose Q sorts define Factor D can generally be said to have liked the book. In this respect, they are closer in overall appraisal of the novel to Factor A and B (though less so to the latter).

Even so, there are important differences in the way the story is construed -- and appreciated -- by those whose global, topographical assessments are comparably favorable. Consider the three statements receiving a +4 score in the composite Q sort for Factor D.

D

- +4 (13) The way the author introduced the story, I found myself believing that it was all true, that Francesca and Robert were real people and Waller was sharing their story with the world for the first time. (+1, +2, -3) [0.59, 0.72, -1.18, 2.00]
- +4 (14) One reviewer tabbed this novel as "Hallmark card for all those who have loved and lost." I suppose I'd have to agree: it's a sweet, though very trite, little love story. (-1, +1, +1) [-0.66, 0.60, 0.59, 1.44]
- +4 (34) I see this less as a love story than as an account of Francesca's choice in the face of a classic moral dilemma: whether to honor her commitment to her husband and children or selfishly give in to impulse. What makes her such an admirable character is that she made the correct -- and more difficult -- choice. (+1, -2, -2) [0.48, -0.79, -0.73, 1.52]

Factor D readers are not afraid to admit that they found themselves thinking that this was a true rather than fictionalized account. Yet they did not find themselves being drawn in and caught up in the romance in the same fashion as Factor A readers. In fact, from D's standpoint, BOMC is not primarily a story of romance at all, but an account of "Francesca's choice" in deciding to do what, from the vantage point of this factor, was the right thing in remaining in Iowa with her spouse and family. As a romance, the novel is on the order of a "Hallmark card" in quality: sweet but clearly unexceptional. The -4 ranking of statement 10, cited earlier in connection with Factor A's celebration of the story's honesty, truth and beauty, offers an instructive accent to the message in statement 14: what Robert and Francesca found in one another, for the period of four days, is hardly deserving to be treated as the stuff of a timeless, lasting romance "for the ages." There is thus a tone of skepticism in the voice of Factor D as it reflects upon the plausibility of what it has read. And even in its self-presentation, Factor D makes it plain that it does not check its critical capacities at the door in reading fiction. Nor does it complete a novel and think no more about what was written (see the -3 score for statement 2, cited above in connection with factor B). Statement 29 extends these

sentiments, revealing as well the pride that Factor D readers take in reaching their own judgments on such matters quite apart from the influence of so-called experts.

- +3 (29) Okay, so this isn't a landmark in literary achievement. What so-called literary critics say about it, pro or con, is merely opinion passed off as expertise any way. Frankly, what critics do or don't like about it is of no interest to me. (0, +1, 0) [0.27, 0.48, -0.15, 1.12]

So, if these are readers who are not about to have the wool pulled over their eyes, or be taken in by an implausible storyline, what is it that trips their critical trigger in Mr. Waller's romance? For the most part, it is Francesca herself that for Factor D is key. Whereas Kincaid is considered to be a credible, though unusual, character for the male lead (see above discussion and scores for statement 11), the same cannot be said for the heroine:

- +2 (23) Francesca's attraction to Kincaid is described in such mystical, soul-partner terms. But might she have been fooled? I mean, she could simply have been lonely and bored, both with married life and with life on the farm. (-1, 0, +1) [-0.50, 0.13, 0.37, 0.88]
- +3 (12) Waller's depiction of Francesca's annual ritual commemorating her affair -- with the cigarettes, love letter, brandy, photos and all -- struck me as more sordid or perverse than as tender or loving. (-2, -1, 0) [-0.88, -0.74, 0.23, 1.36]

To these readers, Francesca's behavior raises questions about the purity of her motives and the soundness of her judgment in entering into the affair in the first place. Moreover, despite D's view that Francesca's decision to say goodbye to Kincaid and remain in Iowa was the proper one, her compulsive reenactment of the initial scene of seduction serves to raise serious questions about the heroine's emotional equilibrium and possibly even her sanity. In follow-up interviews with two of the factor D readers, both of whom happened to be grandparents, unsolicited reference was made to the sacredness of the marriage vows and the sorrowful frequency with which such vows are forsaken nowadays. Not that divorce is always wrong or extramarital affairs always inexcusable; at issue here is not an inflexible adherence to moral absolutes. Proponents of old-fashioned "traditional values," these readers are not about to absolve Francesca of responsibility (and guilt) for having had the affair with Kincaid, short-lived though it may have

been.

Concluding Discussion

Taken in their entirety, these findings speak to the wisdom of a key premise of reader response approaches to literary criticism: clearly, at least in the case at hand, not all readers are experiencing quite the same thing in reading the same piece of fiction. From accounts furnished in the form of Q-sort representations, four very different versions of the same story have been discovered. By the same token, the existence of four readings of BOMC underscores the centrality of convergent selectivity to the volume's astonishingly vast readership: while all reading the same novel, different readers resonate to different facets of the same textual narrative.

What clues do these findings contain that might shed light on BOMC's astounding popularity? Our results would have to be labeled as preliminary, but they do provide an empirical foundation from which to advance some tentative explanations for the novel's extraordinary appeal. For simplicity of presentation, we focus on three evidentiary clusters within the foundation laid by our data.

First and foremost, any explanation of BOMC's appeal would have to begin with Factor A. Recall that for these readers BOMC is a book "that works." They are drawn into the story by both the way it is framed and its setting, and they identify with both of the characters, finding them credible and emotionally appealing. Illustrative perhaps of the deeper dynamics at play here are the comments from followup interviews with one of the four male readers from Factor A. By his own admission, Mr. A (as we shall call him) identifies more closely with the character of Francesca than with Kincaid. We cannot be sure at this point whether what Mr. A considers "identification" is not actually closer to what some scholars (Kinsale, 1992) label "placeholdering" -- denoting an experience of "riding along with" and/or partaking of the same actions as opposed to "becoming" and "feeling" the character as oneself -- but it is clear that Francesca's experience becomes for him the gateway to a self-described "fantasy" level of enjoyment of the novel. Francesca's character is key for Mr. A because she shows how it is possible to "have it both ways" with respect to true romance and marriage. Through Francesca, one taps into the fantasy (which A considers more common than most married people are willing to admit), fueled in part by the near-certain prospect that all persons will at some point experience at least some unhappiness

within marriage, that there is an antidote available in the form of a cost-free extramarital affair with an idealized romantic partner. For Mr. A, BOMC feeds on the fantasy that [in his words]:

. . . somewhere out there is a true eternal love that you will stumble upon sometime . . . [And the affair] would be a quick one like this . . . one that would not disrupt your normal living too much . . . It would allow you to meet an important need in having your one true love affair, but spare you the lingering effects of oppressive guilt and self-recrimination . . . since you resolve the moral dilemma by doing the right thing. You feel bad about it, but you resolve it all by doing the responsible, moral thing in the end by staying with the family.

Granted, these are the thoughts of but one of more than thirty people from among our readers whose subjective reaction to Waller's novel is clearly on the order of an affectionate, romantic embrace. And given our earlier cautions about treating as privileged the interpretations of literature advanced by individual critics, we are simply not prepared to claim that Mr. A speaks for others on his factor, let alone those whose experience of this book is represented by the other three factors. Yet clearly his ruminations make sense in light of both our own understandings as well as that of other research on the subject (Kinsale, 1992). Certainly commentary such as Mr. A's illuminates the deep seated emotional appeal that BOMC has for individual readers.

While Factor A more than likely provides the key to understanding BOMC's appeal, one cannot ignore responses shared by all of our readers. In this context, it is of interest to note two items which earned consensus rankings -- those not ranked significantly different -- across the four factors.

A	B	C	D	
+2	+4	+3	+2	(31) In all honesty, the book's brevity has to be ranked high among its virtues. Waller took few long detours, stuck pretty close to basics, and was not overly anxious to impress with stylized prose. It was a quick read, and that I liked. [0.98, 1.70, 1.00, 0.87]
-3	-3	-2	-4	(30) The writer's technique and style -- the movement back and forth in time, for example -- made it hard to get into the story. [-1.14, -1.27, 0.89, -1.93]

That there is agreement of this nature and magnitude embedded among viewpoints that in other respects show scant signs of consensus

may point to a piece of the puzzle in explaining the book's vast commercial success. Notwithstanding sharp differences in appraisals of the book's literary merit, readers appear to share a "hedonic calculus" in connection with the time and energy required to complete the book. Viewing the reader-text relationship as analogous to an interpersonal one, BOMC is an undemanding other, asking little of readers and, except for those with a Factor C sensibility, granting a measure of subjective pleasure that is, on balance, a windfall given the minimal investment involved. There may be more involved, to be sure, on the pleasure and play side than such cost-benefit considerations acknowledge, but an obvious implication, mundane though it may be, is that BOMC's status as a quick, non-taxing read has contributed in no small way to its stature as a record bestseller.

Finally, and by way of conclusion, it is possible to view these findings in light of the intensely conversational nature of the BOMC phenomenon. This, after all, is what led *Publisher's Weekly* to proclaim Waller's romance as the "all-time word-of-mouth bestseller." Quite clearly, those who have read this story -- whether with the pure delight of Factor A or the indignant disgust of Factor C -- have enjoyed talking about the experience. Accordingly, we can envision countless conversations devoted to both the story-in-the novel and the story-of-the novel as constituting one vast communications "concourse," as Stephenson (1980a) has put it. The principal vantage points in that concourse -- and the leading voices in those conversations -- are arguably none other than the perspectives expressed in the four factors summarized above. In our view, to note the subjective diversity that defines this four-fold set of "readings" is to begin to appreciate how and why it is that conversations devoted to the BOMC phenomenon might be so utterly engaging and so playfully enjoyable to all concerned. And in this we might discern the seed of an insight into the conversational dynamics out of which curiosity and interest in Waller's love story have remained so robust over the long run of its success.

Thus a Factor A reader can be called upon to do battle with those on Factor B, who (as one person on A put it) "just don't get it." Factor C readers can find validation for their scathing indictments of the book in the numerous caustic reviews by literary critics. Meanwhile C's part in the conversation, only rendered more indignant by the unparalleled commercial success of the volume, enlivens while making more audible to on-lookers the depths of passion at issue in the act of reading a simple romance. Rounding out the range of conversational standpoints are those readers, as on Factor D, who regarded the novel

not as a love story but rather as a tale of Francesca's choice. Having ourselves participated in any number of conversations comprised of persons whose viewpoints run the gamut from Factor A to D, we can personally vouch for the engaging -- often animated, virtually always captivating -- nature of the experience. What is perhaps most compelling about such conversations, animated though they may be, is their fundamentally *playful* character. The ludenic element in human communication is, of course, what lies at the crux of Stephenson's (1967) account of conversational pleasure emanating from topics bandied about in the mass media. In *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*, Professor Stephenson draws attention to the self-enhancing effects of subjective communicability and its expression on topics such as the popular arts. As a substantive matter, as Stephenson might say, none of the viewpoints represented by our factors is either provable or falsifiable. Hence conversations over their "validity" are not, at their core, really about validity in some impersonal, objective sense at all. Rather, they are about subjective play and the affirmation that accrues to the self from the sharing in social settings of subjective communicability when "standards of proof" are impertinent and communication-pleasure is the order of the day.

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