

# Oprah's Book Club: a case of literary enlightenment or plebeian propaganda?

Stick to the sob stories Oprah—you're no literary connoisseur



ELIZABETH  
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point

Back in 1996, Oprah inadvertently started the must-have list for American bookshelves. Since then, she's chosen a range of books that appeal to a wide audience and confront serious issues every year.

But at the risk of offending legions of minivan-driving, Croc sandal-wearing women, I have an issue with Oprah's Book Club. Don't get me wrong, the woman has made some positive contributions to society: she publicly renounced skinny jeans as universally unflattering, she taught America how to shop for bras, and she revealed Tom Cruise as a raging lunatic. But I want Oprah to stick to the tear-jerking sob stories and stay away from literature.

In typical Oprah nature, her books are often sentimental—because let's face it, nothing locks an Oprah audience like melodrama. Titles include all-American classics as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*, as well as her favourite novel, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. High school English class, anyone? She also includes the Bible in her list of favourites—how original.

It's a sad reflection on society to think that people read because Oprah tells them to. I think it's great that people are reading, but knowing that in this case they're doing so because they've been handed a prepackaged ticket to critical thinking makes me seriously question their priorities. Watch TV, read books, follow steps to enlightened life.

The daytime TV tycoon has become what Roger Ebert is to movies and what Simon Cowell is to authors, offering guaranteed fame and fortune to

the chosen few writers who receive her blessing.

I can't help but feel that a book is cheapened and dumbed down by the Oprah stamp, and I would personally be embarrassed to buy a book with one. Not only does it ruin the cover, but I'd worry that anyone who saw me with it would assume I'm the type of person who would listen to Dr Phil too. Oprah's name is not only a seal of approval but a brand in itself.

The publicity is a problem because the act of making the cut for Oprah's Book Club replaces the content of the book as a mark of value. The scheme succeeds by selling Oprah's wisdom, and not the books themselves. Publishers scramble to make the list in order to sell copies; meanwhile, readers no longer have to use their own judgment. The Oprah enterprise markets a product and suddenly a novel skyrockets to the top of the bestseller lists.

The Oprah empire is a consumerist machine. People are already counting down to her Christmas special—which, let's face it, isn't the act of extreme generosity that it's made out to be, but rather an advertiser's dream. In many ways, Oprah's Book Club is an attempt to generate revenue via the inevitable publishing partnerships as it is to remind America what people did before TiVo.

As a positive, people are reading literature—and hopefully thinking critically and appreciating it as well. In a culture crazed with instant gratification and with attention spans conditioned to 22-minute sitcoms, it takes effort and ambition to sit down with a book. Hell, I'm an English major and sometimes it's still as appealing as pulling teeth.

We're constantly barraged by media that tells us what to think, how to act and how to look. At the university level you'd think we'd be more sensitive to forming our own opinions. Just because Oprah can teach someone how to buy a bra doesn't mean she should get control of the literary world.

On that note, I'm off to finish Derrida before *Prison Break* starts. After all, it's all about priorities.



Don't hate tha playa, Elizabeth: hate tha book publishin' game



VICTOR  
VARGAS

counterpoint

For over a decade, Oprah has managed to accomplish what all the "Read-a-thons" and "Reading is Good" posters couldn't do: she got people reading again. Sure, many of them are reading because she told them too, but at least they're doing it. So congrats to Oprah on a job well done.

Oprah's readership is far from mindless, nor are they lacking in critical-thinking skills. People have gone on her show and said, "I hated this book," or, "I think this book means such-and-such."

And—gasp—Oprah encourages her readership to voice their opinions and discuss these books. She even dedicates an entire show to having members of the audience voice their opinions, as well as providing an Internet bulletin board for people to post their thoughts.

Everyone has their own taste, and Oprah's happens to be the tear-jerking kind—not that there's anything wrong with that. In fact, there are tons of clubs out there that cater to a specific demographic. Some people really like sci-fi, others like weepy romance novels and some people will only eat strawberry ice cream.

What's more, these tear-jerkers happen to be written by some of the greatest novelists of all time. You've got your Leo Tolstoy, you've got your William Faulkner, you've got your Toni Morrison, you've got your Maeve Binchy, you've got your Rohinton Mistry—and John Steinbeck is no slouch either.

Perhaps she's become the Roger Ebert of

books, and while her endorsements mean guaranteed fame and fortune for the chosen authors, she also gives readers direction in a market that has little of it.

In the world of books, there are few well-known reviewers out there, and previous attempts to make a helpful review system have been in vain. For example, it wasn't too long ago when the credibility of Amazon's review system was destroyed by certain greedy authors who gave themselves gushing reviews—and who can blame them?

Tons of other people in the world have attempted the same thing, from the staff picks at your video store to the Gateway's own movie, book and CD reviews—Oprah just happens to be the biggest and most successful of these talking heads. Best of all, she's not afraid to call greedy authors on their BS.

Remember a certain author a while ago that tried to pass his book off as a true story? When it came to light that some details were fabricated, Oprah tore him a new one.

Consumerist culture is a problem, but Oprah is hardly the cause. We have years of schooling and commercials to blame for that. If anything, she actually helps fight against it, because at least she tells people about the quality goods out there in a sea filled with crap.

Oprah isn't rich and successful because she uses some super mind-control rays, she's popular because she gives people good advice. Behind all the glitz and glamour, there are important messages like, do good things for others, there's still hope in the world, and you can change yourself for the better. If Oprah wasn't such a positive influence, her viewership—and readership—would plummet.

And keep in mind that we humans always free will, so if you ever feel that Oprah is steering people wrong, then you can always just flick the switch.



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Thursday, 12 October, 2006 at 6pm  
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#### Tentative agenda:

- Introductory remarks •
- Approval of 2005-2006 GSJS Audit (*Ellis, Govenlock LLP*) •
- Announcements •
- Refreshments •

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