

RICHARD WRIGHT, TONI MORRISON, AND UNITED STATES BOOK CLUBS

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the influence of commercial book clubs in the United States. It will examine the country's oldest commercial book club, the Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC), Oprah's Book Club (OBC), which bears the name of its founder, television personality Oprah Winfrey, and their roles in the careers of two African-American authors, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison.

The BOMC is a privately-owned company and like all such businesses it is meant to earn a financial profit. It was started in 1926 by an advertising executive, Harry Scherman, who envisioned a company that would distribute newly published books, chosen by a panel of literary experts, through the mail. By calling his new enterprise a "club," Scherman wanted to give its "members," as they are known in BOMC terminology, the impression that they were part of a select group of book lovers, rather than mere customers. His strategy worked. The BOMC was an immediate success, claiming more than 60,000 subscribers in its first year. The operating principles were straightforward: members agreed to buy the monthly selection at full price with an option to exchange the book upon inspection for an "alternate" choice. Soon after, readers were asked to buy only four books per year and allowed to substitute the alternate selection before shipping. The books designated as monthly selections and alternate choices were reviewed in the *BOMC News*, a publication edited by Scherman and mailed to subscribers (Lee 30-43). Today, the BOMC operates in much the same way and remains the leader in what has become a crowded field of mail-order book clubs.

When Winfrey started her book club in September 1996, her stated intention was to help "get this country reading again" (Johnson 47). She has become famous as the host of what is known in the U.S. as a television "talk show," which features interviews with celebrities, discussions of social issues, and her book club. Begun in 1986, the "Oprah Winfrey Show" is broadcast for one hour each weekday afternoon. It reaches an audience in excess of 20 million people and has been the number one rated talk show for fifteen consecutive seasons. Winfrey is also an actress, television producer, and magazine publisher. Last year, she was voted the second most admired woman in the United States (with Hillary Rodham Clinton being the first) and a recent *Life* maga-

zine cover story called her the “most powerful woman in America.” Given that she has amassed a fortune from getting people to watch her television program, Winfrey’s sponsorship of a book club might appear to be ironic. Yet she is an avid reader and a self-professed lover of books.

Oprah’s Book Club differs greatly from the BOMC in its structure and operating methods. It is fashioned after a book discussion group of the kind that has become popular in the U.S. in the last decade. In this model, a group of people chooses a particular book and then gathers at a later date to discuss what they read. The difference between these informal groups and the OBC is that the latter’s “meetings” are broadcast on her television show and facilitated on-line. Oprah’s Book Club functions this way: Winfrey announces her book choice, gives her audience time to read it, and then selects several club “members” who discuss the book with the author on the show. Her next book selection is usually announced at the end of that televised discussion. The club’s website features a plot synopsis of the current selection, reviews written by club members, lists of questions to guide reading group discussions, an archive, and excerpts from previously televised reading groups with the authors participating. Winfrey’s book choices are based on her own tastes and interests; she does not solicit new works from publishers, nor does she have a financial interest in the books she chooses. Worth over half a billion dollars, she is already the world’s wealthiest entertainer.

There can be little argument that she has also emerged as one of the most influential arbiters of literary taste in the United States. The announcement of her book selection has become one of the most anticipated events in the publishing world. Books selected by OBC are guaranteed more than a million sales as a result. Nonetheless, in early 2002, she announced that she was putting the club on hiatus because she felt its purpose had been fulfilled and a number of other similar clubs could continue its mission. A year later, the club resumed operation owing to requests from fans and Winfrey’s persistent desire to promote her favorite books. This time, however, her selections would be limited to older, “classic” titles. Her first choice for the revived club was South African Alan Paton’s 1948 novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

In her show business endeavors, Winfrey has demonstrated a desire to not only entertain, but also educate her audience. Her choices for her book club reflect her aesthetic *and* social interests, particularly her support of multicultural education. Winfrey, who is African-American, has made a point of introducing her viewers to writers of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. She has been especially drawn to the work of African-American Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison, choosing four of her novels for her club, the largest number by any single author. Winfrey has called Morrison “the greatest living American writer” (Johnson 56). Morrison has referred to Winfrey’s book club as “a revolution” (Johnson 47).

The multicultural selections of Oprah’s Book Club have a precedent. The Book-of-the-Month Club also included literature by culturally diverse writers among its early selections. Most of its choices in its first fifteen years were written by white American men and women about white American men and women. However, one member of the Club’s five person Committee of Selection responsible for choosing the book-of-the-month, was especially interested in diversifying its choices. That per-

son was Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a bestselling novelist and prolific author of non-fiction, who was involved in a number of social causes. Her 1921 novel *The Brimming Cup* was the first bestseller to directly address the issue of racial discrimination against African-Americans. In 1951, Eleanor Roosevelt called her one of the ten most influential women in the United States. Fisher, who served on the BOMC Selection Committee from its inception until 1951, believed that white, middle-class Americans—the large majority of the Club’s membership—would do well to read multicultural literature, just as Oprah Winfrey now advocates.

One of the authors Fisher championed early in his career was Richard Wright. His first novel, *Native Son*, was selected as a book-of-the-month upon her strong recommendation in 1940. At that time, the 32 year-old African-American Wright was struggling financially and had published just one book, a collection of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom’s Children* in 1938. *Native Son* would make him one of the best-known writers in the United States. Five years later, his autobiography, *Black Boy*, was also chosen as a book-of-the-month, with Fisher again arguing convincingly for its selection. Wright published four more novels and several volumes of non-fiction before his death in 1961 and is, by any standard, now considered a major American author. What I will address in the remainder of my paper is the role of the BOMC and OBC in Wright’s and Morrison’s careers respectively. As I aim to show, the two book clubs were responsible for introducing large numbers of new readers to their books. The practices of these clubs have been the subject of some controversy, however, as I will also discuss.

The first BOMC Committee of Selection was composed of five respected literary figures who were offered substantial salaries to read a selection of new books and meet once a month in New York to make their choices. Fisher was regarded as one of the “most influential” members of the committee and its only woman. For her, the BOMC represented more than a promising financial venture or vehicle for self-promotion. It was through the lens of public service that Fisher saw her role on the Selection Committee. With a family background in education and the arts, she was raised to believe that books were vital to the development of healthy individuals and societies. In the BOMC, she saw the possibility of distributing books as efficiently as other goods, and moreover, distributing a product with the potential to counteract the racial and ethnic bigotry she saw around her in the United States.

In Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Fisher saw a book with the potential to do just that in a compelling fashion. The novel remains one of the most powerful indictments of racism against African-Americans. The importance of the novel’s bestseller status to Wright cannot be overestimated. It gave him confidence and the money necessary to support himself early in his career. What is not often discussed about the crucial position of this book in Wright’s career is the key role the BOMC played in its success. *Native Son*¹ was an unlikely candidate for selection by the club, which had not yet

¹ Arnold Rampersad, editor of *Native Son* in the Library of America series, provides a comprehensive analysis of the BOMC’s involvement with Wright in his introduction to the volume. Wright scholars are indebted to Rampersad for his groundbreaking research and editing. See also Clare Joly’s essay “Richard Wright and the Book-of-the-Month Club,” *Richard Wright Newsletter* 6 (Spring/Summer 1998): 8-11. For a discussion of the BOMC and *Black Boy*, see Janice Thaddeus’s essay “The Metamorphosis of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*,” *American Literature* 57 (May 1985): 199-214.

chosen a novel by an African American writer. Perhaps the most unlikely Wright supporter was Fisher, whose literary taste was conservative when it came to “rough” language or the graphic depiction of violence. In *Native Son*, the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is an impoverished, alienated young African-American man living in Chicago’s racially segregated South Side. Early in the novel, he accidentally kills a white woman and then decapitates her corpse in order to dispose of it in a furnace. He later rapes and murders his own girlfriend. Following a citywide manhunt, Bigger is captured and the novel ends with him in a jail cell awaiting execution.

Despite *Native Son*’s violence, Fisher was Wright’s strongest ally at the BOMC, in large part because of her spirited opposition to racial prejudice. Due mainly to her persuasion of her fellow Selection Committee members, *Native Son* was chosen as the book-of-the-month for March 1940. Although Fisher would later write that the Committee had doubted whether *Native Son* would be “at all acceptable” to the American public since there had been “very little crack in the solid crust of prejudice against the Negro” (Starr 89), the book was met with positive reviews and record-breaking sales. The Book-of-the-Month Club played an important part in the novel’s reception. Most obvious was the large number of sales attributable to its designation as a monthly choice. BOMC membership reached 500,000 that year, nearly half of whom regularly bought the book-of-the-month. *Native Son*, published with an introduction by Fisher, sold 200,000 copies in under three weeks and was number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list for several weeks.

Ironically, the selection of *Native Son* as a book-of-the-month served Wright best with the very target of his social criticism: the white middle-class readers who formed the core membership of the BOMC. A quotation from one review of the book attests to the BOMC’s intermediary role: “. . . it is not strange that the publishers, a little alarmed at what they had caught in their net, should have invited Dorothy Canfield to write an introduction preparing the reader for the impact of the novel. . . . What is surprising is that the BOMC dares to send this powerful book to its . . . members” (Reilly 41). Nor did that observation escape Fisher, who wryly noted that potential readers would perceive her introduction as being from “a respectable old lady” (Starr 90). She felt the Committee had taken an attitude of “mild heroism” in choosing the book at the risk of losing subscribers (Starr 90). Considering the volatile subject of the novel, Fisher’s introduction was especially important. She once said that it was the job of the BOMC to hasten the public recognition of a writer who has something to offer and such was true in the case of Richard Wright and *Native Son* (Starr 8-9).

When Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, it marked the first time that an African-American writer had been so honored. While she has published in multiple genres, it is upon her eight novels that her reputation rests. The first, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970; the most recent, *Love*, appeared in October 2003. In the United States, Morrison’s work is not only favored by critics, but also widely read. This is no small achievement for an author whose formally complex fiction addresses difficult issues of race, gender, and class.

What has saved Morrison from joining the ample ranks of critically acclaimed authors of serious fiction with small readerships? In 1998, she offered a partial an-

swer, "I always thought that the best art is the only thing that would attract the largest number of people. . . . The more complex it is, the more resonant it is. That's when the audience is wider, not when you dumb it down!" (*Boston Globe*, 3/10/98, D1,D6) Another reason for her popular success is Oprah Winfrey, who has selected the following Morrison novels for her book club: *Song of Solomon*, which was selected in October 1996; *Paradise*, selected upon publication in January 1998; *The Bluest Eye*, selected in April 2000; and *Sula* selected in April 2002. *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* were Morrison's first three novels, published in 1970, 1973, and 1977 respectively. Their selections by Winfrey brought them renewed attention and sales twenty to thirty years later. In *Paradise*, Winfrey endorsed what is arguably Morrison's most ambitious and difficult novel. The plot centers on the planned murder of four women by the most prominent citizens of a small Oklahoma town in the 1970s. Reviewers were divided on the issue of whether the novel was up to the same high level as her previous work. The author's lyrical prose was praised, but several critics judged that the plot was overly-complicated and would have benefitted from tighter editing. The imprimatur of OBC undoubtedly accounted for considerable sales of *Paradise* to readers who otherwise would not have purchased such a daunting novel. Finally, Morrison's appearances on Oprah's television show have literally brought her image into the homes of millions of Americans.

Morrison's novel *Love* examines the life of a former owner of an Atlantic seaside resort hotel which catered exclusively to African-Americans in the 1940s and 50s. Among the shortest of Morrison's novels, it is typically complex and populated by a large cast of characters. The large majority of U.S. reviews were laudatory. *Love* was named a BOMC main selection upon publication. Presumably, Winfrey will not select it, given her book club's new focus on established literary classics.

Thus far, I have presented a favorable view of the BOMC and OBC. Before concluding, I want to point out some controversial issues relating to these book clubs as well. In Wright's case, the BOMC not only sold and distributed *Native Son*, but also insisted on shaping its content. Passages from the novel, mainly pertaining to the protagonist Bigger Thomas's sexuality, were cut by the author at the club's request. Sadly, it seems that it was at the time acceptable for an African-American to be portrayed as brutally violent, but not a sexual human being. The Library of America edition of *Native Son*, published in 1991, has restored these deleted passages to reflect Wright's original authorial intention.

Controversy surrounding OBC has focused on the manner in which it markets its selections. Each of Winfrey's choices are published with her club's logo on the cover. Author Jonathan Franzen, whose novel *The Corrections* was selected by Winfrey in September 2001, objected to this practice, saying, "It's an implied endorsement, both for me and for her. The reason I got into this business is because I'm an independent writer, and I [don't] want that corporate logo on my book" (Anft). As I have noted, authors of OBC selections are also expected to appear on her show. Franzen, who was to have been the forty-second novelist to do so, objected to this practice, too, on the grounds that television has had a detrimental effect on American culture. A compromise was reached when his publisher printed a limited number of books without the

OBC logo and Winfrey excused him from the television appearance while retaining the novel as an official selection (Anft).

In the nearly eighty years since their inception, commercial book clubs have proliferated and become more specialized. A recent internet search turned up no fewer than 127 clubs in 20 categories (www.book-clubs.com). In the last decade, electronic media and on-line reading groups have transformed the very concept of the through-the-mail book club established by the BOMC. The BOMC, OBC, and other book clubs like them are positioned at the intersection of American culture and commerce. They are at once commercial enterprises and cultural institutions which can exert significant influence on authors and the reading public. Their roles in the careers of Richard Wright and Toni Morrison underscore a number of literary issues. These include the function of a cultural intermediary in presenting the work of a controversial author, the negotiation of authorial intention and corporate marketing, and the relationship between electronic media, such as television and the internet, and traditional printed books. The importance of these book clubs in the marketplace of American dollars and ideas is undeniable.

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