LITERATURE AS LIFE EXPLORATION: THREE AMERICAN GUYS READING FOR THEIR LIVES

by
ALEXANDER BENTON JOHNS

(Under the Direction of Mark Faust)

ABSTRACT

As two-year and state colleges increasingly find themselves taking on the role of providing access to post-secondary education to a larger number of students, especially in the southeastern United States, they often face the pressure to “dehumanize” the curriculum and assessment criteria of literature courses, if not abandon them altogether. Emphasis is increasingly placed on “preparing students for the jobs of the twenty-first century,” and although the nature of those jobs has not been made at all clear, courses of study that do not seem compatible with that nature through testable, easily measured, and comparable sets of skills are passing out of the core curriculum of these institutions.

Using the Deweyan concept of art as experience, his related theory of the dimensions of the aesthetic, reader-response theory, a neo-Vygotskyian conceptual frame, and more recent texts from the field of activity theory to examine the role of background in reading practices, I employ a case-study interview approach to answer the following questions:

1. How do the participants describe the role that reading plays in their lives?

2. What role does their background play or how his their background evident in their reading experiences and practices?
This interview-based case study of three college-aged readers, seeks to highlight, within a population of students deemed crucial to the mission of two-year and state colleges, an approach to reading that holds tremendous potential not only for literacy education but also for inculcating a more fertile and receptive mind among students. Among its several aims, this study challenges many of the notions concerning the learning process at the post-secondary level by examining exceptional students for whom the practice of artistic reading is integral to their lives and central to their educational success in all fields.

INDEX WORDS: College Reading, Aesthetic Reading, Soldiers, Literature, Art and Experience
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by

ALEXANDER BENTON JOHNS

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ALEXANDER BENTON JOHNS

Major Professor: Mark Faust
Committee: Peter Smagorinsky
           James Marshall

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of the Project</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Participants</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline of the Dissertation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to the Field and Significance to Society</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art as Experience and Artistic Experience</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Organic Aesthetic</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cultured Aesthetic</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sociohistorical in the Aesthetic</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic Being</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing Experience</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an Aesthetic Being: Reading and Community</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  METHODS</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There's a World Out There”: Beginning a Reading Life</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeper of the Key</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Growing Reading Life</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Might as Well Be a Soldier</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Comrade in Arms</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destruction and Narrative Construction</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Reading”</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 MAC: METHOD AND THEORY</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 FINDINGS</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons to Read</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and Teaching</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Expanded, Though by no Means Simple, Concept of Aesthetic Reading</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where Are They Now?</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and Hope and Some Thoughts with Regard to Soldiering</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next Steps</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The interesting question for me is not “What is reading?” but, rather, “What is the experience of living a life that includes the practice of reading?”

Dennis Sumara (1996, p. 1)

This dissertation has arisen primarily from my interest in a particular kind of student. I have taught English in a state college for ten years, and my very heavy teaching load, which includes at least two composition classes and two literature surveys each semester, in addition to other classes, puts me in contact with over one hundred students each semester. The majority of the students I teach come from semirural or rural communities in which political conservatism and evangelical Christianity are the norm. For at least the past decade in this part of the country, Christianity as a cultural identity seems for many to have coexisted with a hawkish stance on foreign policy and an unquestioning support for the military, and the Southeast provides more soldiers to our armed forces than does any other region of the country. For many of the males in this area, being a man is more often than not associated with certain handed down values and activities: self-reliance, loyalty, patriotism (nationalism), hunting and fishing, football, and, for many, military service. What I rarely find demonstrated or discussed as important aspects of manhood are being inquisitive, thinking critically, becoming highly educated or articulate, or, unless one is studying the Bible, reading for personal edification.

Since 2003, I have had among my students each semester at least a few veterans who have recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan, and my experiences with them have served
consistently to challenge my teaching and remind me why I pursued a career in teaching literature in the first place. The soldiers’ investment in literature and how they have talked and written about what they read have not only shattered stereotypes I might have carried concerning individuals who have just come out of serving years in the military but also made them some of the most outstanding and interesting students I have had the pleasure of working with. Over the years, my interest in the reading lives of soldiers from this background has continued to grow, and this dissertation represents a unique opportunity to focus deeply on a set of soldiers from small-town, evangelical Christian backgrounds as practicing readers. At first glance, these young men might seem to embody a “proper” male in the communities from where they come. However, they are, in fact, entirely uncommon and live lives of resistance to the most prominent values and ideals present in their background. As this dissertation will illustrate, these young men have a profound investment in their reading lives, and the role that the practice of reading seems to play in their lives challenges some of the common approaches to teaching literature in two-year and state colleges.

In order to highlight how these students have both enriched and challenged the standard approaches to the conception and pedagogy of reading in the institution where I work, I have chosen to focus on three cases, individual soldier-students whose lives as readers distinguish them from the majority of students I have encountered in my teaching career. Two of the participants were familiar to me prior to the study, as they were former students. One, Mac, came to me by recommendation of someone who is familiar with my research interests.

In this chapter, I present my rationale for conducting this study. First, I address a current trend toward homogenized approaches to reading in two-year and state colleges, approaches that often move away from “close reading” to an even more superficial interaction with the text. I
then explain why the participants in this study are worth learning about as people with rich reading lives. I provide a broad overview of the project and the scope of analysis, from which the findings reported here were selected to present the primary argument in establishing the context of the study.

**Context of the Project**

**The Quality of Reading Emphasized in Core English Classes**

Prior to my coursework in Language and Literacy, I would have presumed that any substantive way to account for how and why soldiers make meaning through reading was out of reach, because, like many, I conceived of the processes associated with reading as occurring entirely within the mind, accessible only to highly trained clinicians. This presupposition is connected with the ascendance of transmissive pedagogies in college English classes, built around a hard distinction between language and cognition as well as “dualistic conceptions of readers and texts that falsely separate the two” (Faust, 2000, p. 104). Either directly or through entrenched institutional expectations for assessment or educational outcomes, many two-year and state college English teachers continue to encourage students to engage a text merely in order to complete a pre-established project. Students in second-year literature surveys, for example, are frequently expected to mine literary texts for specific kinds of information, seeking “evidence” of how the work refers to specific aspects of its culture or of the author’s intentions, or performing an analysis of how certain literary devices are being employed to support the theme of a story or poem. This reading through a filter, so to speak, is described by a variety of theorists, often employing a binary formulation that tends to oversimplify a very complex set of processes. Nonetheless, distinguishing the ways that reading is understood, talked about, and modeled in college classrooms is important.
Attridge (2004) describes an *instrumental* approach to reading as the “treating of a text (or other cultural artifact) as a means to a predetermined end: coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce, that usefulness” (p. 7). Sumara (1996) summarizes some of the theoretical distinctions between positionalities toward reading as being more or less *literary* or *non literary*, drawing on, among others, Langer’s (1942) identification of *formulative* vs. *communicative* reading as observed in school settings:

The formulative function of words is marginalized in schools where discourse is generally instrumental. . . . The reading experience dominated by the formulative power of words cannot be predicted and, therefore, betrays the largely technocratic ranking and sorting function of schools. . . . It is only in this formulative space, which is less determined than the communicative space, that the imagination is invoked and the aesthetic experience is realized. The formulative, then, as related to the experience of the virtual, blurs the boundaries between the textual images presented by the author and the interpretations of these images made by the reader. (pp. 23-24)

Bruner (1986) distinguishes between *paradigmatic* and *narrative* modes of thought, both of which extend into one’s approach to reading. The first is procedural in nature, focused on verifiability and empiricism. This mode of thought is predictive in nature and generally seeks to eliminate ambiguity. The narrative mode is one of openness to newness and possibility, conditions under which certainty is not a primary concern. Although these formulations of reading positionality are somewhat problematic in their binary simplicity, they do raise an awareness of the difference between kinds of reading. Not all approaches to reading apply equally to every reading scenario or every setting.
Although a more instrumental orientation is certainly appropriate in many contexts and holds value for fostering analytical skills, this orientation seems to have become the exclusive mode of reading for a majority of students at the post-secondary level. Worthen (1997) compared literacy instruction in 250 community colleges and found that, although “type of text structure” and “purpose of text use” (p. 6) differed between “occupational” and “liberal arts” community colleges, “literacy in the community colleges [was] taken to be a matter of writing expository texts” (p. 5) and that literacy practices were always contexts for context-specific tasks (p. 7). Worthen found that in the vast majority of English literature classes, instructors expected students to follow a prescribed interpretive protocol and that they tested to see whether students could demonstrate that they had received and learned the correct way to apply language. McCord (1999) regrets that, as of the end of the millennium, most post-secondary language skills and rhetoric texts continued to be based on a deliberate distinction between language and speaking that results from a perceived demarcation of the social from the individual and “what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental” (Saussure, 1966, p. 14).

Although there is a need for more current comprehensive research on how reading is being conceptualized in community and state college curricula, there is little reason to believe that literacy is understood or presented with any more variety than these studies indicate. On the contrary, the increasing sense of urgency and pressure on colleges to bring students, widely perceived as increasingly unprepared for the workforce, quickly up to speed seems to have had a homogenizing effect on the way literature is presented to them. Recent studies indicate that many students are graduating from high school unprepared for college-level work. A national 2008 study found that 29% of students enrolled at four-year public institutions required remediation (Strong American Schools, 2008). This number is even higher in the Southeastern
US and in community colleges, where nearly half of enrollees enter some form of “pre-college” developmental reading or English course (Aud et al., 2011). A Zogby International poll of 502 college instructors found that 55% of college instructors surveyed reported that the 2006-2007 entering freshmen class was not ready for college-level studies. The figure is even higher for two-year colleges, where 75% of faculty members consider incoming students to be unprepared. Moreover, 45% of the college faculty reported that over the past four years, student preparedness has worsened (Zogby International, 2007).

Outpaced only by for-profit colleges, the two-year college is the fastest growing higher education sector in the US, and pressure on community and state colleges to implement more homogenous core standards and approaches in English classes is increasing (Deming, Golden, & Katz, 2012). Although the reasons for this pressure vary from overtly financial initiative to lower the cost of course delivery and oversight through more automated and easily monitored systems of assessment to the developing cultures of surveillance and centralized authority in institutions, an emerging trend seems clear. Beach’s (2011) study of the Common Core State Standards Initiative of 2010 identified the learning paradigms associated with literacy instruction, each of which is framed on a formalist paradigm of literacy instruction evident in the attention to teaching the structure or genre forms for reading narratives as well as teaching argumentative or informational/explanatory writing based on use of structural forms. . . . One possible explanation for the formalist orientation of the CCSS is that they lend themselves more readily to standardized testing and scoring in that the uses of certain forms in students’ literary analysis or writing can be readily identified, for example, whether students can identify the use of plot structure in a story or whether in
writing argumentative essays, they formulate a clear position statement with supporting reasons or counter-arguments. (pp. 4-5)

As community colleges and secondary schools seek to build bridges in literacy instruction, the obsession with centralized oversight and simple metrics for assessing student “performance” and “achievement” seems to creep upward as well, potentially leaving college English teachers like myself limited in what and how we can teach with regard to literature and reading. Already, as Beach notes, homogenization is occurring through required texts and anthologies in community college English departments as well as unified, department-wide measures, many of which even involve multiple-choice questions about the literary works being studied. Currently, in Georgia, initiatives such as Complete College Georgia, funded by a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are requiring aggressive implementation of “efficient” methods, such as Accelerated Learning Program, the goal of which is to move more students through developmental and first-year composition courses by combining classes and streamlining assignments. Already overworked English teachers could be all but forced to resort to more “mechanized” processes simply to handle their grading load. Although full-time English faculty at the institution where I teach have been allowed to choose course texts, adjuncts, who make up a very high percentage of our instructors, must use assigned texts, and this year, even full-time faculty are for the first time being assigned standard texts for first-year English courses.

How many of the authors represented in the Norton Anthology or The Bedford Introduction to Literature wrote with the idea or goal that their stories or poems would become specimens to be analyzed in college classrooms? Do those of us who love literature merely enjoy breaking it down to its component parts, identifying specific literary devices, and arguing for the value of their function relative to a central theme? The approaches of many community
college English teachers, and certainly the policies promoted by many administrators, seem based on the belief that the individual student receives information from the external world and processes it privately, invisibly, either, at best, to synthesize information and provide analysis or, worse, merely to regurgitate it later under testing conditions. Why include literature in the curriculum at all? Indeed, the instructors at the state college that employs me are increasingly removing literature from their first-year English courses, developing instead theme-based courses that might use any topic, from advertising methodology to 1960s counterculture, as the focus. Abandoning literature entirely makes sense if the goal is to help students go through a strictly guided interpretive process. It is conceivable that other forms of writing and even other media would lead to student interpretations and analyses that are easier to assess.

This study is concerned with reading in pursuit of a certain kind of experience, what I am calling “aesthetic” and “artistic” interchangeably. As chapter 3 will clarify, this particular kind of experience has parameters and dimensions that lead one to refer to it as an experience that is distinct from others. This experience involves being open to being challenged or changed and passing through a loss of cognitive equilibrium in some way as one moves toward and anticipates regaining it in a new way. It is, to some extent, open ended, but it culminates in a manner that, although accompanied by struggle, results in a kind of pleasure. An analytical orientation to the text helps students write essays that apply critical thinking skills and sharpen their awareness of significant literary elements and techniques. These skills are certainly important to develop and refine in certain contexts, but as an English professor in a rapidly growing state college, I have become concerned that centralizing this orientation can also limit both the aesthetic and other meaning-making potential of reading, and I am afraid it does little at all to engender a life enriched by reading. This tendency to avoid centralizing the aesthetic in
college reading seems to be symptomatic, at least to some extent, of a broader set of assumptions in our society about the role and purpose for post-secondary education, but it is certainly not a recent phenomenon. In fact, many university systems, including Georgia’s, are eliminating literature courses as a necessary component of the core curriculum, relegating them to merely one option among many for fulfilling a cultural diversity or humanities requirement.

In short, an aesthetic literary experience of the sort that led me to a career focused on written art seems to be vanishing from the core of the college experience, and this loss is all the more pronounced for students in community and state colleges. Any recognition of (a) the intrinsic value of reading for the development of imagination or (b) the relationship between reading and the rest of life outside of academics seems to have been ignored in recent revisions of the core curriculum. Where, if ever, do students encounter reading that isn’t directed toward a specific analytical task, and why should educators be surprised, then, that fewer and fewer people seem to value reading for pleasure or personal edification? Is a core curriculum college English class not an appropriate venue to facilitate aesthetic reading and encourage reading-enriched living?

A Reminder of Reading-Rich Living from an Unlikely Source

As a teacher in a community college, I spent years perpetuating this heavy emphasis on instrumental reading in my classes. Our English department required texts that emphasized thematic textual analysis designed to facilitate modes-based writing, which would ultimately be measured on a timed “final exam essay.” Training in this approach for college instructors is virtually non-existent, so I mostly replicated the materials and goals of my more senior colleagues, assuming that their experience and the college’s stated outcomes indicated the most important reasons for the time I would spend with students each semester. However, my
experiences in 2005 with a group of soldiers who enrolled in one of my sections just days after returning from Iraq led me to reconsider both my role as a literature teacher and the potential for college reading to contribute to a more meaningful life. These three talked and wrote about their reading in terms I had not yet encountered as a teacher, and I became deeply interested in their reading lives.

In 2007, I conducted a pilot study with two of these soldier-students and another from a different class. The interviews I conducted illuminated, among other things, how deeply aesthetic reading had been integrated into the participants’ lives, and they described how, especially during their deployment, they sought out texts of a challenging literary nature. One described asking his family to stop sending him popular books and to send him “art” instead. Another, in his attempt to help me understand the nature of his deployment experience, likened it to a section of For Whom the Bell Tolls and then proceeded to quote an entire paragraph of the novel, word for word. Interestingly, the soldiers didn’t describe themselves as particularly good students in high school, and the one who recited Hemingway had actually dropped out before finishing the tenth grade. By the time they arrived in my class, however, they seemed very excited about our reading, and all three were very good writers by our college’s standards. Reading mattered deeply to them, and each insisted that I read the work of certain authors with whom I was unfamiliar. The soldier-students reminded me how reading can serve to color, consistently renew, redefine, and bring new meaning to life, all reasons I chose to pursue a career in literature and teaching in the first place. In a way, I envied the depth of experience their aesthetic reading seemed to produce for them, and I began to search for ways to engender this kind of reading in my other students. This goal led me to seek a deeper understanding of the
nature of these soldier-students’ reading experiences and why, given their lives and vocation, they made a practice of reading.

I wanted to know how a deeper understanding of their reading lives might inform how the reading of literature is modeled at institutions similar to the one at which I teach. I sought a clearer understanding, therefore, of the cognitive structures that mediate their aesthetic reading and eventually what distinguishes how they are being enculturated to read (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 137) by the prevailing approaches to reading in their college English classes. Based on how they talked about their reading lives, I sought to identify implications for a community college teacher who, given a large number of students and other institutional constraints, hopes to foster aesthetic reading among his or her students.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on a combination of three key epistemological perspectives to examine the reading practices and experiences of college students who have been soldiers:

1. A neo-Vygotskyan, social constructionist paradigm to frame the relationship between the participants’ enculturations and their practices and experiences as readers
2. Compatible Pragmatist theory and recent Continental aesthetic theory
3. Reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978; Iser, 1974; Booth, 1961), specifically as applied by Sumara (1996) in his research on secondary-school students focusing on the reading experience itself as the nucleus and essential starting point for reading research

Crotty (1998) describes social constructionism in the following way:

That social realities are socially constructed is something of a truism. The most ardent positivist would find that hard to contradict. What distinguishes constructionism, setting
it over against the objectivism inherent in the positivist stance, is its understanding that

all meaningful reality, precisely as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. (p. 55)

This epistemology aligns with my working definition of aesthetic experience, based on Dewey’s formulation, and is brought to bear and accounted for in the reading transaction.

**Research Questions**

Using the Deweyan concept of art as experience, his related theory of the dimensions of the aesthetic, reader-response theory, a neo-Vygotskyan conceptual frame, and more recent texts from the field of activity theory to examine the role of background in reading practices, I employ a case-study interview approach to answer the following questions:

1. How do the participants describe the role that reading plays in their lives?
2. What role does their background play or how is their background evident in their reading experiences and practices?

**The Participants**

The three participants presented in this study were recruited primarily because they are all serious readers; reading is central in their lives as practice and serves to continually define and refine their identities. Jack Wade is a gregarious and very intelligent young man, who seems to have a knack for guiding the direction of social situations. As a student in my classes, he stood out for both his unique insights into the literature we were exploring and his humorous wit. During our classes, Jack could actually make me laugh out loud with a perfectly timed or angular comment, and he seemed to enjoy the challenge of wielding this skill to the greatest effect. Both his choices as a young adult and his own comments describe a man who seems genuinely unconcerned with seeing his life conform to any socially acceptable narrative. Russell Hartwell comes across as a more serious man. He was the first of the participants I got to know and was a
participant in my pilot study in 2007. He was a marine who had deployed to both Afghanistan and Iraq before he enrolled in my class. His consistent critical thinking and rhizomatic reading practices serve him well in his current job as an intelligence analyst and have contributed to what I can only describe as amazing changes in his identity even since we first began interacting, which this study will examine more closely. Mac, who wasn’t a student of mine, displays an intriguing combination of self deprecation and self confidence. He chuckles at his misfortunes while drawing from a vast knowledge and a personal history inseparable from the sharp vanguard of that of our nation. Whether as the lone worldly minded student in his rural high school and community or the one member of his special operations unit who opposed the war even before he deployed, Mac is a man for whom reading is and has been a connection to another way, another voice, the “world out there.”

**Outline of the Dissertation**

In chapters 4, 6, and 8, I present the participants as individual cases, providing their cultural background, their history as readers, details about their reading lives and how they conceptualize the reading transaction, and the how their reading lives intersect with their military and deployment experiences. Fortunately, each soldier-student was eager to participate and more than willing to talk at length about these issues, so I decided to let each tell his own story here and then link aspects of each narrative to the key theories and methods driving my study. The goal of this approach was to gain an emic perspective on the participants’ reading lives and ultimately to bring this understanding to bear on the problem of college reading. Therefore, chapters 4-9 consist of these three narratives, each of which is followed by a short chapter linking key themes of the narrative to the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study.
In chapter 10, I examine the interviews through a theoretical lens, referring back to the theory addressed in chapter 2, and I consider the findings in light of how reading is currently taught in the institution where I teach. Chapter 11 considers some of the key implications of this study with regard to the teaching of literature in a two-year or community college setting.

**Contribution to the Field and Significance to Society**

As two-year and state colleges increasingly find themselves taking on the role of providing access to post-secondary education to a larger number of students, especially in the southeastern United States, they often face the pressure to “dehumanize” the curriculum and assessment criteria of literature courses, if not abandon them altogether. Emphasis is increasingly placed on “preparing students for the jobs of the twenty-first century,” and although the nature of those jobs has not been made at all clear, courses of study that do not seem compatible with that nature through testable, easily measured, and comparable sets of skills are passing out of the core curriculum of these institutions.

This study seeks to highlight, within a population of students deemed crucial to the mission of these colleges, an approach to reading that holds tremendous potential not only for literacy education but also for inculcating a more fertile and receptive mind among students. Among its several aims, this study challenges many of the notions concerning the learning process at the post-secondary level by examining exceptional students for whom the practice of artistic reading is integral to their lives and central to their educational success in all fields.

Additionally, as state colleges seek to accommodate returning veterans through programs such as Soldiers to Scholars, understanding this population not essentially as a “special needs” group but as one with a distinct set of aptitudes and strengths is crucial, and establishing a relationship with them that offers the opportunity to construct the environment of education,
rather than merely to fit into it, is an important part of helping them return to meaningful lives as civilians and citizens.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

People, people,
There’s truth here plain to see.
There’s no truth in you,
there’s no truth in me.
The truth is in between.

Bill Callahan, “Truth Serum”

In this review, I examine the research literature that informed and inspired an interview case study exploring the reading practices and experiences of veterans who enrolled in college and the role that cultural background plays in their reading. I begin by considering the nature of artistic experience, especially as it is connected to reading done by choice, “for pleasure,” if you will, drawing heavily on the work of John Dewey and Hans-Georg Gadamer as a basis, then linking their theories of art as dynamic and culture forming to more recent theories of aesthetics and reader response. I then draw upon Vygotsky’s concepts of cultural mediation and internalization, Gee’s notions of primary and secondary discourses, and other key texts from the field of sociocultural theory as a basis for considering the relationship between cultural background and specific practices. Together, these two fields of inquiry provide the primary conceptual framework from which I both constructed and conducted this interview study as well as how the interview data were reduced and interpreted.
Art as Experience and Artistic Experience

I experience art. I have been genuinely moved by Bach, Coltrane, Yeats, Monet, and Faulkner. I speak of them by last name as if they are some eternal entity. After all, many have experienced their work, and they have been recognized by those within the industries and institutions that have carried their work to me, even though I have varying degrees of cultural distance from them. But I also love Arvo Part, Godspeed! You, Black Emperor, David Berman, Paul Bowles, Subtle, and Andre Tarkovsky. These composers, musicians, writers, and filmmakers are certainly more obscure but have had no less of an impact on my life and my identity than the “canonized” ones. The experience of the art of each is of equal and particular value to me. How and why art is experienced is central in this study. The dimensions and impact of what has traditionally been called “aesthetic experience” serve as the nucleus for my examination of the participants as readers and as exceptional cases. Each of the participants in this study is a practicing reader, meaning that he reads by choice without a specific predetermined goal, except to have his life somehow changed by and through the reading process. Reading is a valuable practice for the participants because it generates a particular kind of experience, and what this experience is “made of” for them is one of the key concerns of this study.

Until well into the twentieth century, aesthetic theory struggled to arrive at an effective way to identify and account for the peculiar relationships between art and experience, due in large part to attempts to account for what makes one cultural artifact art and another not. In other words, these theories sought to begin with a clear definition of art in order to account for which particular characteristics of it were stimulating specific effects on human consciousness. These approaches, according to Dewey (1929, 1934), Gadamer (1975), Shusterman (1992), and others, are inherently flawed, primarily because they are based on the assumption that art is isolated
from other forms of experience, what Dewey (1929) describes as the association of art with the museum, art as a product of a culture removed from its cultural conditions and placed in the intellectualized, post-colonial context of the museum. Much of western philosophy, from the Enlightenment onward, including aesthetic theory, has set up and based itself on artificial distinctions between aspects of human cognition and experience, and the structure of educational institutions as well as the construction and delivery of pedagogy has developed based on these distinctions:

Compartmentalization of occupations and interests brings about separation of that mode of activity commonly called “practice“ from insight, of imagination from executive doing, of significant purpose from work, of emotion from thought and doing. Those who write the anatomy of experience then suppose that these divisions inhere in the very constitution of human nature. (Dewey, 1934, p. 21)

Gadamer (1975) locates the central problem with western aesthetic theory in its basis on the quiet dominance of the inductive methods of natural science, which tend to be based on atomistic notions of how one arrives at the basis of things. He makes a clear distinction between truth as an objectively observable reality and truth as an experience:

The experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means to proper science. . . . The experience of the sociohistorical world cannot be raised to a science by the inductive procedure of the natural sciences (pp. xxi-4).

I recall occasions when friends or colleagues and I struggled to identify in some way which characteristics of a work could account for its being art or literature, what distinguished it
from or elevated it above “just a painting,” “just a piece of music,” or “just a nice story.” While some pointed to the presence or absence of certain elements in the work, others dismissed aesthetic value as purely subjective. Others quite openly embraced and wielded their role as the “tastemakers,” equipped by their intelligence and level of education to assign literary value to texts and dismiss others as unworthy of consideration in post-secondary education. American Pragmatism and more recent continental philosophy seems to “change the box,” to quote Russell Hartwell, of this tired argument. Still, in the majority of community college classrooms, the emphasis in literature classes continues to be on breaking a literary text down into the key elements and techniques and writing essays that attempt to account for the way a given work of literature “functions.” This approach might lead one to ask, “Why teach literature at all?” If a reader is not free to experience a work of art from his or her own position, why use art for course content? If one is expected to read according to an externally prescribed protocol, might not some other kind of text work just as well if not better? How did literature find its way into most American colleges in the first place?

The way the soldier-students in my courses talked and wrote about their reading experiences served as a powerful reminder of the magic of reading and the reasons I sought a career in the field of literature, so much so that I reconsidered my approach to teaching it in my English classes. After all, I have made a practice of reading in my own life not because I generally enjoy engaging in a systematic analysis of what I am reading but because through reading, I experience new voices and see them merge with my own, my understanding of the world and of others is expanded and transformed, I gain new lenses through which to see, and as these experiences unfold, I am elated to be caught up in the process. Many of the works of literature in anthologies and course selections for college students are ostensibly chosen because
they have had a powerful effect on many readers, yet in a majority of classrooms, these works are presented to students as specimens to be dissected and analyzed in order for them to demonstrate their proficiency in textual analysis and criticism. Finding it increasingly difficult to continue asking students merely to locate in a text the same elements that stood out to me, I began to find in the theories I address in this chapter a potential for linking aesthetic experience with cognitive development in an artistic event. Following Dewey, Gadamer, and others, my study presumes that inquiry into what is called artistic or aesthetic experience cannot be conducted from a position of atomism, a belief that one can reduce a work of art to essential components that account for its being art or for its specific effects on one engaged with it. Nor can one locate the aesthetic as an entirely internal, ultimately subjective response to external stimuli. These theorists have developed an aesthetic theory focused on connections rather than distinctions, one that situates the aesthetic as an integral factor in the sociocultural formation of mind.

The Organic Aesthetic

Dewey (1934), Gadamer (1979), Attridge (2004), and Sumara (1996) share a basic framework for describing the dimensions of aesthetic experience, one that orients it in the “biological commonplaces” that people share with other species and that serve as the foundation of all meaningful experience (Dewey, 1934, p. 14). As a sentient organism interacts with its environment in the space between complete separation from it, which is atrophy or death, and unimpeded access to it, which is mere subsistence, there is the potential for growth. The environment and the organism transform each other, and the organism moves to new possibilities for development. This principle is observable in all living things and is integral to the success of our species. Dewey distinguishes between general experience and what is identifiable as an
experience, when the “material” of experience is carried to fulfillment in a complete and unified way. He proposes an experience “consummation and not a cessation” as the fulfillment opens new horizons of possibility (p. 35). Only in the process of a temporary lack, struggle for fulfillment, and achievement does growth occur, and the same is true of any event that is called an experience.

Therefore, there cannot be aesthetic experience, according to Dewey, without the presence and awareness of tension, a period of loss of integration, of disruption of equilibrium that orients the experiencer toward restoration and that eventually gives way to culmination. Simply put, in the process of an experience, a creature moves from equilibrium to discord to anticipation to fulfillment. Gadamer (1975) echoed this concept in describing the nature of understanding as consisting in a movement from whole to part and back to whole. This general structure can be observed in everything from physical exercise to scientific discovery, and it is also the basis of aesthetic experience as Dewey defines it: “Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience” (p. 19). Just as life cannot expand if it remains perpetually in any of these phases, the growth of meaning, married to aesthetic truth, depends on a seamless, ongoing completion of them. What originated in survival continues as the compulsion toward exploration, the meaningful experience of discovery. The nature and role of this phase of discord in aesthetic experience is emerging as a central area of focus as I consider soldier-students’ reading experiences.

Although there is pleasure associated with it, aesthetic experience should not itself be understood solely as pleasure or as an emotional reaction to something. There can be
experiences of pleasure, even beauty, that do not reach the level of the aesthetic as Dewey defined it. Dewey sees emotion in the role of sustaining the unity of the process of an experience. Emotions cannot exist discreetly; they demand something to attach themselves to, events and things in movement. The role of emotion in the aesthetic is to be the “moving and cementing force” (p. 44), an energy that sustains unity within the elements and stages of an experience and keeps the experiencer oriented toward the possibility for fulfillment. Indeed, some experience of tension is integral to the aesthetic: “The discord is the occasion that induces reflection. Desire for the restoration of the union converts mere emotion into interest in objects as conditions of realization of harmony. With the realization, material of reflection is incorporated into objects as their meaning” (p. 15).

The basic pattern of an experience as Dewey described it is observable in everything from a momentary aesthetic experience, of the sort one might have as a song progresses, to the more extended experience of reading a novel. The same phases of conservation, tension, anticipation, and culmination can occur regardless of context or art form and in varying degrees of intensity. Whether one is still before a slowly shifting sunset, engaged in scientific exploration, or working purposefully with physical materials, whether one is viewing art or creating it, these necessary stages of the aesthetic are present. What is central to all is the underlying structure of the experience.

When the soldier-students in my pilot talked about their reading, especially the reading done during their deployment, they emphasized that they were not reading for mere escape or simple pleasure. Each one described seeking out an interior struggle, books that would present him with some kind of challenge, whether it was Faulkner’s narrative style or Chuck Palahniuk’s social commentary combined with innovative plot construction. One put it in terms of holding
out for the payoff and claimed he did not want to “waste time” with texts that “would leave [him] the same person as when [he] started.” Another said he wanted “art, not something you can breeze through in a weekend.” The experience they were pursuing was not mere entertainment; they wanted something more profound, something that required a significant degree of struggle. Hearing them talk about this desire led me to explore how aesthetic experience might be distinguishable from other kinds of human experience and to seek a way to account for it in a way that was not dependent on reducing particular texts to their aesthetic provoking characteristics.

**The Cultured Aesthetic**

This study is based on the notion that artistic experience, the reading experience in particular, is transactional. The experience of art is neither an essentially private nor interior phenomenon, but is the very process and expansion of culture itself. There is in aesthetic experience a convergence of sociocultural processes that might seem isolated and unrelated in an aesthetic theory centered on a definition of art but that are actually indivisible. In discussions of art and aesthetics, I have often heard the terms *culture, work, form, material, and medium* applied without clear reference to each other and almost always in static terms, as if one were examining an immobile specimen. Many analyses of the aesthetic describe the role of the individual as distinct from that of culture, as if the experiencer is an independent mind coming into contact with a set of conditions at particular points. The meaningful experience is understood as arising either entirely from within, having been merely set in motion by some external stimuli present in a work of art, or, as in the case of Formalism and much of New Criticism, the work is understood as a container of meanings that the individual acquires through a particular receptive orientation toward it. Vygotsky (1987) determines that the study of the formation of concepts cannot be
based solely on a definition of concept, which deals exclusively with the word and ignores the
dynamic nature of the process, or on mental functions and processes that drive the formation of
concepts, oversimplifying the process of abstraction. Does the same concern not apply to the
relationship between art, culture, and the individual in aesthetic experience? In either case, the
process of mediation in the experience points to an inseparability of the cultural from the
cognitive. The definitions of art and of the aesthetic from which I operate in this study share
with sociocultural theory the recognition that culture and the mind are always in a state of mutual
formation. Hutchins (1995) defines culture as an adaptive “human cognitive process that takes
place both inside and outside the minds of people . . . the process in which our everyday cultural
practices are enacted” (p. 354).

A conception of culture as dynamic, ongoing, and coevolutionary with the aesthetic and
cognitive redefines what constitutes form, substance, and work with regard to our experience of
art. First off, the three cannot be completely isolated from each other, and one cannot be
conceived of without the other. Form is essentially what clarifies experience by revealing to us
what it is like for an “event, object, scene and situation” to be brought to “integral fulfillment”
(Dewey, 1934, p. 137). Form is what organizes material into the matter of art. It can be
understood only in terms of relations and aesthetic form only in terms of completeness of
relations within a given medium. These relations draw our attention to the “clashes and
unitings” of elements (Dewey, 1934, p. 134). Form in this sense is not limited to what is called
art but is an “operation of forces” (Dewey, 1934, p. 137) present in everything considered to be
an experience. What we call “art” seems to be an experience in which our sense of form happens
to be particularly dense.
Work here is not to be confused with the *art product*, a physical thing that exists as an object apart from experience. For Dewey, the work of art is what this thing does with and in experience, work in the sense of activity. The art product, therefore, cannot be meaningfully extracted from the work with which it is associated. Following Derrida (1992), Sumara (1996) ties this concept to literary texts, saying the work is “not a location for meaning but, rather, is a form that empties out meaning while, at the same time, remaining potentially meaningful” (p. 31). Gadamer (1979) explains that our understanding of the purpose and meaning of art is always influenced by our own situatedness, historically speaking. In other words, “the work of literary fiction does not contain a transcendent core of meaning, but rather has a repeatable singularity that depends on a structural openness to new contexts” (Sumara, 1996, p. 31). These elements converge in an event in which there is a shared participation in the being of the work. The work of art, according to Gadamer (1979), Dewey (1934), and Heidegger (1962), is not essentially a perceptual object in the mind of the viewer but is also a subject that can express itself. Its being is changed as it becomes an experience of the viewer whose being is changed by experiencing the work of art. As Vygotsky (1987) points out, culture and cognition are always in a relational, mutually formative motion, so, in a sense, a work of art is “recreated every time it is esthetically experienced” (Dewey, 1934, p. 113). Although much of college-level pedagogy seems based on the goal of doing so, art and literature have not yet been successfully reduced to their essential state, as Bruner (1991) reminds us: “Empiricists, for their part, rested their claims on a mind capable of verifying the constituent ‘atomic propositions’ that comprised a text. But neither of these procedures, right reason or verification, suffice for explicating how a narrative is either put together by a speaker or interpreted by a hearer” (p. 9). With regard to art (including literature) the focus should turn, then, to what is occurring in the experience itself. Each of the
the participants in this study talks about reading in terms of the essentiality of the experience; it is the dynamic transaction they seek out for how it both surprises them and serves to reshape their identities relative to their social world.

My working definition of the reading experience for this study draws upon a combination of Vygotskian theory and Pragmatist aesthetic theory, especially as these theoretical schools overlap on the key issues of the constant motion of cognitive development, the social formation of the mind, the “cultural situatedness of meanings” (Bruner, 1990, p. 3), and what occurs in the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978). When one is engaged in the act of reading, an event is occurring that is a convergence of sociocultural forces present through the text, the situation of the reading act, and the reader’s social history. This convergence is what theorists of reader response, most notably Rosenblatt (1978), but also including Iser (1974) and Booth (1961), describe as the reading transaction. The reading “event” is always unique to itself, given that it cannot be repeated from the exact same cultural or cognitive position. What is being formed in this event forever alters the cognitive landscape as well as the work of art; the history of that work of art is being written.

This notion of aesthetic, or artistic, experience being a convergence of moving forces aligns with the Vygotskian (1987) articulation of the social formation of mind. Crotty (1998) touches on the basic compatibility of these two theoretical perspectives, especially where the philosophy of phenomenology defines intentionality:

The world and the objects in the world may be in themselves meaningless; yet they are partners in the generation of meaning. . . . Not only is consciousness intentional, but human beings in their totality are intentionally related to their world. Human being means being-in-the-world. In existentialist terms, intentionality is the radical
interdependence of subject and world. . . . The image evoked is that of human beings engaging with their human world. It is in and out of this interplay that meaning is born.

(pp. 44-45)

The role of background in the participants’ reading is essential to both their experiences of reading and their reading practices, and, given that the goal of this study is to understand how they stand out as practicing readers, this study seeks to locate the cultural within the individual, so to speak, as they describe their reading. To this end, I have drawn on the work of various sociocultural theorists to establish a basis for considering evidence of the social within individual experience.

The Sociohistorical in the Aesthetic

Given this study’s concern with the role of cultural background in the participants’ reading lives, the applied understanding of aesthetic experience must align with a social constructivist epistemological framework. According to Vygotsky (1987), all cognitive processes have their origin in society; they were external and social before they became internal psychological functions. He claims that we develop cognitively as we internalize processes that already exist in the social sphere, a process that begins from the moment we are first aware of our environment:

Any higher mental function was external [and] social before it was internal. It was once a social relationship between two people. . . . We can formulate the general genetic law of cultural development in the following way: Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice or on two planes. . . . It appears first between people as in intermental category, and then within the child as an intramental category. This is equally
true of voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the
development of will. (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 21)

He describes what we have internalized from the social sphere as *tools* and *signs*, which serve to
mediate cognition. Vygostsky’s concept of mediation is based in tool use as a distinctly human
phenomenon, something that not only sets us apart as a species but is also the source of our
cognitive development. We made a significant leap and touched off new psychological processes
when we first modified objects in our environment in order to modify our interactions with it and
with each other. As we acted on the material world, it acted on us, and we subsequently
conceived of it differently:

It goes without saying that internalization transforms the process itself and changes its
structure and functions. Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie
all higher functions and their relationships. . . . In their own private sphere, human beings
retain the functions of social interaction. (Vygotsky, 1981, pp. 163-164)

The use of a mediator between ourselves and our world applies to forms of
communication as well. Humans made a quantum leap once we began using sounds to represent
or indicate aspects of the material world. Language is the “tool of tools” (Luria, 1982, p. 495),
given its central role in cognitive development. A crucial stage in the development of concepts
occurs when that which an individual initially encounters as a social phenomenon is eventually
transferred into a psychological one, the “internal reconstruction of an external operation”
(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56). This stage might begin with a child’s recognition of and subsequent use
of simple gesturing, but with each internalized operation, linguistic or otherwise, the individual
has more cognitive tools with which to mediate subsequent operations. This process grows ever
more complex and sophisticated as an individual goes through stages of cognitive development.
Higher mental functioning, including that currently associated with literacies, is marked by the ability to “decontextualize” language, to develop what Vygotsky (1987) calls “scientific concepts” (pp. 172-174). Volitional, abstract thinking, especially about ideas or language itself and its use, is central to my purposes of studying the cognitive processes associated with soldier-students’ reading experiences. Vygotsky’s notion of higher mental functioning focuses on the ability for rational and goal-directed thought, a mental process that depends on mediation by signs and systems of signs. Among these systems, language serves as a primary example. Here, the individual employs a psychological mechanism in order to change or direct mental functions that would otherwise occur naturally, permanently and continuously transforming the intrapsychological plane:

By being included in the process of behavior, the psychological tool alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions. It does this by determining the structure of a new instrumental act, just as a technical tool alters the process of a natural adaptation by determining the form of labor operations. (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 137)

Vygotsky understood spoken language, texts, and works of art to be examples of psychological tools. However, in higher stages of development, internalized systems of signs also serve as mediational tools. Smagorinsky (2001) describes higher mental processes as “paradigmatic rather than universal. . . . They represent ways of comprehending and acting on the world that are appropriated through cultural practice, and they therefore embody cultural concepts of what and how things signify” (p. 134). Vygotsky’s (1978) developmental method is based on a recognition that both the social world and the mind are always in flux. Culture does not reside outside of the mind to be received and appropriated by individuals; the processes of culture and the processes of cognition are mutually formative. Vygotskian theory understands
culture as dynamic and ongoing as humans act on and are acted on by their social environment. The boundaries of culture might seem more difficult to identify according to this perspective, but only if one begins with a “one-size-fits-all” definition, which separates culture from the individual, making it a static, containable object of study. According to Vygotsky, in the event of mediation, as an individual uses a psychological tool to act upon and alter the social sphere, culture, “the entire pool of artifacts [signs and tools] accumulated by the social group in the course of its historical experience” develops at its most elemental phase (Cole, 1996, p. 110). From a sociocultural perspective, the mind “extends beyond the skin” (Geertz, 1973), and society extends into the mind, so neither can be effectively studied without accounting for the role of the other. Robson, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2011) appeal to current theories in neuroscience to support a dynamic, interactional definition of “mind”:

This understanding of what constitutes “mind” implies a theory of consciousness that does not conflate it with perception, knowledge, or experiences of self-identity. Instead, consciousness is conceptualized as what Cohen and Stewart (1997, p. 63) describe as phenomena that arise “when two or more complex systems interact in a kind of mutual feedback that changes them both, leading to behavior that is not present in either system on its own.” This theory not only explains the biological manifestation of conscious experience, but also the human desire to understand why consciousness “feels” the way that it does and how these feelings are both individual and social/cultural phenomena. From this perspective, consciousness can be understood as an experience that is embodied at various levels, including the human physiological, the socio/cultural, and the environmental. Consciousness then is not pre-given, nor is it biologically or culturally
determined, but instead is an ongoing emergent property of the relations of all of these.

(p. 4)

Nieto (1999) emphasizes the dynamic and interactional nature of culture, describing it as “dynamic, multifaceted, embedded in context, influenced by social, economic, and political factors; created and socially constructed; learned; and dialectical” (pp. 48-49). Smagorinsky (2001) describes it as “both the primogenitor of signs and tools and the product of sign and tool use” (p. 134). In other words, culture “happens” in the reading event; its ongoing development both depends on and defines the transaction.

This emphasis on the role of culture in mediation and the resulting alteration of the cultural landscape as an individual acts upon the social plane calls for a reorientation of social science toward the place where transformation occurs. Vygotsky realizes that in order to observe stages of cognitive development, one must focus on processes unfolding within their natural context. Cole (1996) follows this principle based on the realization that “people . . . develop cultural tools and associated cognitive skills in domains of life where such tools and skills [are] of central importance” (p. 76). Research into cognitive development must, therefore, be similarly contextualized, accounting for the process as it unfolds. Bruner (1990) insists that meaning making is always culturally situated and “always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources” (p. 4). Moreover, it is the “cultural situatedness of meanings that assures their negotiability and, ultimately, their communicability” (p. 3). Even in the act of reading, then, “meaning is always situated in specific sociocultural practices and experiences” (Gee, 2000, p. 195). According to this view, even soldier-students’ reading experiences are mediated by cognitive structures the origin of which are in the social sphere. In order to gain a deeper awareness of the structure of their reading experiences, then, what is mediating the activity of
reading must be identifiable in the interpsychological plane. How the participants in this study relate key aspects of their own background, especially as they describe the concentric circles of influence around the activity and experiences of reading, is essential in gaining a more well-formed understanding of why and how they read, especially in light of the way reading is approached in college literature classes. For example, all three were raised in evangelical Christian homes in communities in which this form of Christianity was most prominent. This study reveals significant ways in which aspects of this worldview, its narratives and formulations and interpretations of society, mediate the relationship between the participants' reading and their identities.

Leont’ev (1981) expands the sense of what serves as the primary metric for tracing cognitive development from word meaning, as Vygotsky proposes, and defined goal-mediated action as “the nonadditive, molar unit of life for the material, corporeal subject, . . . the unit of life that is mediated by mental reflection” (p. 46). Similar to the way a word is understood and employed over stages of both cultural and individual development, it is in an activity within a specific context where the “link between inner and external structuring” can be found (Robbins, 2006, p. 4). Leont’ev (2006) illustrates how activity is mediated by structures employed based on an intended goal, observable as the “system-forming role of consciousness in relation to the entirety of activities; and second, the double-sided interdependence between the dynamic of the internal structure of consciousness and the dynamic of the structure of activity” (p. 34). He emphasizes that microlevel analysis of activity occurs within the social system of language, which is “neither a text structure, nor an ‘individual’ language system of speech behavior, nor a pure construct: it is the actual form of interaction among the elements of speech activity that can be interpreted using various models” (Leont’ev, 2006, p. 34). In other words, the structure
mediating linguistic activity is not located in the language itself but in its use within a specific activity setting. This concept is summarized by Minick (1985), who claimed that “actions are at one and the same time components of the life of the individual and the social system. . . . correspondingly, the intermental actions and the social interaction that makes that action possible will be defined and structured in certain respects by the broader social and cultural system” (p. 257). The system precedes any units within it, and those units are identified or organized only by those studying activity within it. By using goal-mediated action as a primary unit of analysis, one could conceivably observe and describe patterns of choices within given conditions present in deciding to read, what to read, where to read, and why, as well as in the experience of reading itself, as one makes mental formulations in response to a given text. If there are patterns of activity, structures present within a given activity, parallels or other manifestations of these patterns might be locatable within the concentric circles of cultural influence, for lack of a better illustration, as one moves outward from the activity. If each of us has internalized patterns of behavior that we have encountered in the social world and that serve to mediate our activities within specific situations, it makes sense to orient my inquiry toward a specific activity and to identify therein the role that culture is playing. Because the participants stand out as practicing readers whose reading seems to have a profoundly edifying effect on their lives, this study has sought to locate some of the influences and cultural tools mediating this practice, and to this end, I depend on the participants themselves to provide access to these mediators.

**Aesthetic Being**

Serious readers of the sort highlighted in this study choose to pursue aesthetic experience for more than pleasure, although pleasure certainly plays a role. A decent meal or a cool breeze can be pleasant without becoming an experience. What is being pursued by the participants in
this study is a genuine experience, one that leaves them somehow different from when they began, and a key aspect of that is becoming consumed by the process, entering another state of being. Gadamer (1979) likens the mode of being of the work of art to the experience of play, which, although it might not be essentially serious, “fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. . . . Players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (Darstellung) through the players” (p. 103). The essential subject of the game (the work) is not the individual player but the game itself, which “holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there” (p. 106). Obviously, to experience the work, then, the individual must be willing to “play the game” with all that this play entails in the interrelatedness of the self, the work, and culture. This condition of being “lost” in the experience seems to me an integral aspect of the aesthetic; the awareness of the experiencer is directed entirely toward the process as it unfolds, and emotions arise to support its completion. The participants in this study describe their reading experience in a way that aligns with this notion of getting lost in a game as the awareness of the world around recedes and the parameters of the game become the edges of present consciousness. Mac goes so far as to liken this experience to that of being on drugs, his consciousness entirely claimed for the duration of the experience. This experience is of great significance to each of the participants. The phases of the aesthetic experience unfold seamlessly: “Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have an experience. There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement” (Dewey, 1934, p. 38). In other words, a distinguishable aesthetic experience has some degree of coherence. Although it does not occur in isolation, as I mentioned before, it does have boundaries as it is experienced, just as a game has a beginning and a culmination, and in between lies the possibility of losing all awareness of life outside of it;
an aesthetic reading can occur and exist in retrospect as an experience. The soldier-students
described this kind of reading experience as most valuable, and the resulting orientation of the
mind toward deeper aesthetic engagement is what Shusterman (1996), Attridge (2004), Sumara
(1996), and others have considered the source of real, permanent, powerful cognitive
development.

Attridge (2004) carries the concept of a dynamic convergence of culture, cognition, and
the work into an exploration of what accounts for literariness in an experience, a literary event:
“This is what a literary work ‘is’: an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the
act-event (or act-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never
entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within
which it is read” (p. 59). Jack and Mac talk about a “a read” or “a reading” as a distinct
experience like a workout or a good meal. Literature is made into literary events by verbal
inventiveness, the use of the familiar in unfamiliar ways. He uses the term singularity to refer to
a state of inventiveness that, although it refers to recognizable cultural conditions or conventions,
exceeds what is recognizable to the individual: “The singularity of the artwork is not simply a
matter of difference from other works (what I term ‘uniqueness’), but a transformative
difference, a difference, that is to say, that involves the irruption of otherness or alterity into the
cultural field” (p. 136). This event is the experience of originality in the sense of new origins for
meaning, a recognition of new possibilities, and it requires a willingness to be temporarily
defamiliarized in a field of familiar material: “the act of breaking down the familiar is also the
act of welcoming the other at the same time, the breakdown of the old is produced by the
pressure of its internal contradictions (the pressure of the other)” (p. 26). These elements of
invention, alterity, and singularity occur as a “trinity” of which the aesthetic literary event is
constituted; each component is present and serves to complete the other. Here, Gadamer’s concept of shared participation in the being of the work is realized in the aesthetic reading experience. It requires that the reader be passive and active simultaneously, passive in the sense of being willing to fall under “the spell” or “playing the game” and active in “(re)inventing” the “singularizing” aspects of the work. This kind of reading creates both pleasure and real purpose, a desire to be changed, to grow, and it speaks to a certain quality of mind, a quality I have observed in the participants:

A person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text until the latter becomes so persistently audible that it breaks through what the interpreter imagines it to be. Rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is what a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involved neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important things is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings. (Gadamer, 1979, p. 269)

The kind of mind that results from this kind of orientation toward reading is what I seek to emphasize in this study, as it seems to differ significantly from the kind of consciousness being emphasized in many college literature classrooms, and the participants in this study seem to stand out for having such a consciousness.
Gadamer (1979) identifies that a consciousness, through engagement in the “game,” is “hermeneutically trained...by means of which we enter the world-horizon which work opens up, not in such a way as to leave our own world behind, but in order to expose our world to it and come away transformed and enriched, that is to say, to effect the fusion of horizons” (Caputo, 1987, p. 113). Dennis Sumara (1996) extends Gadamer’s (1979) concept of historically-conditioned consciousness to the act of reading, and this kind of consciousness calling for an emphasis on the *poetically-conditioned imagination* is essentially the same condition Gadamer describes as the “hermeneutically-trained consciousness,” only more closely associated with the act of reading:

For to imagine, within the spaces opened up by the literary fiction, is not merely to imagine what might fill those spaces, but to imagine oneself as well. To imagine is to “bethink oneself,” to mediate, to picture oneself in imagination. It is this human ability that leads to interpretation, to self-interpretation. This need for self-interpretation, in relation to our historically- effected conscious presence in the world, is hermeneutic.

(Sumara, 1996, p. 40)

The realization of this condition depends on the imaginative space opened up by the indeterminate condition of alterity:

The interpretations that human subjects bring to bear upon their lived experiences are caught up in the ecology of ever-evolving subject/world relations. . . . It must be discernible and, at the same time, must appear ungraspable in its vastness. I would suggest that the aim of interpretation must be to continue to strive for deep understandings of one’s ecological relationship in the unity of the us/not-us relation.

(Sumara, 1996, p. 118)
The *us/not-us* relation occurs in the cognitive space where as our imagination fills the spaces created by otherness, we re-imagine ourselves; we grow. Sumara (1996) used his experiences with reading groups made up of students and teachers to trace his theory of the reading experience and illustrate the power of aesthetic reading. His primary interest is in the way reading and lived experience are mutually informative, and he centralizes the realization of this in the act of *hermeneutic inquiry*: “Compatible with the idea of cognition as embodied action, hermeneutic inquiry shows how meaning co-emerges with meaning-making activities (such as reading) and, furthermore, how these ever-evolving meanings represent a world of significance which has been brought forth by the inquirers” (p. 126). The participants in this study describe an intense engagement with the texts they read, an experience in which they appreciate the uniqueness, the unprecedentedness of it relative to their experience prior to reading. They are recognizing and internalizing something new and being reshaped in the process. They connect this experience to thrill seeking activities, provoking some of the same feelings as the risky activities of extreme sports or other dangerous endeavors. The game is an exciting one, not a way to “relax.” Jack proclaims, “I'm trying to attack a book. . . . If I want to be amused, I'll watch sports.” This kind of reading they often do instead or in spite of the prescribed kinds of reading they encounter in their classes, and the experience provoked through it is describable in some interesting ways as it pertains to the personal. I sought how theorists present the details and dimensions of the aesthetic transaction in order to potentially consider them in light of the way the participants described their own reading experiences. Are they strikingly similar, or are there other components of experience that might be important to consider?
Describing Experience

Within the basic framework I have set forth here, I have sought some variety in the way theorists discuss aesthetic experience in order to provide a wider vocabulary from which to consider the participants’ reading experiences as they describe them. To this end, the work of five theorists in particular is particularly helpful, providing a language to address the often difficult felt aspects of the aesthetic as well as the impact it can have on how one perceives and experiences the world.

It Feels Like Art

Shusterman (1996) identifies four distinguishing features, *dimensions*, of the aesthetic rooted in the memorability of what makes it *an* experience. The fact that we ascribe value and enjoyment to aesthetic experience speaks to its *evaluative dimension*. We qualify it differently from other experiences. Shusterman calls the fact that it focuses our attention on its immediate presence, that it is felt vividly and is often “savored,” the *phenomenological* dimension, the condition Gadamer associates with being drawn in and held in the “spell” of the game. The *semantic dimension* refers to how the aesthetic experience is reflected upon, remembered as meaningful beyond mere sensory stimulation. Lastly, the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience, which he connected to fine art’s essential aim and perhaps its most intrinsic feature, is what he called the *demarcational-definitional dimension*. Of course, individually these dimensions could certainly be associated with experiences other than the aesthetic; they are not intended to demark the limits of aesthetic experience, nor do they suggest a limited definition of the “work” that is experienced aesthetically. I like, however, that these dimensions allow for the individualized nature of experience while providing a useful set of terms for referring back to an aesthetic experience after the fact.
Nelson Goodman’s (1976) aesthetic theory is situated within a broader concept of language as a symbolic system mediating our experience of the world. Goodman extends this theory into the cognitive space where sense and meaning align in the aesthetic experience, and thus suggested some distinguishing features of the experience that resonate as I consider how the soldier-readers talk about their reading experiences. In assigning the term symptoms to refer to conditions of aesthetic perception, Goodman seeks to differentiate the aesthetic from other symbolic functions. Symptoms are features that, in conjunction with others, make more probable the presence of a given condition, and in describing the aesthetic thusly, Goodman allows for a great degree of interplay between aesthetic conditions as well as between the aesthetic and other experience. They are sufficient for aesthetic experience and in some degree necessary, so one or more of Goodman’s symptoms can be referred to in a discussion of aesthetic experience regardless of the system of symbols the experience grows out of.

Relative or syntactic repleteness refers to one’s intensified awareness and appreciation of what is being focusing on during aesthetic perception. Related to this idea, though associated more directly with nonlinguistic (mainly visual) symbolic systems, is syntactic density, the experience of the appropriateness of the distinctive parts of the work, the sense of the “rightness” of the work’s form. Both of these symptoms seem appropriately associated with intensity of experience and heightened awareness, an aspect of the participants’ reading I am interested in exploring. In speaking of semantic density Goodman uses the term “density” to suggest prominence as opposed to presence. Goodman’s understanding of aesthetic perception in this sense depends on the symbolic system through which the perceiver interacts with a work of art. He pointed out, for example, that a squiggly line can indicate stock market activity or it can be associated with the contours of a mountain range. Goodman (1976) describes exemplification as
“possession plus reference” (p. 53). This term refers to the way a symbol serves as a sample of “properties it literally or metaphorically possesses” (pp. 66-67). A slight problem with Goodman’s formulation is that it directs the presence or not of some of these “symptoms” as criteria for determining whether or not the work being experienced is art, moving the emphasis toward a definition of art instead of the essence of the experience. Nonetheless, I find his vocabulary useful as I consider the participants’ reading experiences.

**Art and Worldview**

The cultural meets the experienced in artistic reading, but what are the effects of this meeting on the construction of identity? Many theorists have described the internalized models that guide our meaning-making process in a given set of social conditions as cognitive *schemas* and *scripts*. Cole (1996) describes schemas as mental structures, “selection mechanisms which specify how certain essential elements relate to one another while leaving other, less essential elements to be filled in as needed according to the circumstances” (p. 125). Scripts are “event schemas,” which guide our actions in familiar settings or daily activities. “Cultural models” refer to those schemas that are shared within a culture and that mediate activity in various domains, including events, institutions, and other social configurations. Along with Ricoeur, Bruner (1990) believes that it is narrativity, or what Cole called *narrativized framing*, “the linking of events over time, that lies at the heart of human thought” (p. 128). There are conceptual links between the notions of narrative identity and cultural models and Burke’s (1973) levels of symbolic action, Goodman’s (1976) symptoms of the aesthetic, and other components of the aesthetic structure I addressed previously. Even considering the “otherness” of the act of reading with regard to forms of mediation, in other words, the way that the mental structures mediating aesthetic reading differ from the schemas and scripts that guide activities in
other domains provides some insight into the nature of the participants’ aesthetic reading. As Smagorinsky (2001) points out, “resisting one set of cultural constructs relies on precepts that are appropriated from other cultural constructs” (p. 146). Each of these young men identifies himself as having rejected the evangelical Christianity so prominent in his upbringing. However, the interview data reveal among the participants echoes of the narrativized self this worldview encourages.

Ricoeur’s (1984) concept of narrative identity and Bruner’s (1991) articulation of the narrative construction of reality are helpful in forming a bridge between aesthetic reading and the reader’s experience of the social world. Ricoeur (1984) used narrative terminology to describe how we make sense of our experiences in the world; our selfhood, “self interpretation,” is derived primarily from our sense of location in a narrative process: “an event must be more than just a singular occurrence. It gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot. A story, too, must be more than just an enumeration of events in serial order; it must organize them into an intelligible whole, of a sort such that we can always ask what is the ‘thought’ of this story” (p. 65). We make meaning and sense out of events in our lives through the process of what Ricoeur called emplotment, “the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession” (p. 65). This process can be understood as one in which internalized narrative structures (narrative identity) serve as artifacts that mediate our interpretation of the events in our lives. Narrative identity helps us understand ourselves as “both as a reader and the writer of [our] own life” (Ricoeur, 1987, p. 246). As narratives are a combination of fact (in the sense of recognizable elements from the material world) and fiction, narrative identity is located between literary fiction and historical events, and in the same manner that a narrative involves a combination of culturally established views and some degree of innovation on them, narrative
identity includes “a dialectic of innovation and sedimentation” in our self-awareness (Laitinen, 2002, p. 2).

I see here important parallels between narrative identity and the dimensions of the aesthetic I touched on earlier. Narrative identity consists of both tension and equilibrium, as narratives mediate between the two, bringing about discordant concordance (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 101) or concordant discordance (p. 66) in our identities: “[T]here is compelling evidence to indicate that narrative comprehension is among the earliest powers of mind to appear in the young child and among the most widely used forms of organizing human experience” (Bruner, 1991, p. 9). Bruner’s identification of narrative construction as one of the key mediational artifacts internalized early in an individual’s life that serves to mediate a wide variety of experiences throughout life suggests that even the act of reading can be mediated in varying degree by four connected distinguishing features. Narrative diachronicity refers to time “whose significance is given by the meaning assigned to events within its compass” (p. 6). An underlying model guides the remembered beginning and ending of events that are patterned according to their particular representation of broader general themes or “generic” narratives. Through intentional state entailment, people assign purposes to events within given settings based on their intentions within the context. Just as a reader might be compelled to consider the reason for a particular character’s fate in a story, interpretation is motivated by a desire to know the reasons for events.

The way the participants in this study situate themselves both in their recollections of their past and in considering their present position is mediated by structures the origins of which reside in the social or cultural sphere. The interviews with them reveal particular internalized frameworks, the mental structures that mediate their sense of identity, how they think of
themselves and the roles they play in certain groups, especially related to their reading. Seeing the relationships that exist between what and how they read and the way they think of themselves is compelling.

**Being an Aesthetic Being: Reading and Community**

Another concern of this study is the participants’ role as practicing readers. Do they read in complete isolation, as many might imagine most reading takes place? Do they share their experiences and practices with others? Jack, Russell, and Mac have stood out among the rest of my students as practicing readers for whom regular reading has become a necessary part of a meaningful life. I suggest, further, that this practice makes them stand out within our society as a whole. The participants in this study are not isolated in this practice; they seek out others to share in the life-changing experiences that reading provides them, and somehow each one was exposed to the practice of reading during their lives. Each participant talked about sharing and discussion books with other soldiers, and the relationships that developed around shared books and experiences has continued beyond their time in active duty. They consider the practice of reading to be an integral part of their identity, playing a prominent role in how they construct themselves. The value of the artistic experience is completed, if you will, in its expression outwardly, socially.

To consider the participants socioculturally, I appeal to Gee’s (1996) notion of primary and secondary discourses. Gee (1996) illustrates how, as the process of internalization occurs within social environments, each of us learns how to speak, behave, and process information appropriately within those environments. The degree to which we are immersed in the collective sign systems within a given social context can determine the degree to which these are internalized: “One does not ‘think for oneself,’ rather one always thinks for (really with and
through) a group, that group which socialized one into that practice of thinking; and, of course, one ‘thinks for’ different groups in different contexts” (Gee, 1996, p. 46). Gee refers to the set practices within a social context as discourses, which work as a sort of “identity kit” within it (p. 127), the socially acceptable ways of speaking and behaving, thinking and feeling, which come from, reinforce, and signal to others that we belong. They are “ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes, [which create] opportunities for people to be and recognize certain kinds of people” (pp. 127-128).

Each of us has been socialized into both primary and secondary discourses. Primary discourses are those that make up our earliest social identity, and they tend to serve as the gravity for the secondary discourses we embrace or reject. Gee (1996) describes them as our “initial taken-for-granted understandings of who we are and who people ‘like us’ are, as well as the sort of things we do, value, and believe when we are not ‘in public’” (p. 137). We are socialized into secondary discourses outside of our early family and peer-group development. These discourses tend to be more public in nature, and most of us inhabit a number of them. Gee defines literacy essentially as mastery over a secondary discourse. In addition to their primary discourses of family and perhaps immediate community, each soldier-student has gained membership into a number of secondary discourses, perhaps around their particular mode of service in the military, an appreciation for a particular leisure activity, or involvement in a particular political group. Drawing sharp distinctions between primary and secondary discourses is difficult, however, as they are often mutually informative. For example, a soldier’s particular religious beliefs, which might be difficult to untangle from family and community influences, might lead him to choose involvement in a particular church or para-church group that differs from his or her family.
Having mastered a set of secondary discourses, including perhaps those of their particular unit in the military, their mode of service, or their hobbies, the participants find themselves moving among the secondary discourses of the civilian workplace, postsecondary education, the English class, or my classroom in particular.

Gee (1996) explains that mastery of discourses comes primarily through “acquisition” and not from “learning” (pp. 134-147). Acquisition occurs informally as we are exposed to models (behavioral, linguistic, etc.) and internalize them, often subconsciously, as we naturally adapt in order to function. Our mastery of our native language occurs in this way. Learning is a much more conscious or self-aware process in which we attain knowledge through teaching of some form or though reflecting on certain experiences. Discourses cannot be reduced to a skill set or to a community in the sense of mere proximity or shared interest. One can be good at one’s job and still remain marginalized from the discourse of the workplace. Here a distinction is drawn between “teaching” and “apprenticing” (p. 64). In distinguishing earlier between soldier-readers learning to read and how they might have been “enculturated to read” (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 137), I am drawing a distinction between teaching and apprenticing, as well as locating the boundaries of discourses. Gee (1996) describes a number of kinds of discourse that operate between or on the fringes of others, such as a mushfake discourse, which is defined by partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to “make do” in a discourse to which one has not been naturally apprenticed (p. 147). This occurs when I, having grown up in an urban environment and developed a social and political perspective at odds with most of my current neighbors, pick up on enough of the social cues and patterns of conversation common to semi-rural northeast Georgia to seem to put them at ease. Borderland discourses are made up of people from diverse backgrounds (diverse primary and community-based discourses) who are
able to interact outside the confines of the public sphere and “middle-class elite” (p. 162). I think of my teenage years in the punk rock underground, with its hostile rejection of many Reagan-era values and popular culture in all its forms, its alternatively raw and energetic music and art as well as venues and outlets for performance, and its intensely asserted (if sometimes misinformed) political views, as a time of membership in a borderland Discourse.

For this study, I had to consider how the participants “came by” reading as a practice. Did they observe others in their immediate family or community engaged in aesthetic reading? Was reading modeled to them? If so, in what ways? At what point in their lives and by whom? If they began reading while in the military, did they do so “privately” or did some form of community, either immediate, virtual, or otherwise, develop around reading practices? If so, how would they describe it? In order to understand the role their cultural background plays in their reading practices, I tried to distinguish between areas and degrees of influence and cultural layers. Gee’s notion of primary and secondary discourses provides both a broad framework and a language for describing social practice and individual identity. I considered (a) which of their practices, or aspects thereof, soldier-readers associate with their primary discourses and which they locate in secondary discourses; (b) which of the practices they connect with secondary discourses, which they have acquired and which have they learned, and what the conditions of acquisition were; and (c) which of the practices they learned and what people, kinds of people, or experiences they identify as being their “teacher.”

Wenger (1998) examines the dimensions, dynamics, and boundaries of what she called communities of practice and provided a wonderfully comprehensive language for describing their development and function that is helpful as I consider the participants’ reading practices. In communities of practice, as Wenger set them out, “members recognize that they share
experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation they will be understood by other members, thus being used to construct a reality for the participants” (p. 125).

Communities of practice, similarly, can exist within and across officially recognized communities, sometimes developing alongside them, sometimes in reaction to them. Wenger articulated three relational dimensions by which practice serves to help a community cohere: *mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire* (pp. 73-96). Concerning mutual engagement, practice exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with each other. The practice does not reside in books or tools, though it may involve artifacts. It does not reside in any preceding structure, but it does not develop in a historical vacuum either. The conditions of practice might exist before specific members arrive and participate, but their mutual engagement is not merely a carbon copy of earlier members. In short, a shared investment in both the history and future of the practice among the members defines the community. Of course, there are parallels between communities of practice and the way Gee describes certain discourses, and it might be helpful to consider these dimensions in seeking to understand the participants as practicing readers. If a community of readers developed within the military, say, among the deployed troops, how might soldiers describe their participation or lack thereof, and what cultural factors might they connect to their investment in the practice? What is the nature of their engagement? Is there a joint enterprise, and if so, what constitutes it? What is included or not in the shared repertoire? This study examines the role the participants play or not as either readers within a community or as those who seek to generate a community of readers around them.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to establish the theoretical landscape in which this study has grown and been conducted. I have sought to build a framework for describing and analyzing the participants as readers, both in terms of their cognition of their experience reading and in terms of the role their background plays in this experience and in their identities as readers. I turn next to the study itself.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

My prospectus was approved in March 2011. That summer, I began identifying potential participants for the study. I sent out an e-mail to my colleagues who are familiar with my research, asking for the names of any soldiers from their classes who might be interested in participating. I also began contacting the soldiers from my pilot study as well as one who had been a student of mine prior to his deployment.

The response was very positive, and I spoke with five potential participants over the phone. I had hoped to have at least one female and one from a traditionally marginalized group. I was unable to locate a female soldier to participate, and one, a Hispanic male, was redeployed to Afghanistan before we were able to schedule an interview. I had initially planned to conduct two 45-minute interviews with each participant, but given my less-structured interview approach and the participants’ awareness ahead of time of what they would be talking about, the interviews went longer than my initially planned length. I did not want to hinder the flow of data, so we continued, making time for longer single interviews instead of two shorter ones.

I conducted the interviews during a period of three weeks in the summer of 2011 and began data analysis during and immediately after the interviews took place. I transcribed the interviews myself during July and August, and I conducted the final phase of data analysis from late August through September, at which point I began to write the dissertation.

Crotty (1998) proposed four essential questions for research design in social science: “What methods do we propose to use? What methodology governs our choice and use of
methods? What theoretical perspective lies behind the methodology in question? What epistemology informs this theoretical perspective?” (p. 2). In this chapter, I address these four questions, though not necessarily in order. Additionally, Hittleman and Simon (1995) claim that research consumers “should look for the following specific dependability of information” in research:

The researchers’ method is detailed so its adequacy and logic can be determined, and there is an abundance of evidence.

The researchers provide evidence of their qualifications as participant observers.

The researchers’ assumptions are clear.

The researchers’ questions are stated, and the study seeks to answer those questions and generate further questions.

The researchers used preliminary days of the study to generate a focus for the study.

The researchers were present in the research context for an adequate period of time, and the researchers observed a full range of activities over a full cycle of those activities.

The data were collected from multiple sources.

The researchers saved their data for reanalysis. (p. 193)

These key points served as a guide for me as I developed and conducted this study, and in this chapter, I speak to how these guidelines served as a basis for the interview-based case studies I conducted to examine the participants’ reading experiences and practices, working within a framework based on a combination of American Pragmatist and more recent Continental aesthetic theory and social constructivist epistemology.

What impressed me about Heath’s (1983) ethnographic study of learners in the Carolina Piedmont was the completeness of the picture she was able to provide of the way specific
cultural influences, found in the home, the church, or the sidewalk, became ways of knowing that were evidenced in specific ways in classrooms. Her work tells the story of how models of behavior and speech, the origins of which might have been in the distant past, even a generation or more earlier, mediate activity within a school setting. Through a rich narrative, Heath traced the development and role of cognitive development within two communities, an inspiring example of educational social science.

Although I do not have the time or resources at this point in my career to conduct a study of the scope that Heath managed, I am considering the participants’ reading practices from a similar point of view. From a Vygotskyan perspective, both their identity as practicing readers and their experiences of reading are culturally mediated, and my goal, similar to Heath’s, is to locate the cultural within the cognitive. Because I am interested in a specific group of college readers but do not have the time or resources to conduct a legitimate ethnography for this dissertation, I chose a case study approach. Hays (2004) identifies some of the key similarities between ethnographies and case studies, as each tends to involve a close examination of people, topics, issues, or programs. They differ, however, in that ethnographies tend to ask a broader set of questions with the goal of observing and explaining practices and beliefs. They make cultural interpretations based on a wide variety of data and are conducted over a longer period of time, usually a year or more. I have a concern at the outset, however, that in the interest of identifying the internal structures mediating participants’ reading experiences and practices, I might tend to impose an agenda on the data, searching too exclusively for evidence of narrativity, for example, and limiting an emic perspective on the participants’ experience.

According to Stake (2000), the decision to conduct a case study is not essentially a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied (p. 435). He defines case study
research not by the specific methods of inquiry used but as growing out of an interest in individual cases. A number of methodological choices can be made within case study research, but these methods are adopted based on the cases themselves and the phenomenon one hopes to observe and describe among them. Stake points out that certain phenomena in educational research are important to understand, not because an understanding leads to an applicable generalization but precisely because of the uniqueness of the phenomenon to individuals or small groups. According to White (1992), casework is most appropriate for studies examining identity, explanation, or control, especially with regard to particular social contexts. The intention to investigate experiences of a certain individual or group that set them apart within a given context is, more often than not, what leads researchers to adopt a case study approach: “The case could be a child. It could be a classroom of children or a particular mobilization of professionals to study a childhood condition. The case is one among others. . . . The case is a specific, a complex, functioning thing” (Stake, 1995, p. 2). Hays (2004) describes a case study as focusing on “discovering the uniqueness of the case” (p. 218) rather than on producing generalizable conclusions, the goal being to “optimize understanding of the case rather than generalization beyond” (Stake, 2000, p. 435). Yin (2009) offers a more technical definition of case study, based on how it has most frequently been employed in the social sciences in recent decades, calling it “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Merriam (1998) distinguishes between the particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic features of a case study (pp. 29-32). The first refers to the study’s limited focus on a specific situation, event, program, or phenomenon. The study results in a thick description of the phenomenon being studied (Geertz, 1973). It is heuristic in that it can “bring about the discovery
of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known” (Merriam, 1998, p. 30). Clearly, *case study* can refer to a wide variety of research, but one of the key advantages of this approach which makes it preferable, given this study's focus is the “close collaboration between researcher and participants, while enabling participants to tell their stories” (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545).

I tie the previous definitions directly to my desire to understand what distinguishes the participants as readers among my students, how they have been “enculturated to read” (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 137). As indicated above, former soldiers in my classes and those in my pilot study described reading literary texts by choice and discussed the importance the practice of reading played during their deployments and afterward, a practice that has impacted their literacy in college in ways I hope to understand. These former soldiers as readers certainly stand out as a case among the students in college English classes. Researchers have pointed out, however, that a case study is the study of a case, not the phenomenon itself. The phenomenon’s significance is tied to its connection with the individual or group with whom it is associated: “This relationship between a grand phenomenon and mundane particulars suggests key theoretical assumptions of qualitative case studies, particularly those involving the production of meaning and its dependence on context” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 4). My interest in observing the cultural dimensions of the participants’ aesthetic reading seems theoretically consistent, then, with the adoption of this approach. Dyson and Genishi (2005) point out that the aim of such studies is not to establish relationships between variables (as in experimental studies) but to “see what some phenomenon means as it is socially enacted within a particular case” (p. 10). Certain young men, former soldiers, now college students, practice reading outside of the literacy-specific context of school. What does this practice mean within the context of the college English
classroom? Developing a method for understanding these students’ reading experiences and practices will clarify more fully what makes them unique among their peers, both in terms of their cultural background and their meaning-making processes. Yin (2009) claims that case study research seeks to answer a “how” or “why” question being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control (p. 13). A desire to understand the participants’ reading practices calls for this approach.

Evolution of the Project

As I mentioned in the introduction, I became drawn to this particular inquiry originally based on my interest in the veterans as students in my classes. Initially, this interest was based on their “performance” among their peers, primarily their contributions to class discussions and how they talked and wrote about what we were reading. Their profound insights into our reading selections and their tendency to find an angle on the material that was both unique and meaningful took me off guard. I must confess that, up until that point, I carried a certain stereotype concerning infantry soldiers, and they abruptly put it to rest for me. The pilot study I conducted with a group of these students led me to their reading lives as a subject of interest, for they identified a relationship between their reading and how they engaged with other aspects of their lives. When I initially discovered through the interviews in that pilot study that each was an active reader outside of the context of school, the idea was really an afterthought. They talked about that fact as if it were entirely common, that among their fellow soldiers, reading was a normal practice. I became determined to examine this phenomenon further, to gain a deeper sense of why and how they read. I was fortunate that the population I hoped to work with on this study was both easy to access and interested in participating, and I considered my proximity to them as a college English teacher to be an advantage in talking to them about their reading lives.
Participant Selection

For this study, I employed *purposeful sampling* in my recruiting of participants (Patton, 1990). The goal was to select cases with the potential to provide rich information, and I chose participants for a certain purpose: soldiers in college who are practicing readers. I located all but one of the participants from among the students at the college where I am a faculty member. Two of the three were former students. In order to mitigate potential issues of power, I chose participants who were no longer students and who could not possibly be in the future. I wanted to include former students among the participants, for these students first drew my interest toward the subject of students who read outside the mainstream. The participant from outside of the college was recommended to me by an acquaintance who was familiar with my research interest and who knew the participant to be both a former combat soldier and practicing reader. He was a student at a nearby college.

I sent out a call for participants through e-mail to other faculty in the institution where I teach, and, although the response was overwhelming, there were just four whom I was able to actually interview. I hoped to be able to interview at least one woman among them, but I received no responses from female students. There was a Hispanic marine among the initial group of participants who had been highly recommended by my colleagues in the English faculty. However, after our initial phone conversation and attempts to schedule an interview, he returned to Afghanistan.

The Participants

**Jack Wade.** In my experience with Jack, he has been an outgoing and very intelligent young man with a penchant for making well-timed humorous statements in social situations. He was born and raised in a small town located near a large lake in rural northeast Georgia, in a
family and community he would describe as conservative Christian. Jack was home schooled before middle school. He earned a reputation in high school as being “the party guy” and confessed to me after he returned from Iraq that he had been drinking quite heavily in the years prior to his departure. He was a student in two of my classes. However, he was called up for active duty and had to leave before the second class was finished. Jack had been trained as an Army medic and knew that he would serve in this capacity in his unit. Before he left for Iraq, we agreed to stay in touch. After he returned, I found Jack to be much more serious, a bit less gregarious, but himself nonetheless.

**Russell.** Russell has come across to me as a generally serious-minded young man. He seems highly intelligent and curious and demonstrates uncommon skills of memory analysis, skills he honed and brought to bear in deployments as a marine in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and skills he still develops and uses in his job as an intelligence analyst. Russell has a deep knowledge of a wide selection of subjects: butterflies of the Southeastern US, the varieties and styles of Arab calligraphy, the semiotic and sociocultural dimensions of the way urban spaces are configured and maintained. He was a student in one of my first-year composition and literature courses immediately upon his return from his second combat tour and, based on my experiences with him as a student, was one of the participants in the pilot study that preceded this one. Russell was born and raised in semi-rural northeast Georgia but spent his summers on his grandparents’ farm in south Georgia. He was also raised in a conservative Christian home.

**Mac.** Mac is from the rural Midwest, where he spent his middle and high school years living on his family’s farm. In my experience he has been self-deprecating and funny and very easy to talk to. He comes across as a young man who “takes it all in stride,” despite the fact that he has endured much difficulty for a man his age. Mac was deployed at the outset of the
invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of an elite special operations unit and spent much of his deployment in extreme conditions. Like the others, he grew up in a conservative Christian environment. However, he was more socially isolated than the others, living on a farm without cable television or internet access at home. He went to the public school in his community and spent time in the small library in the nearby town. Mac was not a student of mine prior to this study but came highly recommended by an acquaintance familiar with my research.

Site Selection

Given the nature of the data being sought, as well as my relationship to the central problem, I chose to include students at the institution where I teach among the participants. My relationship to the participants as their teacher provided the opportunity to begin learning what sets them apart as readers and students. Our familiarity with each other seems in this case to have been advantageous, for some context for talking about reading had already been established. Also, the college of which I am a faculty member is in many ways emblematic of many of the trends in post-secondary English pedagogy and student enrollment. As a rapidly growing institution providing a state system education at a much lower cost than a big university to students who either do not have the grades or the money to attend a large university, schools like mine are experiencing significant and steady growth. We have a relatively large number of young veterans as well, given both our geographic and demographic location and our relative affordability compared to universities in the area.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study took place during the summer of 2011 and consisted of interviews that ranged between 90 and 120 minutes. I conducted all interviews one-on-one with the participants at a time and place that was convenient for them. Patton (2002) stresses the
importance of having an ethical framework in place for dealing with issues of reciprocity, privacy protection, sensitivity to the provocation of certain feelings, and other potential issues related to the personal impact of the interview transaction (pp. 405-416). Although I was not able to pay the participants directly, I paid for their meal and accommodated their wishes relative to the research, agreeing to credit them and provide open access to it. Mainly, they were interested in the study and eager to read the finished product. Given the participants’ knowledge that I am an English teacher by vocation, it was important to me to remove all visible contexts to that end. I wanted to put them at ease as much as possible and remove any potential associative obstacles to their unhindered train of thought. All but one of the interviews took place in restaurants, and that one, the longest, I conducted via Skype, as the participant was in another city.

Patton (2002) describes three general categories of interviews: the informal, conversational interview; the general interview guide approach; and the standardized, open-ended interview (pp. 341-347). Merriam (1998) similarly describes a continuum of three approaches to interviewing: a highly structured, or standardized approach in which the wording and order of questions is predetermined; a semistructured approach, which is a mix of more- and less-structured questions; and an unstructured, or informal style, a flexible, exploratory, conversational interview with open-ended questions (pp. 72-74). DeMarrais (2004) identifies more specific categories, a few of which seem suited to a case study: intensive and in-depth interviews seek complete and detailed information from a participant; open-ended, unstructured, or conversational refers to an informal, conversational style of process and is adopted when participants seek to more freely engage in the process without merely responding to researcher’s questions (p. 53). Each of these interview styles might be employed as one seeks rich
descriptions from a small number of participants. Given the kind of information being sought through the interviews in this study, it was appropriate to design and deliver the protocol in a way that facilitated and did not hinder long, even exploratory speaking on the participants’ part. They needed to have the freedom to “talk their way to something” when useful or necessary. I made sure each was aware prior to the interview of what I was seeking to understand so that they would feel more comfortable talking during the interview session, which, although it employed a standard protocol, was more or less a conversational interview. In short, I sought to provide the participants with direction and a framework, guideposts for them as they considered and talked about their reading lives, but I also recognized their need for room to work their way through their thoughts.

I recorded each of the interviews and transcribed them as soon after the interview as possible. During the interviews, I noted particular comments that interested me and used those notes to ask additional questions later in the interview. I also made note of connections or themes that seemed to emerge during the course of the interviews and placed them in a file for future analysis. I then listened to the recording of each interview and made more specific notes, which I linked to the notes I had already made. During the transcription process, emergent themes and connections became even clearer.

I approached the interviews according to DeMarrais’ (2004) emphasis on interviews as “not simply exchanges of questions and answers by researchers and participants, but a form of discourse where the researcher and participant engage in coconstructing meaning within a particular type of social relationship” (p. 54). She referred to Mishler’s (1986) appropriation of the terms speech events and speech activities to describe the unique nature of interviews themselves as a culturally situated activity:
“[T]he question form is not the determining factor in the process through which ambiguity is manifested and resolved. This is done through the way that interviewers and respondents attempt to ‘fit’ their questions and responses to each other and to the developing discourse. Presumably ‘simple’ questions are as open and sensitive to this process as are complex ones.” (as cited in deMarrais, 2004, p. 55)

A researcher and participant engaged in an interview are working toward “shared meanings” (DeMarrais, 2004, p. 54). From a sociocultural perspective, the written transcript of the interview becomes data, not just answers but “a unique form of discourse between two people where one is an informed learner who is there to learn more about another’s experiences or series of experiences, views, or perspectives, or reactions to a particular phenomenon or event” (p. 55). At each stage of analysis, I approached the transcripts from this perspective.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) stress that the importance of conveying the attitude that participant’s views are valuable and useful. I tend to think of this treatment as common courtesy in conversation, but it is also crucial if one hopes to gain rich data during an interview. They stress the importance of allowing the participant to frame and structure the responses. This freedom is especially necessary if one is seeking to understand cognitive schema, an issue I address in my response to question 2. To this end, “the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (etic perspective)” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101). Interviewers have to be careful, therefore, not to “guide” a participant’s responses or to halt or redirect his or her response prematurely in an attempt to stick too rigidly to an interview protocol. Merriam (1998) advises against using jargon or technical language, any terminology that focuses respondents on the language itself instead of on their responses to questions (p. 76), and I kept this advice in
mind during the interview process. Researchers must also remain aware of how their philosophical and theoretical orientation informs their approaches to interviewing. Of course, this awareness applies directly as they develop research questions and a set of interview questions designed to garner useful responses from participants. However, researchers must also be careful not to provoke responses, either directly or tacitly, to support their own beliefs or conclusions.

In order to facilitate the participants’ consideration of their reading lives, I spoke with each participant over the phone and gave him the general interview protocol along with the research questions. I wanted each to feel prepared to speak during the interview, and I wanted to allow the conversations to develop naturally within the broader framework of the research questions. This approach, combined with my personal familiarity with all but one of the participants, contributed to less encumbered interviews, for each participant seemed to feel free to follow his train of thought. The goal was to elicit responses of depth rather than to make sure a wide variety of questions were answered.

The first interview was conducted with Jack. We communicated via e-mail and agreed to meet at a restaurant for the interview. Jack was aware of the general subject area he would be discussing. Nevertheless, I had an interview protocol with the questions written down. I also took notes during the interview, highlighting information that seemed to stand out relative to the protocol and the research questions. My interview with Jack lasted about an hour and twenty minutes. The day after the interview took place, I listened to my recording of it and took further notes on points in the data and emergent themes that might be relevant in subsequent interviews. When I listened back, I realized there was quite a bit of background noise, and I decided that that setting was not the best for the subsequent interviews.
The second interview was with Russell. Because he was residing in another state, we conducted the interview via Skype. Through e-mail he had been made aware of the study and the sorts of things I would be asking him about. As a former student of mine and a participant in a prior study, Russell and I were familiar with each other; he is in no way reluctant to talk, and conversation came freely. This rapport led to an unusually long interview of almost three hours, a portion of which included Russell slowly passing the camera on his laptop across his bookshelves to show what he had been reading for the past four years. He would occasionally stop on a book to tell me about it and why I should read it. Based on some key points from my interview with Jack, I had refined the interview protocol in order to address more directly the role of religion in case Russell mentioned that as part of his background. He did, and I encouraged him to elaborate on that area.

I interviewed Mac third. A friend had put me in touch with him, and the night before the actual interview, Mac and I spoke for two hours on the phone. I e-mailed him the interview protocol so that he would have time to consider his responses ahead of time. The next day, we met at a restaurant near his apartment during the mid afternoon, in an attempt to avoid being in too noisy an environment. Based on how Jack and Russell had brought their educational experiences into their discussion of their backgrounds, I had added to the interview protocol direct questions about what his schooling was like and how reading was modeled in his educational environment. The interview lasted around an hour and twenty minutes.

**Subjectivities**

Who I am, especially in connection with the people, issues, and environments related to this study undoubtedly colored the research. I identify here my own subjectivities as they relate to the context of this study and to the participants themselves.
Role as English Teacher and Researcher

As I mentioned in earlier, I became drawn to these students through the teacher-student relationship. As a college English teacher, I feel successful when students show clear evidence of critical thinking or that art is having an impact on them emotionally or intellectually, and I make a distinction between success of this sort and some of the particular “outcomes” I am expected to monitor. The soldiers in my classes and the individuals in this study are the kind of students I enjoy teaching. I appreciate them for making my job seem worthwhile.

A Believer in the Power of Literature

The participants in this study who were students of mine reminded me of what drew me to literature in the first place, something I feel had I lost along the way because of the relentlessness of my job. This reminder had a certain effect on my perspective, first, because they served to evaporate much of the stereotype I carried concerning infantrymen and, second, because they were, admittedly, my favorite students in a given semester. I felt like I learned more about whatever literature we were discussing than I taught them. I chose to teach literature at the college level in large part because of the impact reading has had on my own life, how it has served to color and enrich life for me and to help me make deeper meaning of the world. I was fortunate to have had certain teachers along the way and especially in college whose approach to literature solidified my determination to make it a central part of my life. In college, I first began to recognize in myself the growth of a “poetically-conditioned imagination,” and I hope to play that role in the lives of others.

Sense of Self as Outside the Mainstream

From an early age, I have thought of myself as being outside the mainstream in almost all that I think and do. I was never popular or successful in the ways my family or immediate
culture emphasized. I was extreme or on the far fringes in everything from my personal interests to my political views to my choice of music, but one thing I always considered important was to educate myself continually, though I chose to do so through means outside of the traditional environment of school. I watched a lot of public television, and I read *National Geographic* magazines, books of art, and underground newspapers. I am naturally interested in others whose ways of life seem distinct from the dominant culture. A big part of what has drawn me to the soldier-students has been how they, as readers and thinkers, seem to stand so far out among their peers in addition to how uncommon they are for the uniqueness of their lived experience. I do not like the idea of “normal,” especially as institutions tend to “normalize” the educational experience. My education has been more memorable and, I believe, more beneficial the more teachers operated outside of generalized sets of expectations.

**Data Reduction**

Initially, I had planned to analyze the texts of the interviews through discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) and to develop a system of coding throughout. However, with each interview, and after an initial review of the data, I became increasingly interested in the emergent themes as the participants presented them. The similarities between the participants and the ways they talked about their backgrounds and their reading experiences led me to resist too much micro-level dissection of the interview data for this particular study. Their stories were too interesting at the surface not to focus on the data with a thematic eye. I plan in a subsequent study to apply a different analytical lens to the interview data as I seek to answer some of the questions raised through this study.

As I addressed earlier, one of the goals in case study work is to discover the uniqueness of the case, and to that end, I analyzed each participant’s interview data individually. However,
given that they were selected according to particular similar criteria (i.e., soldiers who are practicing readers enrolled in college), I also sought threads of continuity, themes that emerged from the interviews as a whole. Generally speaking, case study data analysis is described as a process of using the research questions to search through the data for patterns of consistency. Through this process the data are dismantled and reassembled to tell the story of the case: “The sorting, resorting, organizing, and reorganizing, and labeling and relabeling of data should lead to a set of categories that answer the research questions in a meaningful, thick description that provides a summarization” (Hays, 2004, p. 232). I identified and analyzed these themes in light of the general outcomes and expectations of the literature classes I teach. In other words, I sought out the uniqueness of the participants as a whole as a case.

Data Analysis

The primary purpose of data analysis in a qualitative case study, according to Dyson and Genishi (2005), is to understand how the phenomenon being studied matters from the perspective of the participants in the case. This understanding occurs through inductive approaches, all of which are “grounded” in the data.

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Data analysis was guided by a combination of grounded theory and Dyson and Genishi’s (2005) five-stage process for analyzing case study data: (a) Initial reading: close reading of all
data sources and analytic memos and narratives, followed by writing additional analytic memos; (b) Focused rereading: developing analytic codes to group pieces of data in relevant categories; (c) Focused rereading: noting recurrent terms and themes that represent societal differences, identifying key narratives, employing a critical theory framework; (d) Propose assertions: interrelating contextualized analytic categories to develop assertions, reread for disconfirmation and negative examples; and (e) Contextualizing the case in the larger conversation: relating case-bound assertions to critical issues in literacy education (pp. 79-111). Although this study doesn't centralize a critical theory framework for analysis, I followed these stages generally as key themes emerged from the data.

During the initial close reading of the interview data alongside the transcripts, I began a making analytic notes, an extensive memoing to document the process of analysis which continued throughout. Through this process, I searched for any data which seemed to point to parallels between the participants' reading lives and aspects of their cultural and social histories. I then compared these notes for each of the interview transcripts and, through a process of clustering, I located each area of similarity relevant to the research questions. It was during this process, for example, that I identified a theme of “fear of ignorance” present in each interview. Once I had identified a set of themes which seemed to respond to the research questions, I went back through each transcript and selected each point at which the participants referred to it or to something closely related in order to both provide for as rich an exploration as possible and to ensure that the narrative being constructed from the data was as emic as possible.

The objective of grounded theory is to “generate emergent theories from the data that account for the data” (p. 157). One analytical approach based on these principles is the use of the constant comparative (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), an inductive method focused on the
subjective experiences of participants. According to Freeman (2005), this method provides a basis for organizing, comparing, and understanding the similarities between the different perceptions, understandings, and values of participants. In this process, a unit of data, such as an interview transcript, is broken into codes based on emerging themes and concepts, which are then organized into categories that “reflect an analytic understanding of the coded entities, not the entities themselves” (p. 80). Each unit of data is analyzed and systematically compared with previously collected and analyzed data prior to any further data collection: “Purposeful sampling is consistently employed in this iterative process to solicit data variations that exhaust all angles of a topic” (p. 80). Unlike many forms of analysis, a constant comparative approach occurs simultaneously with data collection.

The interview protocol was developed based on the primary research questions, and during the interviews, I remained aware of them as I made field notes, highlighting statements that seemed relevant or themes that seemed to emerge relative to the research questions. Given the emphasis on understanding the uniqueness of each case, however, I treated each transcript individually as I considered the relationship between each participant’s background and his reading life. Although I began to see similarities between them, such as the fact that each grew up in a conservative Christian environment, I deliberately analyzed each transcript on its own in order to “discover” the case. Very shortly after each interview, I listened to it again and made detailed notes, highlighting points that seemed to speak to the research questions or that seemed theoretically significant as I sought connections between their reading lives and their backgrounds or to consider their reading experiences in light of the aesthetic theories outlined in chapter 2. Then, I used the transcription process as an opportunity to solidify thematic and theoretical connections. I then grouped sections of the transcripts around emergent themes, such
as fear of ignorance, following the trail, or reading as relationship. These themes were considered both individually with each participant and as they relate to the kind of reading emphasized in the post-secondary institution where I work and elsewhere.

I based my analysis of the role of the participants’ backgrounds in their reading lives on Cole’s (1996) concept of cognitive schemas and scripts, which presuppose that activities, as they are enacted and experienced, are mediated by “selection mechanisms which specify how certain essential elements relate to one another while leaving other, less essential elements to be filled in as needed according to the circumstances” (p. 125). Scripts are “event schemas,” which guide our actions in familiar settings or daily activities. “Cultural models” refer to those schemas that are shared within a culture and that mediate activity in various domains, including events, institutions, and other social configurations. I sought evidence of the schemas and scripts mediating the participants’ reading practices and experiences, and I treated each transcript individually in this process.

**Conclusion**

From a rich set of interviews, I have chosen to, as much as possible, allow the participants to tell their own stories relative to the research questions prior to conducting my own analysis, in which I have identified emergent themes and considered them in light of how reading is being represented in two-year college English classes that I have experience teaching.
CHAPTER 4

FLIP THE SCRIPT: JACK WADE’S STORY

Jack Wade (pseudonym) was a student in my World Literature II survey class, a poorly named course in which I focus on a smattering of writing from continental Europe, the US, Russia, South America, West Africa, and the Middle East. I was immediately struck by his charismatic personality and his immediate willingness to participate. Jack sat in the center of the room and attended every class meeting. Like many of the soldiers, he set the tone of the class and managed to walk the fine line between spontaneous comments and interjections, most of which were genuinely funny, and serious engagement in discourse around our readings. Jack was both the class clown and a class leader.

He seemed to know quite a bit about the cultures and histories connected to our reading selections, more than most, and he brought that knowledge to bear in very insightful ways in order to highlight relevant aspects of each text. For example, he was the only student to express an awareness of why certain social tensions might exist around traditional institutions, such as marriage, in Russia in the early 1900s, and he linked that to particular characters in Tolstoy's work. He sat in the center of the classroom each day, and I often noticed other students looking to him when I would posit a question about our reading.

I was excited when Jack enrolled in my creative writing class the following semester. It was in this class where Jack began to talk about the books he was currently reading and why he was into those authors' work. I hadn't read any of the writers he mentioned, but how he talked about them made me very interested. His writing was as clever and compelling as his speech,
and it was fun to see him make progress in it. Unfortunately, however, it was just a few weeks into the semester that he was called up to go to Iraq. I asked him if we could stay in touch during and after his deployment, and he agreed to do so.

Jack is an Army medic and the most recently deployed of the participants in this study. He grew up in a community in rural northeast Georgia he describes as “lower middle class in a white affluent controlled county... general mean below the poverty level, but there's a lake.” In this community with a fairly significant division of wealth between those with property on and around the lake and those who either worked in the dwindling textile industry or in farming, he considers himself to have been “the poor kid” among his friends and peers. He was raised in what he describes as “a hardcore Southern Baptist” home in a predominantly conservative Christian community. He has two older sisters and was homeschooled through fifth grade. Jack considers it unusual that he didn't learn to read until he was seven (I have no idea how old I was when I learned to read). When I asked him to elaborate he indicated that this was the result of a “mother who was flower child infused of ‘It's better to have imagination than knowledge’” and who “let [him] kind of wander up in [his] own way.”

Jack's mother had a degree in Christian theology, and he recalls that she occasionally read books in this vein along with the Bible, but other than this, he doesn't recall reading taking place in the home. As far as how reading was talked about and conceived of in both his home and community, he describes it as having been “a tool to gain religious knowledge.” Even during the time he was homeschooled, however, Jack would get absorbed in the act of learning through reading, as he would get interesting in a specific subject and “chase it down” through reading. He would see something interesting in nature, for example, then seek it out in Peterson's Field Guides or Encyclopedias. During this process he would come across other things of interest and
begin a new trail of inquiry, developing a learning style that, although it lacked a traditional structure, seems to have served him well in being able to draw upon a wealth of knowledge. He describes learning about history this way, as he would read about a famous battle then want to learn about the key military or political figures involved, which would lead him to want to understand the cultural and political forces in their lives: “Who is this guy, and what did he do, and how does this effect and tie into that.”

This approach to reading began to cause Jack trouble in his secondary schooling, however, as he describes the hardest part of high school having been his resistance to “reading the right stuff.” Jack would “end up reading forty pages about the Spanish American War and then flip to the end to read ten pages about what I was supposed to be reading for class.” As I mentioned earlier, few of my students over the years have exhibited such a complete knowledge of history, and none have been able to contextualize it for our readings as seemingly effortlessly as Jack was able to do so, yet the approach to history in Jack's high school classes, one which he describes as reading to learn important facts and dates, didn't accommodate his desire to form connections and widen the radii of significance:

Cause people don't like to look at history as a whole...Why do the US and Iran have problems? Well, we essentially overthrew their elected officials and put the king back in power. Why was there a Cold War? Because in 1918 we fought alongside the Whites trying to take back, you know, the crown. Soviets don't like us because they had their revolution, we tried to stop it. People don't look at things contextually; they want to look at – 'Why were the '80s so bad?' Cause the '50s were this, and...
Jack applied this approach in his science classes as well and often departed from the course's assigned text in order to explore the significance of what he was learning and to find how it might connect to other things he understood.

Jack's tendency to get wrapped up in inquiry, to get caught in the current, so to speak, also caused him trouble in his English classes in high school, even though it was at this time that he first discovered literature and began to value it above other pursuits. He describes how this began in the Accelerated Reader program in high school: “Best year ever, read *Moby Dick.* Failed the test.” Fortunately, Jack's teacher recognized that he had been genuinely engrossed in the text and that he merely hadn't read it “the right way” in order to be successful on the test. This teacher, one of the only ones Jack remembers fondly from high school, actually went and changed the answers in order to give him the points he needed then required him instead to read more books in order to get through the program: “He tricked me into doing more reading.” Jack claims he “tore through books” once he felt free to do so.

**Reading Becomes More Existential**

When he was twenty-one, Jack had a more profound and life-changing reading experience when a friend gave him the book *Ishmael,* by Daniel Quinn: “I sat down in bed about ten o’clock one night, I was with Amy (his fiancé at the time), and I read it ’til four in the morning, and I put it down ’cause I was getting too sleepy to read, and I woke up and didn't get out of bed 'til I finished it...That kind of just woke me back up.” This experience began a new, more serious pursuit for Jack, as he “went on a really long read,” exploring the tension-filled space where religion, culture, mythology, sociology, and biology meet. He began to see his own religious and cultural background “through different lenses” and became both challenged and caught up in the excitement of discovery. He read Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*
and *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* during this period, seeking to see the religious narratives and concepts with which he was raised “revisioned,” considered from a variety of angles.

Jack describes how this frenetic journey in reading began to shake up his life in unpredictable ways as he saw his sense of self and his confidence in his beliefs suddenly disrupted:

> When I went on this crazy reading spree and I read, I just dove in hard and heavy into a lot of just trippy concepts, and I was reading a lot of different philosophers, and I was trying to just soak up as much knowledge as possible. And I just fucked my head up. And that's actually probably why me and Amy ended up breaking up, cause I just, we were engaged, and I was like 'I have so much going on, so much to think about. I don't know anything.' I went from, you know, being completely secure in my world of knowledge and understanding to within a matter of a month and like six books later realizing that I didn't know shit about anything. And the concept of not knowing anything and having to commit to everything definitely blew my mind wide open.

For the first time in his life, Jack had experienced a degree of risk in his reading, and he describes his determination to “tread lightly” after this. The intensity of this episode, one which led him to questions about the nature of reality and experience, showed him the power that reading could have and dispelled any notion he might have had about reading for mere entertainment. Jack began to understand reading as a challenge, a struggle to be willingly engaged in for the purpose of self-transformation: “I'm trying to attack a book...I don't read for pleasure...If I want to be amused, I'll watch sports...I don't need books to be an escape.” Jack
backed away from reading as much and went through a period marked by substance abuse: “I was too fucked up to read.” During this time he did read the *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis' examination of demonology and the Christian spiritual life while he was “completely trashed,” an experience he describes as intense, given his increasing “loss of faith.”

**What the Army Can't Take Away**

It was during basic training in the Army that Jack decided to make reading a part of his life again:

When I left basic the first day, the first time I actually left the base, I went to like a Books-a-Million, Barnes and Noble and bought like ten books. Cause I didn't realize how much I actually would enjoy being able to read until, one, I couldn't read, I didn't have any books, and also having that nine weeks of without having anything in the world that I wanted. And after the first thirty minutes we all looked the same, we had the same sweatsuits, the same tennis shoes. I didn't have anything, and that's when I started realizing what things started to matter, you know, I wanted to read more literature, I bought like twelve like the Penguin Classics. And I almost read them all.

It's striking how as the more superficial elements of Jack's identity were stripped away, he turned again to the vivid interior life he associates with reading. This had become one of the most important aspects of his life, something he yearned for when he couldn't have it, something he truly missed about himself. Interestingly, he departed from the classics as he began to follow a trail of inquiry linked to his earlier reading exploring various “heady, existential creation theory books” a process which “died with the secret. I got the to secret and realized I was done with that vein for a while. A little ridiculous in some aspects for me.” I'm not sure what exactly he
means by this, except that Jack seems to have exhausted this area for himself when he felt there was no longer something potentially meaningful enough to search for.

In a process which reminds me of the characters in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, for their deployment the soldier's in Jack's unit were allowed one, relatively small “tough box” in which to place personal items of their choosing. Jack filled his almost entirely with books, many of them philosophical and political in nature: *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *Mein Kamph*, *Atlas Shrugged*, *1984*, *Animal Farm*, “big heavy books that I knew I was going to have a hard time reading without distractions...a lot of heavy reads that would be good to read without, you know, all the stuff on the TV and watching baseball for a little bit, you know.” Jack seems to have anticipated a need to escape the more mindless forms of escapism that would be offered during his deployment. Although he fully intended to read all of the books he had taken while he was in Iraq, he didn't have time to because his job changed. He was put in a position of leadership as a medic which he didn't anticipate and sent to a remote location, and this meant he was in charge of others and found himself working twelve hours a day, seven days a week. The only book he got through was Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, “cause it was one I had just really wanted to read but just hadn't had a chance.”

**Literary Missionary**

Although Jack wasn't able to read nearly as much during his deployment as he had hoped, his relationship to reading up until that point began to be directed in an unusual way. Because of the Army's concerns about the psychological and emotional stresses associated with war, Jack and the medics in his unit were encouraged to create a “safe place” for soldiers to come to in the field for their mental well being. He created a place that was “off limits” where soldiers could periodically escape and “just hang out and talk.” Jack found himself in the role of a counselor,
and he brought his literary life to bear to this end: “If you're having a bad day, come talk to us...we want people to be comfortable there. So I had all my books set up...you know, anyone who wants to borrow a book, borrow it and bring it back.” Jack would often sit and talk with soldiers who were feeling stressed or unstable, and what seemed to him like natural conversations about a wide variety topics were for others a source of new knowledge and insight. He shares the story of a Navy Seal who would come to him for conversation and who eventually became a believer in the power of reading:

a guy I had a great deal of respect for, a Navy Seal, I mean, just, dude was the man, I mean just absolutely jacked, did his job great, he was, he was a professional. You looked at him and knew this guy was a pro, hands down. But me and him would get to talking, and he was extremely fascinated by my knowledge of books. Cause he would kind of talk and I would talk about this book I read or that book I read, and how in this book it talked about this concept of how it could be but this book gives the counterpoint, and that's how...I mean we could sit and talk for hours. Then one day he just was like, 'I'm really jealous of what you know.' which to me just flipped the script. I'm, you know, a hundred and seventy pounds going into the gym with these guys to work out every day feeling like a complete, you know, failure of masculinity, as I'm squatting what they're curling, you know, just these just, essentially guys who...their body is essentially another weapon. But he was fascinated by the concepts, like 'I would just love to just take your mind and roll with it for a day and see what's in there.' And to me that just was really a shake up of what I conceptualized as a goal. But for him, he had taken his life and dedicated it to the opposite end of the spectrum, not pursuing knowledge but pursuing skills, physical fitness, and his job...It was flattering and awkward all at one time.
Given his own extreme experience with reading before entering military life, I find it curious that Jack identified books as an important source of grounding, restoration and healing even for others.

Jack had come across to me as a young man fairly confident in his knowledge, academically speaking, prior to his deployment, but realizing that this could have value for others outside of the context of school seems to have set him off on a different path.

**Why Jack Reads and How he Conceptualizes Reading**

Jack associates reading with both his self-image and his pursuit of a certain kind of experience. He places more value on educating himself than he does on “getting an education”: “I don't view education as my means to success by any stretch. I want to educated for my personal well being. I want to know that I'm intelligent and I'm able to converse with people of all classes...I want to be well rounded.” Jack illustrated this by describing how at a party he had a conversation on the back porch about international finance and floating currencies then went inside and had an hour-long screaming match about who was the best shortstop of all time.

When I asked Jack to explain what he thinks is taking place during the act of reading, he focused directly on the interchanges between characters, both in the text and beyond it:

I'm looking for the conversation, what's actually occurring, cause it's great. If I'm reading a book – let's say it's set in 1920s Russia – I know it's 1920s Russia; you don't have to tell me that, you know, it's an awkward time politically and societally. You don't have to tell me that, you know, this guy was the son of colonel, this guy or this girl was, you know, poor. You don't have to give me all that. What's happening between them? It's what they're saying. I really focus on what's being said. That a lot of times to me is when the author is directly talking. The conversation for me is when you're getting what the author
is wanting you to understand...seeing what someone else who has different life experiences feels. It's especially great for me if it can be about a similar experience. As long as there's something that I've experienced but I can see through a different lens, I really enjoy that because I'm able to understand. Something for me, I like to take something that I think I understand and then learn something new about that. It's very enjoyable.

Jack's interest in “philosophical metaphors” and revisioning of Christian concepts arose out of his pursuit of this experience, and once he was able to temper himself and gain more security in himself as a thinker, something to which he attributes his deployment, he became more confident treading in this area. I find the parallels between the spiritual life as presented in Southern Baptist Christianity and Jack's relationship to reading quite compelling. One gets “saved,” “born again” in an experience often described as intense, emotional, and life changing. Then one seeks to remain grounded in this reality. To this end, reading the Bible, praying, attending church, and having fellowship with others who have had this experience are indispensable. Life is then understood largely in narrative terms, with God as a destiny-sculpting force and us as characters in a cosmic “good versus evil”-themed story. This life structure was presented very prominently in Jack's life, and although he claims to have rejected religious belief, his relationship with reading seems to bear similarities to the relationship with God which his family and community would have spoken of and modeled.

In his reading, Jack has returned to the religious narratives from his upbringing, seeking to see them reworked, played with in philosophically compelling ways. He identified with a Christ who seeks curious, inquisitive people, learners instead of those seeking the supernatural, a Christ who eventually walks away from his calling and tries to groom someone else to do what
he can't. Fiction that cuts to the core of cultural and religious belief seems to provide characters with whom he identifies, both within the text and beyond it in the author: “I find it hard to hear anything about Christianity and not instantly, I know it. And write it off, but if you can take the exact same story and flip the script to where all of a sudden it's seagulls, I'm able to look at it with a different perspective.” When a friend asked Jack why he was no longer a Christian, he responded, “Because I've read the Bible.” Jack is drawn to myths and sees real value in characters which represent the deeper struggles of human existence. He even enjoys stories and characters which refer to Biblical narratives, but the Bible itself “doesn't do it for” him.

I asked Jack what was next on his reading list, and I found his response surprising:

*Mere Christianity*, by C.S.Lewis, 'cause I've enjoyed all the C.S. Lewis I've read, and that's supposed to be his, that his thesis, that's his reason for Christianity and as a person who grew up 'of faith' but no longer acting by any stretch of the imagination, you know, more or less denounced it, I'd like to understand an intelligent man who's brilliant and Christian. If this is his apologetic, 'Why do you feel this way? What was your reasoning?' 'cause it's his reason for what he does, and I'd like to know why someone who seems to me to be intelligent enough to decide otherwise still went the route of Christianity.

Jack's tendency to continually interrogate his current beliefs is a central part of his life currently, and reading is his primary means to this end. He seems to actively avoid becoming settled or comfortable, cognitively speaking, and describes the experience of challenging himself through reading as both troubling and “very pleasurable.” As a teacher whose primary concern is to foster critical thought among my students, I can count on one hand the number of times I have encountered one who deliberately engages in this kind of self-challenging.
Reading is intrinsic to Jack's how Jack constructs himself. His identity is wrapped up in his reading, and he seems to naturally link reading with an ability to access a wider variety of discourses (Gee, 1996), which serves to reaffirm to him his intelligence relative to others as well as to add variety and color to life. Jack comes from a community in which educational achievement and intellectual prowess aren't generally valued or encouraged, yet he seems to want to be known as a smart, well-read person while at the same time being the “party guy.” He readily shares both his vast knowledge on a wide variety of subjects and the sordid details of his many youthful exploits, unapologetically.
Appealing to Dyson and Genishi’s (2005) stages of case study analysis, I grouped the data into categories based on their relationship to the primary research questions. Both during the interview with Jack and during the analysis process, I appealed to Leont'ev's (1981) concept of goal-mediated action as the the unit of observation of where the external meets the internal, the intrapsychological meets the interpsychological. My focus was on the evidence of some of the sociocultural dimensions of Jack's reading practices. Additionally, I focused on the nature of the reading experience as Jack described it, how his description aligns with the dimensions of the aesthetic articulated in chapter 2. These two theoretical orientations converge in the analysis of Jack as a reader.

Arguably, Jack is a young man, who, culturally speaking, doesn't seem like he should stand out the way he does. His community and family don't seem to have provided much encouragement to read at all, much less to approach reading with the degree of intensity and purpose he does. How Jack has been “enculturated to read” (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 137) seems to located more in his sense of himself as counter to his immediate culture than in a direct encouragement from family, friends, or schooling. Smagorinsky (2001) points out that "resisting one set of cultural constructs relies on precepts that are appropriated from other cultural constructs" (p. 146). Jack's reading is a key part of how he constructs himself, especially relative to others. Jack's stated goal of wanting to be well rounded and to be able to converse on a wide variety of subjects seems to be part of what undergirds the experience he has when he reads.
Reading and being a “reader” seem to reinforce to him that he stands out from the community he comes from, that he's not average.

My interview with Jack reveals a person for whom reading is, among other things, a means to self-challenging, a distinct and important kind of experience for Jack. He doesn't read to be entertained. His use of reading to interrogate his own personal beliefs seems to arise from the nature of the experience this provokes. Attridge's (2004) notion of *alterity* in the literary event is significant here, as Jack seems to welcome the temporary discomfort of moving into unfamiliar territory, cognitively speaking. The almost manic experience he describes having had as an adult reader, one in which he experienced his world view and concept of reality disrupted, can be understood as a more prolonged and intense example of Dewey's framework of the aesthetic outlined in Chapter 2. The fact that Jack continues to pursue this kind of experience, despite the disorientation he experiences, is evidence of this idea and echoes the “trinity” of the “literary event” as Attridge describes it. Jack's explanation of why he is drawn to “philosophical metaphors” and seeing the figures and concepts associated with his community's Christianity imagined in a new way illustrates the the use of the familiar in unfamiliar ways and the welcoming of “the other,” which is not only the basis for why this experience is an aesthetic one for Jack, but also the place where, according to Vygotsky, new culture is formed.

One of the ways of defining one's self in both Jack's immediate family and his community seems tied to the kind of evangelical Christianity Jack describes as being so preeminent in his life. One of the “cultural models” (Cole, 1996) mediating Jack's reading identity seems to arise from this experience. Although he disassociates himself from the tenants of this worldview, the positioning of himself as “evangelist” doesn't seem to have been abandoned along with it. His orientation toward others, Jack's turning outward of his identity as a reader, his “ministry” to
I remained aware of Ricoeur’s (1984) concept of narrative identity and Bruner’s (1991) articulation of the narrative construction of reality as I considered how Jack described the relationship between his reading life and other lived experience. Jack’s vocational choices as well as his sense of himself relative to others bear resemblances on some level to the primary narratives in Jack’s cultural background. The emphasis in evangelical Christian narrative on a sudden and significant transformation of the self followed by a ministry of that to others, the role text often plays in quickening or continuing to fuel this process, certainly as far as the central role of sacred scripture is concerned, the distinction of the self from the general population in the sense of the faithful as opposed to those who are “of the world” are all common themes in Jack's religious background. Echoes of these cultural models seems present both in Jack's reading life and his social life, and in his profound experiences of reading his past self converges with his present in the work of art. Sumara (2000) describes the “work of art” as reflects on his own experience of reading The Underpainter:

it is also the case that this reading experience was complexly attached to other experiences that had been very influential to me some years ago. It is this triangulation of the “presently experienced me” and the “remembered me from the past” and a “literary identification” that created the conditions for the work of art to take hold. Because I
understand the “work of art” to be conditioned by human interaction with some “object” of the world that renders everyday perception less familiar, I would say that my interaction with this character (Robert Henri)...I was confronted by the enormous change that had occurred in my thinking and, most interestingly, in my sense of self-identity. (p. 122)

Jack’s past both as it is remembered and as it has been internalized schematically mediates both his experience of reading and its role in his self construction, as he moves on from the reading act, transformed and transforming through it even after the book is closed: “Of course “reading” is not merely decoding and comprehending. More generally interpreted, “reading” continues long after these beginning activities” (Sumara, 2000, p. 122).

Jack’s determination to build a community around his reading, offering to others the potential for a more meaningful life is something the other participants have also done, participating in a shared discourse around the practice of reading, not essentially to be entertained, but to have their lives altered in unpredictable and profound ways.

Employing a constant-comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1965), I made note of the role of religion and community in the interview data from Jack as well as the way he described the experience of reading to be and Russell describe having been raised in very similar cultural conditions, so by the time I moved from my interview with Jack to that with Russell, I had made note of how Jack described choosing texts and reading in pursuit of a profound experience as opposed to mere entertainment relationship. I also made note of the intersection between his reading experiences and the religious notions present in his upbringing. Another area I zeroed in on was how Jack emphasizes being free to “chase that stream of knowledge,” which is another
reason he reads, often at odds with “reading the right stuff” for school. These themes became more significant during and after my interview with Russell.
CHAPTER 6

COLLECTING BUTTERFLIES: RUSSELL HARTWELL’S STORY

Russell Hartwell (pseudonym) was among the first group of veterans to enroll in my classes and one of the first to arouse my interest in soldiers as students and as readers. He is a Marine who had deployed with the first wave of soldiers into Afghanistan, and after that deployment he attached to a different unit in order to go to Iraq. He was more quiet in class than were the other veterans, who were generally more gregarious and humorous. He seemed to me to be a more serious and thoughtful person, organized and focused on the task at hand. When Russ did offer his perspective in classroom discussions, it was clear to me that he had thought deeply about what he had read, moreover, that he had interrogated it, and he extended his challenge into the classroom discussion. He had a keen way of locating and emphasizing the unexamined angle of whatever subject the students were dealing with, and his comments had a way of silencing the room.

At the time, all of the English teachers at the college were required to issue the same final exam worth twenty-five percent of the course grade, an in-class essay requiring the students to choose from among six topics on which to write. One of the prompts, which were newly generated each semester, asked the writer's opinion about the war in Iraq, which at the time had begun to go badly. Instead of crafting a neat five-paragraph essay for an easy “A,” something he could have easily done, Russell chose to attack the presumptuousness of the topic in that it called on those ill equipped to weigh in on this issue to express their opinions, opinions he didn't believe had been earned through a genuinely informed perspective. His essay became one about
questioning the educational value of such an exercise. The policy of the department at the time was to have each teacher's essays graded by other faculty in order to “prevent favoritism.” Russell was aware of this policy but seemed more concerned with the argument at hand than with illustrating his proficiency at crafting a nice essay. That impressed me. When I conducted the pilot study which preceded this one, Russell was one of the participants. It was through this study that my interest developed in how the soldiers' reading was being mediated by their military experiences, and Russell was one of the most intriguing of the cases.

What stands out to me from both my interviews with Russell and having had him as a student is how profoundly his cognition seems to have been shaped by his reading. The boundaries between his reading and his life are strikingly porous. Even his more protocol-driven, instrumental reading, such as that he did for science classes, seemed mediated by schema (Cole, 1996) he employed as a marine in Iraq and Afghanistan. When I decided to go forward with this study, Russell is one of the first potential participants I sought out, although it took me a while to track him down again some years after that study.

Russell grew up the older of two boys in suburban and semirural Georgia in a home and immediate community he describes as “conservative Christian.” He considers his family to have been middle class. His father was a graduate of Georgia Tech and had a successful small business. Russell attended public school.

The Planting

Russell spent summers on his grandparents' farm in the southern part of the state. As a child, he was “violently opposed to reading” and recalls when he was in the fourth grade the first book without pictures he was forced to read, a story about a boy who befriends a group of Native Americans. I find it interesting that he so vividly remembers this book; I can't even remember
the first book I read. With the exception of his mother reading the Bible on occasion, he doesn’t recall much reading occurring in his home. He describes his home as a place where critical thinking was discouraged, especially with regard to church, school, and politics, and he considers his grandmother, who was a school teacher, to have been the only member of his family to exhibit or encourage critical thought or reading as a practice:

There was no critical thinking when it came to that area of life. You know what I mean. I don't remember anybody even suggesting, you know, 'Well, what do you think about this?' That's never happened. It was just like, 'Oh, this is church, and this is what it is, you know then grandma take me to library and I can check out a book on UFOs. I mean it was like completely - You know what I mean? Like, how do you go through life and have those mental walls? I don't know, but that's exactly what it is: A whole other subdivision of life without critical thinking.

Russell attributes his experience in war and the moral and cultural quandaries it brought to the fore to his beginning to gain a new perspective on his family and cultural influences, the drive toward critical inquiry which he considers a defining aspect of himself: “I think I only picked that up after a year or so of being out of the military after having seen what I'd seen and having had the time during that break in the military from my family and being apart from all that to kind of find that myself.”

The Growing

In middle school Russell was enrolled in F.O.C.U.S., a program for “above average” students, but he felt very uncomfortable there and experienced a great deal of stress, feeling that his new friends were all smarter than he was because he lacked critical thinking skills. This stress resulted in his literally going blind during class, actually unable to see the problems he
was expected to solve. Russell credits the teacher in this class, “one of the truly great ones” for not only intuiting the distinction between his capability and the stress he felt being asked to perform in a social setting, but for applying an appropriate remedy in allowing him to read on his own for credit. Although he told her that he hated to read, she offered him a book to take home and read for later discussion, a story which forever changed his relationship to reading:

She must have known that that would've made a connection with me, because I grew up on a farm every summer...I would go back down to Statesboro and live with my grandparents on their farm...basically being able to run around and go fishing and do farm stuff and cows and all that good stuff. Uh, so, her giving me that book was giving me something that was immediately relevant, you know, to the kinds of experiences that I would love to have had. Uh, man it was just great. I remember I didn't put that book down. I went inside, you know when I started reading it, got home and started reading it, I pretty much read it cover to cover. And I remember my dad being outside, he was outside on the ladder, painting the house, and I went outside to tell him about this book 'cause it was so good, you know? And I had never tried to – I don't know – My parents had never talked to me about reading. It was never – I can barely remember them ever reading...but I remember going outside to try to explain this book to him, and I just started balling. I mean I was in tears because the fuckin' dog had died [laughing] you know? Or both of them had died, and it was this, you know, this heart wrenching story about these dogs, and that was one thing that I could always relate to, you know, that bond between a boy and his dog on a farm, 'cause I'd had that, you know? So that was, I guess, the first sort of introduction, the thing that really got me into books.
This experience led Russell to pursue new experiences in reading, and he describes being seduced by books which seemed to promise something new and profound. For example, he chose to read *The Lord of the Rings* not because of what he knew about the stories or the author, but because of the mystery and significance promised by the black, hardbound cover with a fictional language printed on the front. He enjoyed carrying the book around with him, as if it were some kind of talisman. He seems to have developed a sensory, even tactile connection with books, and he describes, even today, his preference for printed books over those in digital form. More than once as he showed me his books during our interview, Russell remarked on how cool or not a cover or binding looked: “It was artistic...I loved the cover, so I carried it around with me.” Russell became familiar with books, with having a book with him, with feeling its presence, both physically and in terms of possibility for occupying a different space.

I am amazed by Russell's ability to remember and describe his reading life from childhood on in such great detail. He can recall not only the books he read and how he felt about them, but the sensory aspects associated with choosing them. For each book he mentioned reading as a child, he described how the cover looked and felt. He also recalls with clarity the conditions in which he was living at the time, the time of year, the other things going on in his life, and so on, and often these connected with aspects of what he was reading.

As an adolescent, Russell would go to some lengths to act out the kinds of scenarios he encountered in his reading. He became interested in the adventurous aspects of military life during middle school through stories, and he and a friend would purchase military surplus and go on overnight missions, which would begin with them actually jumping and rolling out of his friend's mother's minivan into the woods. The attention to detail in their play is striking:
We'd make movement through the night, you know, to get where were going, and we'd set up our bivouac site and get our hide site prepared with branches and stuff and, I mean, half the time we couldn't find our own, you know, tent by the time we had camouflaged it so well. But once we'd set up our camp and dropped our bigger packs, we'd go out in what we call the deuce gear [unclear], which is just like a harness with some pouches and stuff, you know, just a small amount of kit.

Their missions involved such youthful challenges as sneaking up on a man sleeping on his porch and trying to touch him on the shoulder and sneak back into the woods without being discovered or of sneaking up to a house and taping firecrackers to the door then hiding close by as the neighbors searched for the perpetrators, and such real challenges as repelling from a 250-foot train bridge. It was as they were doing this that they had a “Stand by Me” moment. Only they were unable to get off the bridge and had to go under the track, where they crouched down amidst the waving I-beams.

**Hiding in the Fields**

During his first year of high school, reading became a way for Russell to escape uncomfortable social situations, such as the ones he encountered in the school cafeteria. He chose instead to sneak his lunch into the library and hide among the books:

I wasn't comfortable with being in high school to begin with, and now here we are in a, a big cafeteria with a bunch of people that I really, I don't have any [unclear] and I don't know, and you've got all these divisions between who you sit with and blah, blah, blah, all that nonsense. Well, I said 'Forget this.' and I would go through the thing and grab a chicken sandwich and go hide in the library between the stacks and read. I know the librarians knew that I was skipping out on lunch and reading and hiding in the library,
‘cause I would always be eating my chicken sandwich behind a book, you know, eating in the library, trying to not let them know I was eating in the library. But they let me sit and didn't bother me. So that probably had a lot to do with that escapism of avoiding all the nonsense of the cafeteria and being able to go sit somewhere and read.

Reading provided solace to Russell, solace he would need when, at the end of his freshman year, his family moved and he had to start the uncomfortable process again of starting over at a different public school. Russell increasingly associated reading with escaping unpleasant social situations, and it seems that as he has developed in adulthood, this association has as well, only he seems now to read against social conventions, the prevailing attitudes, the too-often unexamined cultural ideals and beliefs he encounters both in the social world and from his own background.

Although he had while he was in middle and high school wanted to become an English teacher, his interest in the military, which had originated in his reading and become part of his play into adolescence, led him to enlist in the Marines. He had spoken with recruiters from the Army but claims he was drawn to the Marines because their recruiter seemed entirely uninterested in whether or not Russell enlisted.

During his deployment, Russell would have family and friends send him books because he didn't like the selection of “three-dollar paperbacks” available in the camp where he was stationed: “How do you keep an idiot entertained?” Among the novels he read was *American Psycho*, which he read “in the back of a Humvee.” His choice of books during his deployments is interesting in how they associate with some of the issues with which he was dealing at the time. Among these were *1984* and and other novels he describes as “dystopian.” Even as a committed U.S. Marine engaged in very serious situations and following orders, Russell
understood that the issues surrounding America's involvements overseas weren't the simplistic ones being promoted in the American media.

“Chasing the Rabbit”

Russell seems to have a dynamic curiosity, and reading is a primary vehicle to this end. Once he takes an interest in something, he is driven to learn all he can about it and to see it from as many angles as possible. This approach serves him well in the work he does as an intelligence analyst. What amazes me is how Russell connects seemingly disparate subject areas or threads of life, removing the often artificial boundaries drawn by formal education around fields of inquiry:

It's a constantly self feeding, like, to me life period is this kind of self repeating loop, and you ever have the opportunity, uh, do you ever talk to [name of colleague]? [yeah] Yeah, he's the physics teacher over in [name of college]. Him and I would always have great conversations, and I love talking to him, because one of the things he would always say is that life is sort of this, you know in your head you have basically this computer program running and you have the option to continually update that model and change it, revamp it, and uh, feed new information in and get, and so ok, here's how I'm going to change the function so that I have a better output. And so I think that's – I think I've always enjoyed that concept of it; the more I can ingest the more I can build a better mental model, uh, and the better I can understand new information but also, you know, just better experience it, uh, life, you know, just have a better experience of it in general.

Collecting Butterflies

When I asked Russell to talk about the relationship between reading and his life, he used an interesting and deep metaphor to explain:
Because it's one of those things where it's like, some people are troubled by, like they see, uh, like one of the things I got into was butterflies. For a long time I collected butterflies, uh, because it was a long period of time in my life where to me it was a butterfly; it didn't matter what it was; to me it was a butterfly. You know? That's all it was. It had a simple label on, that's all it was. But then I remember at one point after watching CSI and realizing how cool Bill Grissom's office was and the fact that he had mounts of butterflies in his home and in his office, I decided I might like to try that. So once I got into that, to catching butterflies, I realized how much diversity there really was, and I think that's another great metaphor for lots of other thinks. Cause once you get into butterflies, there's hundreds of thousands of different varieties of 'em, you know? And there're tens of thousands of those even in the southeastern United States. So once you start to catch 'em and look at what their names are and look at all the different patterning and really examine them on a macro/micro scale it's not just a butterfly anymore. Now it's something more specific and more informative and more detailed than your mental model had ever accounted before before. You know what I mean? So there're so many other things in life that are exactly that same way on this macro scale.

He illustrates how what often begins with a mere impression or a sudden interest will, through the process of trail chasing through reading, open up into a complex and colorful world. Russell stands out in that he doesn't seem to feel the need to interrupt or stop his inquiry, even if it might seem frivolous. He read fifteen books about slight of hand, for example, after he saw Mission Impossible. That might seem obsessive to some, but Russell describes it as both pleasant and valuable, especially in his work as an intelligence analyst:
There's so much richness to life that I don't necessarily, unless it's something that relates to, you know, like literature does, that relates to – hav – it's how - one of the ways I think I can explain it is sort of like there are tribes that don't have words for things but they still have those emotions, you know? And it's like if you've never read about a certain emotion or a certain experience before have you ever really had it? You know, cause you may not have, you know? You may not have really ever thought about something on that same level or thought about it the same way, and if somebody presents it to you and leads you down that road, you know what I mean? It's like this expansion of 'Oh shit, yes!' you know? It opens something completely different up. You know? Um. That's part of it, but again, another part of it is the technical aspect of, um, of doing intelligence stuff, so it's like, you know, 'How do I know a little bit about everything, uh, so that I can understand it and understand where this piece of the puzzle fits it. How do I know when something's out of place? How do I know when something's not, you know, how do I recognize deception from a real piece of information?

His reading is both rhizomatic and inductive, and it links with his fear of ignorance addressed previously. As an undergrad, Russell took an Arabic class, based initially on his immersion in the language as a soldier, and because he needed a foreign language credit. Other students might have studied the required texts, practiced the exercises, and so forth. Russell began to realize that the history of the language and much of the sense of its use was reflected in the art of the script:

So you're like 'Arabic is, uh, you know, on a surface level, is a way of writing, and just it's an alphabet, but then you realize that there's so much more to it than that, and you start to realize and look at and appreciate all the different Arabic calligraphy. And so on one
level I knew I might like to try Arabic calligraphy. Well once I started delving into that, then there's all these different styles, you know, Kufik (sp?), Ulith (sp?), and there's all these different styles that evolved geographically. So then what interests me is all the back story to, you know, okay well, which style developed in Morocco? Which one was developed by the Persians or the Turks? Which one originated to be used by scribes transferring the Koran? Which ones were done in Baghdad in Iraq, you know, originally, and just on and on and on, and you've learned all that, then you say, 'Well, now I need to try it.' So you start to try it, and there's all this more expansion of like different, you know, pens and making your own inks and using different papers and then the actual act of trying to write...I see things and I see them at a level, but then I can't help chasing the rabbit. You know what I mean? I gotta keep going. By extension, when you study Arabic, you begin to see it's [calligraphy] so inherently tied to Arab culture. And once you begin to study Arab culture, you start to get into the politics of types and different ways of thinking within the Arab world, and that all links itself back into, again, the practical part of trying to understand information to know, to have a larger picture. You know what I mean, to have a better understanding of, recognize when something's forming a pattern, or something looks out of place.

Russell's tendency to get caught up in the experience of learning, obsessed even, moreover, his tendency to begin to actualize what he reads about, to bring it into his lived experience, makes him stand out among the participants. This interweaving of his reading and his life continues now. Russell is keenly aware of the seriousness of the work he does, of how crucial it is that he make the most informed and carefully considered decisions possible.
Russell's life and reading seem so intertwined that I find it difficult to make clear distinctions between what might have originated where as far as his interests and desires are concerned. His consistent interest in understanding the nature of things combined with his critical orientation is reflected both in his choice of reading and in his personal theory of reader response:

I've gotten to the point now where what's important to me is to develop an understanding...I think some of the major differences when you read a work of literature is that it's almost, kind of one of the ways I that explain how I feel about it to people is to say that to me it's sort of like, you know, when you're talking about physics, when you're talking about the way that we have an understanding of, you know, of how things operate in the natural world we use, you know, we have equations for this, we can understand the push and pull of forces, you know, and how that relates to um, so everything that happens, you know, with physical matter. When we talk about literature, I think literature is almost, is that equation that is a model of expressing human emotion and human understanding and feeling, you know.

Russell's reading seems to have been closely tied to his self-construction since his experience with *Where the Red Fern Grows* as a youngster. As he has made educational and career choices, considered his family and community's influences and rejected the religion, patterns of thinking, and political views he was taught, his reading has both reflected and influenced his reality.

**A Maturing Reading Life**

Since Russell was a participant in the pilot study I conducted a few years before this one, I asked Russell to talk about how his reading has changed since we last spoke. He mentioned that whereas he was oriented toward “the classics” at the time we last spoke, his reading had
narrowed significantly into a variety of very interesting subject areas. For a while he spoke about certain books and areas of interest, claiming that he now “reads to get more of a firm foundation,” considering what he believes he missed out on through his rather strict religious upbringing and public school education: “I don't think it was impressed upon me to have a firm foundation.” To that end he has read African history, “the history of ideas and ideologies,” and he was currently learning about the history of Chinese ideograms, “Trying to fill in the gaps,” as he put it, “I'm not living in an echo chamber.”

After mentioning some areas of interest and some particular titles, Russell had the idea of passing the camera on his laptop across his bookshelves while he talked about his reading. This took quite a while, but it was fascinating, not only the titles but how they were grouped. For example, he had a shelf labeled: “counterpoint to the religious upbringing,” which included some of Christopher Hitchens' work, some of the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Walter Wink’s *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, two of Bart Ehrman's books, some Nietzsche, a book called *Future Bioethics* and many other titles. “I'm more than willing to hear everybody's side to the argument. I think that's something I've picked up.” he said as he finished passing over that shelf. Another shelf included the following in order:

*Crowds and Power*, a book he describes as a work of cultural psychology, examining the loss of individual identity in the growth of collective identity.

*The Patrochian Archives*, a collection of secret KGB documents.

A few books about Russian history

Mark Twain's autobiography

The works of Noam Chomsky

Derrick Jensen's *Endgame*
Russell said there was a reason he had these books together, that there was something in one that led him naturally to another. The shelf below that one was made up a number of books that seemed related to the history political revolutions, such as the biography of Che Guevara. Another shelf included these:

*The Collected Short Stories of Anton Chekov*

*Leviathan*

A collection of George Orwell's essays

*The Naked and the Dead*

*The City in the Islamic World*  An examination of urban areas, relationship between, religion, culture, and arrangement of cities

*The Geography of Nowhere*  “That one's looking at how by the time we realize we've built our entire infrastructure on the assumption of cheap gasoline and non-renewable resources…”

Russell insisted that I read certain of these texts and expressed that he would really like to know what I thought of them. He lingered on *The Moral Landscape* and pulled it off the shelf:

It's basically an atheistic response to theistic insistence on religion as necessary for morality, that old dichotomy between religion and science. There could be multiple peaks, you know what I mean? There could be more than one way to achieve happiness, you know, in a society, and that was always something that I keyed on, I thought was to be true and enjoyed was that there is something about all different societies that I enjoy because I think that there are aspects of the way they do things that are worth
understanding and are worth knowing, you know and why pigeonhole yourself to one line of thought when you can read about multiple systems, you know, a- and gain that input of, of, uh thousands of years of, of, um, of history that haven't necessarily been comingled, you know? When you talk about Asian history or you talk about, you know Native American or South American or European, for the most part until recently your talking about systems and cultures that developed somewhat in isolation of each other, you know? Until there was a rapid exchange of information or the ease of the flow of information, you know, you didn't necessarily have that exchange of ideas. So you have each of these different groups working to try to move toward their best understanding of the world and how the world works. So I think there's something of importance that can be found, you know, in all of those different approaches, of all of these different people working on the same puzzle. It's the same thing with like calculus or different forms of mathematics, you know, they've been arrived at by the same people in isolation of each other, you know? Same thing with, uh, um, you know the beginning theories of evolution, you know, with Darwin and, gosh, now I feel like I'm going to have to ask because I can't remember the other guy's name, uh, Lamarck? They both came to approximately the same conclusions at the same time, you know, based off of the studies they'd been doing.

I want to draw the reader's attention here to the parallel between how Russell's explanation unfolds, moving from one subject organically into another, and how he reads, made evident both in how he talks about it and in how books are grouped together on his shelves. Books aren't arranged by genre or author but by the experiences they are speaking to in his life, by the role they are playing for him in his cognitive development.
Similarly to Jack, Russell seeks to extend the practice of reading into the lives of others. Russell mentioned to me some fellow soldier/readers I might want to get in touch with about my study. He mentioned sharing certain books and threads of reading among the participants in these groups, especially his recent reading in the areas of religion and science. Russell insisted that I read certain of these books and let him know what I think of them. Russell's younger brother attends a fundamentalist Christian private school, one in which it is actually forbidden to ask questions, and Russell has taken an active role in trying to be for his younger brother a voice and guide for critical thinking, art, and scientific fact, passing him books secretly and having “these sort of secret, backdoor conversations. He's able to talk to me about this kind of stuff, but not them...Once he realized it was okay to think and to express himself, he opened right up.” It seems as if Russell has taken on the responsibility for his brother that his grandmother and F.O.C.U.S. teacher took on for him.

I have had the benefit of considering Russell as a reader twice, right after he left active duty and began college and years later, after he had completed his Bachelor's degree and gone back to work for the defense department. Russell is a serious reader, one for whom the practice, which had been for him a source of aesthetic pleasure and escape from difficult circumstances, has developed into an integral aspect of his identity, his vocation, and his experience of the world, as well as how he communicates with others.
CHAPTER 7

RUSSELL: METHOD AND THEORY

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands... Its unity is variable and relative. (Foucault, 1974, p. 23)

Prior to my interview with Russell, I made notes of some the emergent themes from my interview with Jack, and I kept these “in my back pocket,” so to speak, in case Russell talked about things that might be connected. He did. Among these were the role evangelical Christianity played in the development of his reading life as well as some of the reasons he has chosen to read, such as resisting ignorance, seeking mental challenges, and becoming well rounded. It was as I reviewed my interview with Russell that I took note of the fact that he also made mention of particular people in his life who introduced him to the reading life, something I carried into my interview with Mac. I decided deliberately not to ask Mac specifically about this in order to see if he would mention it without being asked, which he did.

My history with Russell helped me to consider more deeply the cultural models (Cole, 1996) mediating his reading and its relationship to his lived experience. The structure of his speech as he talks at length about his reading bears resemblance to that of his history as a reader since his deployment as well as to how he follows a trail of inquiry through reading. He moves in a rhizomatic way from broader to more specific threads then eventually linking those separate
threads and moving off into a new trail of inquiry. This ongoing process is, for Russell, both aesthetically pleasing and self-defining.

How Russell talks about his experiences of reading aligns with Dewey's (1934) description of aesthetic experience as involving “consummation and not a cessation” (p. 35) as he moves on from experience to experience. An experience of discovery or illumination leads to further questions and a recognition of where his knowledge is lacking. Another horizon opens up. If other readers are willing to “lose [themselves] in the play” (Gadamer, 1979, p. 103) of the game, Russell remains engaged for the whole season, so to speak, as he “chases the rabbit.”

After my interview with Jack, I had made note of this reason for reading, to “chase that stream of knowledge,” as opposed to “reading the right stuff,” and found that it seems even more significant for Russell. For him, one book often leads straight into another and another as he becomes intensely focused on some aspect or set of aspects of the text. The phenomenological dimension of the aesthetic (Shusterman, 1996) extends for a remarkably long time for Russell, almost as if he refuses to quit. The parameters are very wide, as evidenced even by how the books are arranged on his shelves. For Russell this experience occurs as Sumara (1996) describes: “It must be discernible and, at the same time, must appear ungraspable in its vastness” (p. 118).

For Russell, a literary event (Attridge, 2004) is not limited by the covers of a particular book, nor even by genre or subject. The nature of the experience for him is aesthetic in as much as he feels himself stretching at the edges of his current knowledge and set of associations, and that moves in unpredictable ways. For Russell, there is an intentional “act of breaking down the familiar” (Attridge, 2004, p. 26), a consistent pursuit of alterity, as Russell knows that openness to the unfamiliar is what helps remake him while keeping him growing intellectually and
creatively. Russell exhibits, perhaps more clearly than with any other student I've known, a “hermeneutically-trained consciousness” (Gadamer, 1979). In the act of reading, Russell pictures himself in imagination: “It is this human ability that leads to interpretation, to self-interpretation. This need for self-interpretation, in relation to our historically-effected conscious presence in the world, is hermeneutic (Sumara, 1996, p. 40).

A goal mediating the act of reading for Russell (Leont'ev, 1981), by his own description, is to resist aspects of his earlier life; he seems to see his former influences as something to be escaped from. The “set of cultural constructs” Russell resists (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 146) dissolve as he appropriates the phases of the aesthetic in his reading. The aesthetic experience of reading for Russell involves the burning away of a former self, one he seems to associate with ignorance, narrow-mindedness, unexamined beliefs, and “blanks” he needs to fill in. He refuses to remain in what he sees as culturally or intellectually static condition, and reading is how he experiences a transformation in his identity. As he has become familiar with the dimensions of it, the aesthetic process is the structure employed, the condition in which the “dynamic of the internal structure of consciousness and the dynamic of the structure of activity” (Leont'ev, 2006, p. 34) converge.

Aesthetic reading in pursuit of a continually redefined self is a practice Russell considers powerful and valuable, and, similarly to Jack, he seeks to extend it into the lives of others, especially those he sees as suffering under unexamined, intellectually static conditions, people like his younger brother. He does this “secretly,” but he is compelled to see his own experiences echoed in those of others. Considering Russell's aesthetic reading from the perspective of Gee's (1996) concept of primary and secondary Discourses, what for Russell was the primary Discourse (Gee, 1996) of Southern evangelical Christianity, one he had acquired through
immersion in his family and immediate community, increasingly became a thing to be escaped from. That shift in his identity has involved the gradual acquisition of the secondary Discourse of “a reader,” one who is set apart from the mainstream in his ongoing, open-ended pursuit of knowledge and new lenses through which to see the world. This acquisition has come quietly, initially through the prodding and accommodating of key members within it: a grandmother, a certain teacher, librarians. A sort of secret society of readers, a borderland Discourse (Gee, 1996) was operating within and against the institutions of Russell's life, and an aspect of Russell's membership in this Discourse includes bringing others into the fold.

In both my notes during and my initial analysis after my interview with Russell, there were emergent themes which bore resemblance to how Jack talked about his reading. Among these were reading to resist ignorance and the intellectual limitations associated with Southern evangelical Christianity, reading to experience challenge and a degree of mental disorientation in pursuit of a transformed identity, “chasing a stream of knowledge” through reading, and “preaching the gospel of reading” to others in seeking to relate these experiences to others, to offer this possibility to them. I carried my analysis of Russell's reading practice into my interview with Mac, intending to consider more deeply how reading practice interfaces with aesthetic experience in the formation of identity.
CHAPTER 8

“I’VE BATHED IN THE EUPHRATES ON EASTER”: MAC’S STORY

Mac (pseudonym) is the only one of the participants in this study who wasn't formerly a student of mine. He was recommended to me by someone familiar with my research. Although we hadn't met prior to my contacting him by e-mail about the study, once I made contact and we spoke over the phone, we immediately had a lot to talk about, and our conversation proceeded pleasantly and organically. Mac is gregarious and funny and very intelligent and articulate. We spoke for over two hours in our first conversation prior to the actual interview. Mac expressed how glad he was that I was looking into the topic of soldiers as readers and his eagerness to contribute, and he asked me to send him the interview protocol prior to our first interview.

As a practicing reader, Mac is a fascinating character. Repeatedly during our conversations and our interview, Mac would use his “reading list” from different periods as well as the present to help me understand what his key issues and interests have been. As with Jack and Russell, the lines between his reading and his lived experience are very blurry. However, how Mac talks about his reading life evidences an interpenetration of narrativity in his life and a relationship with reading so profound that it seems inseparable from almost any other aspect of his life. From an early age, Mac relied on reading as a companion in his life, given the kind of environment in which he grew up. Mac seems to have generally considered himself as different from those around him as a young person. A curious mind, a desire to see the world outside, and a skeptical bent all seem to have set Mac at odds with those in his community. Based on the
reactions to family and friends to his inquiry-driven mind, Mac grew to feel the scrutiny of others:

In my experience growing up there was no gray area; it's wrong or it's right. Small towns, I guess. I think the reason they're so set in their belief systems is that if you show them the world is more complex, that there's much more out there and things their beliefs can't explain, they've wasted their lives. It's a very threatening and scary idea to them. People who want to better themselves through reading or whatever reminds them of what they're afraid to do.

Mac recalls pointing out to his mother that there are two creation stories in the Book of Genesis and that they aren't identical: “She's not open to interpretation of her beliefs.” The result of growing in these circumstances seems to have been that Mac sought relationships with “other voices.” Reading was a primary means for Mac to relate to other people, places, and circumstances than those understimulating or quietly hostile ones in his immediate environment.

Mac was raised in the Midwest and spent his middle and secondary school years on a farm in rural Missouri before entering the military. Similarly to Jack and Russell, Mac's family and immediate community were evangelical Christian, and due to the agricultural basis of the region's economy, education beyond high school was seen by many in his community as an unnecessary diversion from real life which involved remaining in the area and running a farm or a related business:

You know, I mean, 'cause it was a farm community and most people weren't as concerned with, with fancy book learning because it just, because it just really wasn't important. They were, farm, they were farmers, and your children would be farmers...It was just
expected that you would graduate from high school and you would do something in the
town. And so the library wasn’t very good, the curriculum in school wasn't that great.
Mac has a younger sister and one younger brother, perhaps adding to a feeling of pressure to
continue the farming life, even though his parents never insisted on his doing so. His parents
expressed hope that he would attend college in order give him other options

“There's a World Out There”: Beginning a Reading Life

Mac describes himself as having felt somewhat out of place in his community and having
been relatively isolated as a young person. He began reading quite early seems to have begun
fairly early on to think of himself separately from the values and shared narratives of not only his
community but even his family:

I don't know why it is. It's, it's always been a kind of 'Question everything.' mentality for me. You know, like it just seemed like things didn't add up in certain – like I couldn't
believe as a kid like sitting in church, like why adults were believing this stuff. I mean
maybe it was just, maybe it was because of my reading, and like I could spot fiction from
a mile away. I remember, like 'That doesn't sound right.' you know, like with a lot of
things...I don't know where it came from, like my father and mother aren't like that.
I find it fascinating that at an early age Mac seems to have begun to recognize elements of
narrative and to distinguish those from both history and normal life. Mac's feeling of isolation
was exacerbated when his family moved onto the farm just as he was entering middle school. He
describes feeling essentially cut off from the world. They had no cable television or internet
access at home. Since his mother worked at a store in the nearby town, she would drop Mac off
at the library for the day, where he had little to do other than follow emerging interests through
books. He advanced fairly quickly as a reader and began to ask the library to order books to
accommodate his interests. In addition to his love of fiction, he enjoyed reading about other places and cultures.

Mac's relationship to reading is distinct from that of Jack and Russell in that it seems to have been one of his main ways of relating to a world beyond his family and the farm. He credits reading with being his primary connection to the world outside of the small world in which he lived, but reading also served to reinforce his feelings of being separate from his community in fairly profound ways. As with Jack and Russell, Mac is a critical thinker and an inquisitive man. However, he considers that he has been this way since childhood and has felt different from others in this way for much of his life. It is also significant to note that he began reading regularly at an earlier age than did Russell and Jack, and he honed this skill, so to speak from early on. Mac seems to have developed a tendency to use books to explore areas of interest, based on his hours spent in the library. He talks about his own natural curiosity and how it has been the source of most of the knowledge he values. This kind of learning seems to have developed in opposition to the the way learning was presented to him in school. Mac is highly critical of the kind of public education he received:

I have zero doubt in my brain that I learned more from reading and just my natural interest....I'm actually not embarrassed to admit this, 'cause I don't believe it's my fault; that's why. Um, I didn't know, um, until college that not all the planets are terrestrial, that some were made of gas. I was under the impression that they were all like Earth and you could stand on them. I had a fifth-grade teacher who would literally just make stuff up, science wise, and I would routinely get made fun of for quoting her...Here's a good one, 'You shouldn't use toothpaste'...and if you hadn't understood what she'd said and asked her to explain it, she would make you write on the board, 'Get a hearing aide.' and make you
draw a picture of a hearing aide. I had and extremely terrible educational experience. Mac credits his personal reading with helping to keep him aware of this fact and showing him there were more intelligent and “worldly” people out there, that there was another world. He considers that he had to take learning into his own hands as, early on, he began to realize that he was not getting a quality education. A number of teachers in his school were “let go” for teaching the theory of evolution. Mac described becoming interested in physics and biology through the lyrics of the rock band Tool:

I guarantee you I learned more from my interest in science 'cause of Tool's music than I did up to the point that I had my biology teacher, actually an extremely squared away, smart guy. He taught us, one of the only teachers I had that I think was good quality, like he was a good teacher. And up until that point I bet I learned more in a summer from their records and learning about ions and, you know chromosomal theories and stuff like that. I mean it was just, it's just amazing, I mean, 'sad,' I think is really more the word, not 'amazing.'

Unfortunately for Mac, this teacher was one of those who were “let go.”

Mac considers that, based on his community's general fear of society at large, the teachers and administrators in his area tried to prevent him from exploring and learning on his own or in his own way, both in terms of how education was delivered and in terms of overly rigid oversight of restricting his access information. For example, when he was in high school, Mac looked up a website he heard about on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno, a humorous site which was a “dating service for people in jail” called Jailbabes.com. His punishment was to be denied “Internet privileges for the remainder of the year. Consider that his punishment for trying to access information that was deemed inappropriate was to suspend him from school and to further deny
his access to information by taking away his “internet privileges” for the remainder of the school year.

**Keeper of the Key**

During his youth, Mac had a relationship with his grandfather, with whom he would talk in depth about books. His grandfather was the one who introduced him to an imaginative world, a forbidden world he would otherwise not have known: “If they'd known what he was giving me, they would have said 'Absolutely not!'...When you go to your grandparents they give you cookies instead of salad. That's what they do.” Mac associates this aspect of his grandfather's behavior with that generation, those he assumed read for entertainment but who were also generally braver people. However, he also believes is grandfather had a deeper purpose: “He knew reading would breed a smarter animal.” He cherishes the conversations they had about books, and there was, for Mac, a very apparent degree of “misbehavior” associated with this relationship. For example, his grandfather introduced him to the novels of Mario Puzo while he was a young middle school student: “He knew I was going to love this.” They had in-depth conversations about the books and their feelings about them. Mac's grandfather helped him get away with a forbidden behavior. Moreover, he encouraged a form of bravery in Mac's reading, taking on heavy subjects and “mature content” while he was still young: “He knew reading is pure imagination. I'm sure he thought what would form in my thirteen-year old mind wasn't as bad as what would form in his.” Mac locates this relationship, in particular the feelings and memories associated with it as playing a mediating role in how he experiences reading even in the present as I will elaborate on later.

His preference for more adult-oriented books would cause him problems in his community and contribute to his feeling alienated as a young person:
My fiction taste buds morphed really quick into, um, kind of more adult. Like I was reading a lot more adult novels as a younger person, and like I told you last night, I think, for me, like I read *The Godfather* when I was like thirteen. It was given to me by my grandfather, and I think just kind of started me off, and I blew through a bunch of Mario Puzo novels, and (cough, excuse me) like I told you when I got my hands on *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, I mean that was it. It was like 'Ok there's a different world out there.'”

In middle school, Mac ordered Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* to the public library, and when it arrived, the librarian called his parents to tell them that their son was seeking out inappropriate materials: “They didn't just tell me I couldn't have it. They tried to stop me. It was on the 'banned books list.' They could have just said 'We can't order that for you.' No, they ordered it then called my house to have a talk with my mom about me.” The library, which had been for him a place to explore and learn, now made him feel like a suspect, an outsider.

**A Growing Reading Life**

Before he began to talk about more in depth about his reading experience Mac claimed “People who don't read just haven't read the perfect book for them.” For Mac the first book like that was John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Mac describes experiencing a shift, a leap in his reading life when he encountered this book:

I knew I had gotten my hands on something special...I think it was just because it was unlike anything I'd ever read for a whole lot of reasons in the sense that the story was so unique and so different and also in addition to the fact that there was no doubt in my mind that this was the best written book I had ever read. John Irving, you know, if you've ever read any of his stuff, he's got such a unique way that he writes, and it's so like, you can tell every sentence is thought over thoroughly, and he, you know, you can just tell, and I
knew it was very, it was very special what I had gotten my hands on, and I think that kinda just set it in motion, and I, you know, I haven't really looked back since.

Although Mac was already a reader, had already found in reading a way to escape his immediate social surroundings, a form of access to “the world out there,” Mac's experience with Irving's novel inaugurated a new, more profound experience of reading for, one which he describes in more relational terms. Mac was introduced to a very interesting person with a very powerful voice in Irving. This experience solidified for him the value of reading and became for him something to be sought out. In short, his reading life became much more serious, reading became an even more essential aspect of his life, one which would play a significant role in his military life.

**Might as Well Be a Soldier**

Mac's decision to enter to the military was solely a financial one, “not for pride or honor or any of that; let's not sugarcoat it.” Although he was generally a good student, academically speaking, he was “not as good as the top three who took the available scholarships.” Therefore, he decided to sign up for at least four years in the Army in order to get his college paid for. Mac chose the challenge of trying to get into the Rangers and, subsequently, Special Operations because he “had never been out of the country and thought [he] would get to travel and get to do cool stuff.” Being a fan of extreme sports like bungee jumping and rock climbing, Mac was excited about getting to jump out of airplanes and such. Also, the interest he had developed in other cultures and places through his reading in the library made the military seem like an attractive option. He never thought he would actually go to war, much less as part of an elite special operations unit, doing some of the most violent and dangerous work there is.
Troublingly, despite his harrowing experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and his four years of active duty service, Mac finished college with 20,000 dollars in student debt.

A Comrade in Arms

Mac realized very quickly upon beginning his military career that it was going to be both very difficult and a particular challenge for him as a critical thinker. He describes how his reading life became more intense and a source of comfort in a number of ways, not only helping him to “escape” from difficult realities, but providing deep conversations and a feeling of mutual understanding concerning his privately held concerns:

It unquestionably was the best way to take your mind off the - ’cause you could completely detach yourself from where you were, you know? I mean all the horrible things you had to encounter on a daily basis at every level. I'm not talking about just war, but like you miss your family, or, you know, you don't get a shower for three days, stuff like that. You get to, you're not thinking about any of that whenever you're engulfed, you know, in a great read. I mean, you just, that's your way to get away. And in hindsight I guess it helped more than, more than you realize.

Early in his deployment, Mac developed a “relationship” with some of the classics and found in them striking resonances with his own feelings and beliefs concerning American life and the political conditions related to the war: “Like I spent one summer while I was in the military, um basically trying to read all those great, like 1984, Slaughterhouse Five, Brave New World, Animal Farm. I did like a …a dystopian summer essentially, and it was very, very good. It was a pleasant surprise.” This was the first summer of the invasion of Iraq, and Mac felt alone in that he was never in support of the military action in which he was involved. His “conversations”
with certain authors seem to have provided a genuine feeling of solidarity and personal
connection concerning his own moral and political convictions:

Well, I mean, it was kind of, um, it was a lot of, um, like, those, I think at least especially
with that, that period, those authors are known for being, you know, very deep and very,
um. I don't know what the actual term would be, but there was always a subcontext of
their writing, like *1984* was speaking about something other than just, you know, a guy
that's being controlled by the government and stuff like that, kinda things like, same with
*Animal Farm* and [inaudible] we were kind of, I actually read that during the invasion
of Iraq, so what I was seeing on TV was people that kind of questioned, you know, were
questioning what was happening, and I think I was one of the only people in my unit that
was actually opposed to invading Iraq before it even started, and I think those guys kind
of reflect it, especially with someone like Kurt Vonnegut kind of reflected, you know,
what I was thinking, and it was nice to have someone that you could relate to. You
couldn't tell anybody about that.

I strikes me how Mac refers to Vonnegut and these other authors as “someone you could relate
to,” as if he was engaged in conversation with them. Mac was in an special operations unit
which saw a great deal of very violent combat and which operated according to different rules of
engagement than regular army units did. I can't imagine what sort of internal conflicts must have
occurred for him in these circumstances, but he was aware of the potential danger of such an
extreme struggle:

So essentially what happens is you bottle it up, and you just get cancer later, no, you um,
you just basically bottle it up and it basically drives people to drinking and drugs is
essentially what happens, but it pretty much, um. It just doesn't jive because you can't
question, you can't question anything, so just kinda gotta stomach it, move on, and say, 'Alright, well that's ridiculous, but there's no point in saying anything or changing or even trying, so it's, it doesn't work out well.

Bear in mind that Mac was still quite young at this time and certainly still forming his sense of the world and his place in it in a very intense way. While others his age were going to college or taking on agricultural jobs, Mac was living on the razor's edge, in extremely uncomfortable and extreme conditions, very aware that each day could be his last:

It was a very weird time for me as a kid becoming an adult and being in a very unique situation, and it was just kind of a perfect storm, and it was. I don't know, but I do know it was my release, cause for whatever reason whenever I would read overseas, it was kind of like I didn't think of anything except the books that I was reading and it was a way to escape from all of the drama of all of the higher-ups screwing with people or the stress of maybe being killed tomorrow, and it was almost kind of a meditative state.

I asked Mac to elaborate on what he meant by meditative, and this was his response: “Yeah, the Timothy Leary, what is it? Drop in? Tune in, drop out, yeah. That's kind of what it was. Just instead of sheets of acid I was doing it with a [inaudible]...and a book.” Mac's reading during deployment seems to have afforded an significant contrast to the very dangerous, extremely violent experiences he was having, and the free interchange concerning his interior conflicts and feelings he was able to have through the works of certain authors seems to have provided much needed comfort and intellectual camaraderie in a social environment in which open criticism of the purposes and goals of their mission was off limits. Beyond his reading, Mac kept journals of his experiences with these texts in which he drew connections between his reading experiences and his lived experiences. He is the only one of the participants to have done so.
Even as part of an elite combat unit, Mac remained isolated to some degree, and he seems to have found rich and conversations in the books he was reading. However, it was also during this time that he began to form a group of readers, friends with whom he could exchange and talk about books. Interestingly, though, even in this group, Mac seems to have stood out for his choice of books. His fellow readers seemed to have been drawn to books which dealt with war in some way:

You know, kind of like it was in my youth as a way to escape, growing up in the Midwest, there wasn't a lot of, whenever someone would give a description of a city that I'd never been to, you know, I did, kind of the same like, I didn't want to live in the desert, you know? I wanted to be, to get nostalgia for home and stuff like that. I, I was different in that sense, and I never understood why they would do this, but I never once touched a military novel the entire time I was deployed, cause I was living it. But I had one that was, ended up graduating from West Point, and that's all he would read. Man, you ever get tired of? Don't you want to escape in some capacity? You know?

Jack and Russell don't emphasize reading as a form of escape as Mac does, and I find it interesting that the others in Mac's group seem to have wanted their reading to echo their current experiences in a more direct way. Reading was indispensable, a genuine necessity for Mac during his time at war, and his reading during this time seems to have carved a much deeper cognitive capability for him to experience what he calls “a reading.”

**Destruction and Narrative Construction**

I notice in particular how Mac speaks in narrative terms about the significant experiences in his life. For example, in reflecting upon his feelings during the invasion of Iraq and the impact his deployment had on his life, he said,
I have experiences and moments that no one I'll ever meet will have...I bathed in the
Euphrates River on Easter...like I remember whenever I parachuted into Iraq, the first
thing I thought whenever I hit the ground was like, 'I am here. Like, I am in the land of
the bad guy that I grew up with.' From a very young age, he was the guy. Like, he's
close...hanging out with people of a different culture, like hearing their stories about what
Al Qaeda had done to them, what, you know, what they'd seen Saddam Hussein do with
their own eyes. I mean, stuff like this is not things that my friends will ever get to
experience. You know, I mean, it was – those are the kind of things that you look back
and you're very – very happy. You know, and I really wouldn't trade those moments for
anything.

Mac was a participant, a character in one of America's collective narratives. This emphasis on
the story of his life continued after his return from deployment and beyond active duty in the
military. His experience in the military was a paradoxical personal process for him, one which
involved much suffering but which he believes has made him into a much better person than he
otherwise would have been. Early on he had the sudden realization,

It was terrible, and I had this thought: 'I think I've made an enormous mistake of epic
proportions.' and I'm like, 'I've got four more years of this! This is gonna be bad.' I got
that part right, at least...but like I said, in hindsight I made the right call; it was best
decision I could have made, but would I do it again? Probably not, but only with the
knowledge from it, because – it was miserable. It was miserable. I did not enjoy it. I'm
glad it's over. I'm glad I did it, but I'm glad it's over.

Mac reflects on this trying and disorienting period in his life as being one in which a new,
profoundly different person took shape: “It definitely produced a better person. I have no doubt
about that. Like, it completely altered me.” It helped shape Mac into a person he likes but one who continues to be different from those around him in key ways. The sense of himself as an emotional and intellectual outsider which had carried over from his life in Missouri into his life in the Army seems to have become suddenly much more crystallized when he first visited Ground Zero:

When I was in New York City for first time, I was eighteen years old and the Twin Towers were still there, and I just returned back for the first time in May of last year, and like, I went down there, and I remember like, uh, the little walkway or whatever. I'm looking, looking down at the, basically a construction site and just having this unbelievably surreal moment of like ‘This is where my whole life altered.’ and people are just walking around like nothing's even happening, and I'm completely, you know, just having this moment, where I'm just, like, 'This is where it all began.' You know, and it was, it was kind of hard to even believe, though, that this, like, it was kind of hard to process that this, what happened here, you know, and. I don't know, it's, it's, it's strange, so [long pause]”

For lack of a better way to put it, Mac reads his life, which allows him to situate himself, even in history. Although Mac evidences an intense sense of his connection to history and American culture, one which he wouldn't have chosen for himself, he seems to feel very distinct from others in it. It is very personal to him but is a major aspect of his interior life, one he looks back on as being something he wouldn't change, horrible, but good.

Although he might not have found many people in his life with whom he could connect about his role and experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, he has sought out confidants through his reading, and it's interesting how the same intensity of experience he describes having had with
his favorite fiction applies to some of the nonfiction he has read regarding the wars: “Like, I read *The Looming Tower*, by Lawrence Wright, purely a nonfiction book about Al Qaeda and 9/11 and everything, and it read like a novel, and I remember just being completely engrossed and I didn't want to put it down. It's not, you know, like a thriller or anything like that, um, so…” Clearly, Mac's experience as a young man, from leaving a community in which he felt different from others to entering the Army, to becoming part of American history while still feeling distinct from the popular narratives, so to speak, is difficult to distinguish from his reading life.

“*A Reading*”

I asked Mac to explain his theory of the nature of his reading experience, what he believes is occurring during the process of reading, and what follows is a long section of the transcript:

It almost has a kind of Dopamine/Seratonin release level on me. I kind of get in a zone when I read, and I kind, if it's something I'm really into, like, I can just lay on the couch and just, and I'm completely [inaudible] and able to distance myself from my surroundings completely, and it really does trigger a level of happiness in me that is hard to attain from other things, especially if it's something that I consider to be a fantastic, you know, thing...It's like a high without drugs, I guess. It really does release, you know, I'm venturing that it would release chemicals that would resemble the same as drug use for me, you know, it's. It really does make me feel great. Even if it is something as heartbreaking as *The Cider House Rules*, I'm really just enjoying it. I don't know, it seems to, it seems to almost alter my consciousness, just by reading those kinds of things.

**Interviewer**: “Is it always that way for you?”
In some regard, yes. If it's something that's absolutely fantastic, then I, I kind of – I will make it my main priority because it is pulling at something that I struggle to get, you know...I think it's got something to do with the kind of lifestyle that I enjoy. You know with people like me who are in the military, we're constantly seeking those great stories and the next rush, you know, like I have – everyone I know that was in the military is a reader...I do believe at least with me it's tied in to, um, happy memories – because – so that could be, that could actually be the basis of this for me. Because my grandfather and I, we used to talk a lot about books, when I was a little kid, me and my grandfather would have these special moments where we would talk about books, and it could be like you know. Not to get off the subject, but I think it's kind of related in a sort of way – Morgan Spurlock explains in uh, in uh, *Supersize Me* that McDonalds somehow managed to equate, um, their food with happy memories as a child, and I think that that happened to me with, with books, you know, 'cause, 'cause, like I said, with my grandfather it was always kind of – like I remember he and I would talk about books that we would read, and like I would read one, and he would give it me, or vice versa, and we would talk, and I think it probably still kind of, in the same that maybe a Big Mac makes someone else happy reading a good book is tugging at the same level.

Mac considers the fact that he began reading at such an early age to be connected to the emotional associations and experiences he has with it. Reading carries a meaningfulness to Mac that is rooted in an actual and significant human relationship and the fact that Mac seems to point to a particular sociocultural basis for his experience of reading is fascinating. It's striking to me that similarly to Jack and Russell, there was a key person in his life, his grandfather, who passed the torch of reading to him, so to speak. Mac eventually came to befriend other readers in the
military, others who share an appreciation for extreme experiences and who have sought that out through reading but also in other ways, some of them not so healthy:

Everybody's had a problem with, you know, drinking or drugs. One of my buddies is a spearfisherman and a base jumper and a rock climber, and I like bungee jumping. I think it's, you know, I think it pulls kind of at those same, same, you know, strings but just on a much less severe scale. Like, it's pushing something like you just, you're energized and you want to know what's happening and it's pulling at things like that I think, and. It's always done that for me.

Another reason Mac gives for reading is that, similarly to Jack and Russell, he wants to have an “intellectual edge” over others; he has a desire to be smarter than those in his immediate community. I asked him why he thinks that is:

Ah, probably just pure vain, just like to say that I'm smarter than other people, or, you know, I guess if you have to say it it's not true, but you know, it's, I, I like the feeling, I guess I don't, maybe not so much I like the feeling. I don't like the feeling of ignorance; I don't like it whenever I don't know something, you know, especially when I feel like I should know it, and, you know, reading things, you know like, kinda gives me, you know, maybe someone else's perspective on the issue, or more information on something that I like. I mean even, I don't even have a problem reading boring science books, you know?, and it's, it's, I don't know, I think it's. I do get, even if it's not a fiction, even if it's nonfiction I do enjoy it.

Reading plays the central role in Mac's construction of himself as an informed person, and he gains pleasure from learning new things and keeping informed. Interestingly, he considers gaining the perspective of others to be integral to this aspect of his life. What's particularly
striking about Mac in this area is that he feels like he has to get out of college to be able to do it: “In college I don't get to read what I want.” It must be said that Mac very much enjoys reading nonfiction and even textbooks about science. It's just that he doesn't feel like he benefits as much from having to read materials that are decontextualized from the flow of his life at a given time. Because he considers himself to be a consistently inquisitive person, it is important to him that he choose subjects of interest as they emerge organically, not as they are pressed upon him. That said, there are certain “classic” books he wants to read in order to be “in the know”:

For the most part I think that they're pretty good stories from what I've gathered, but uh, something that I don't like, I don't like being in the dark, and I watch a lot of stuff, and I read a lot of other books that they reference these things all the time. Like I know *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* gets referenced all the time, and I want to read the book before I watch the movie. So that's my, kind of my reasoning for that.

I find in Mac a person for whom reading has been a partner in life. Even more than with Jack and Russell, reading seems to have represented for Mac a way out, whether that is out of the small minded world a small farming town or as a narcotic to carry him away from the stresses of war. Mac also seems to find in his aesthetic reading a form of communication and communion with rich, interesting, and beautiful minds, offering to him new ways of knowing, new perspectives and a person with whom his inquisitive mind can relate. Mac grew early on to associate reading with a degree of bravery, with stepping outside of the comfort of the simple beliefs and narrow perspectives of those in his family and community. That treading into a realm of risk, guided early on by his grandfather, seems to taken root in the growth of not only an extraordinarily brave young man, but of a dynamic mind, unafraid to take on new ways of understanding the world.
CHAPTER 9
MAC: METHOD AND THEORY

My interview with Mac was the third, and as I had interviewed Jack and Russell respectively, I had made note of emergent themes and topics to remain aware of during and after the interview with Mac. Continuing with a constant-comparative approach, during the interview, I made notes of both connections which seemed to emerge between Mac and the other participants, such as the fact that he also was raised in an evangelical Christian family and community and also had a person in his life who introduced him to the reading life, as well as key distinctions between them, such as the fact that Mac took to reading early and seems to have seen himself as an outsider from fairly early on. Data analysis was ongoing in this way and took place in stages as I made notes of key points during a second listen the day after the interview then again during the transcription process.

Mac is similar in key ways to Jack and Russell in his identity as a reader. Like them, he reads as a way of maintaining an intellectual edge over others, of fighting off ignorance in his life. Like them, he hates the feeling of not knowing something or understanding something others might. Even though he concedes that it might be “purely vain,” he wants to be smarter than those around him, and the practice of reading seems to provide for Mac a degree of steady confidence in this area. Interestingly, Mac doesn't seem to have gained this same sense of confidence from attending college, even though he was the first in his family to do so. He seems to see standard, formal education of the sort he encountered in a public university as working against this ability to distinguish himself from others. Among a large group of students in a
lecture hall, all hearing the same lecture and reading from the same textbook, taking the same tests, Mac doesn't feel like he stands out much. Perhaps his public school experience followed by four years of extreme difficulty and experiences so distinct from those of almost everyone on earth served to make Mac feel further isolated from his peers in a way that merely being one of the students was an unsettling experience. His eagerness to return to a more active reading life after finishing college, reading in directions of his own choosing, highlights the clear distinction he makes between the kinds of learning centralized in his formal education and the arguably more integrated, holistic, self-defining reading he experiences when he is free to move from chosen text to chosen text.

Although Mac mentions no one other than his grandfather with whom he could identify artistically and intellectually during his school years – this relationship was clearly one of the most significant for him as his reading life was being formed – he seems to have been aware that there were other “deep thinkers” out there. Mac is a brave person; he doesn't seem to have responded to pressure to be like others in his environment. As a practicing reader, more particularly as a critical and creative thinker, he connected with what he considers more extreme authors and musicians through their work. Gee (1996) defines Discourses as being, among other things “constituted by specific actions (performances) carried out by specific individuals, performances which are an amalgam of words, values, thoughts, attitudes, gestures, props” (p. 196). I posit that these characteristics extend into the art product as a cultural artifact, and that through the work of art, one is able to gain membership and participation in a Discourse. Among the secondary discourses Gee (1996) identified, he defined borderland discourses: ”where people from diverse backgrounds, and, thus, with diverse primary primary and community-based Discourses, can interact outside the confines of the public sphere and middle-class “elite”
Discourses (p. 162). Mac's close identification with a variety of distant figures seems to have been very profound and in ways to have replaced personal relationships in his immediate community until he was able to form personal relationships with others more like him in the military and beyond. Gee believes that borderland discourses are common in contemporary society, where people are able to form connections and communicate along more specific lines. Among these are shared artistic experiences and preferences for particular views on particular issues or aspects of life: “Like all discourses, borderland Discourses carry social identities and values that render people, for that time and place, certain 'kinds of people’” (Gee, 1996, p. 189). Gee's study presents a girl who is initiated into a borderland Discourses not by her school but by being in conflict with the school (p. 193), a phenomenon I observe in Mac. What began for him as a more “private” participation in a borderland Discourse through art before his life in the military developed into participation in a community of those with rich reading lives in and outside of the military. This Discourse developed and persisted not only in spite of but in certain ways in opposition to Mac's formal education.

Mac's reading experience stands out for its intensity, “like a high without drugs,” and “a reading,” as he calls it, seems to be for him both euphoric and self-defining; he simultaneously experiences the disorientation, the being lost in the moment, and the sense that he is changing in ways he is pleased with. He links the experience of a reading to that of base jumping or bungee jumping, in the release of brain chemicals. His use of the term “a reading” signifies that Mac thinks of his reading as being a distinguishable experience of the sort Dewey describes as being indicated by the dimensions of the aesthetic, and it certainly seems for Mac to bear those characteristics.
Among the participants, Mac seems the most keenly aware of the role reading plays in his own narrative self construction. In fact, he recommended that I look at his “reading list” at given points in his life to get a better idea of the kind of person he was, what his sense of himself was at a given time. Consider how Mac positions himself as he recalls parachuting into Iraq, “the land of the bad guy I grew up with,” interacting with Iraqis and hearing their stories, enduring such trying circumstances, all while feeling that the war was uncalled for, then finding himself overcome as he stared into the construction site at Ground Zero, while others went obliviously about their business. Mac’s deep immersion in fiction through his life seems to have been a source of the *schemas* and *scripts* (Cole, 1996, p. 125) which mediate his experiences in his life outside of reading. Mac’s role as a character in the American war story - “I never once touched a military novel the entire time I was deployed, ’cause I was living it.” - carried over into his role as an outsider in the very epicenter, the central catalyst of the narrative. Mac’s *emploiement* (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65) has him as a lone figure, an outsider in the grand narrative. Interestingly, though, it was his intuition regarding the conventions of fiction which led him to position himself outside of the dominant narrative of his community in his childhood experiences in church.

Smagorinsky (2001) crystallizes the complex convergence of past and present “texts,” internal and external**: Each text is produced as a conversational turn in dialogue with prior and anticipated future texts regardless of whether or not they are acknowledged. I would argue that readings are similarly emplotted, serving as what Ricoeur calls a configurational act enabling readers to bring together diverse texts into a complex whole” (p. 141). Mac's aesthetic reading and his identity in his social world seem parallel in the paradox of tension and balance, just as *narrative identity* (Ricoeur, 1984) inculcates *discordant concordance* (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 101) or *concordant discordance* (p. 66) in one's identity. Mac's discussion of the relationship between
his reading and his life points to a significant degree of *narrative diachronicity*, time “whose significance is given by the meaning assigned to events within its compass” (Bruner, 1991, p. 6). The aesthetic for Mac consists of an interpretation of his life and what he reads.

I find it interesting how Mac talks about the “readings” during his deployment and how they seem to have shaped him in the most intense way during that time. According to Sumara (1996), reading, even if done in private, “is not an inherently private act. It is inextricable from the context in which it is done and from the lived experience of the reader” (p. 135). In his research with reading students, Sumara identified certain conditions which serve to facilitate “hermeneutic inquiry,” conditions which seek to facilitate the embrace of disruption in order to allow for otherness in the transaction, which, if readers are playing the game, leads to an extension of the self, as the imagination moves to fill in the spaces opened up. Given that all reading is mediated to some extent by the context in which it takes place, Mac’s reading during deployment is

In order to facilitate aesthetic reading in the classroom, Sumara had to reconceptualize its setting and structure to introduce conditions such as being “out of bounds,” having “time for difficulty” and “private readings in public,” introducing “breach of promise,” and fostering “communal commitment.” The cultural, social, physical, and mental conditions in which Mac was reading at the time seem to have not only influenced his choice of texts, the dystopian novels he was drawn to, but to have mediated the experience of reading in such a way that the intensity and absurdity of the war became re-realized in his identification with the characters and circumstances in the novels. Those authors were “reflecting what I was thinking.”

Shusterman (2000) points to the power of those works which are perceived as being in opposition to the dominant culture to impress themselves on the experiencer in a particularly meaningful way, facilitating a holistic and wide reaching experience. He points to rap music as a
form born and refined outside of or in opposition to the dominant culture’s artistic conventions, and its sense of its own uniqueness, its self-referential nature among its practitioners, its “creativity and attention to form,” (p. 231) which seem to both deliberately disenfranchise its detractors while embracing those who embrace it, the convergence of the sense of self and community in its creation and performance, serves to both draw in its participants and seamlessly remake their mind. Mac describes learning more about biology from the lyrics of Tool’s songs than he ever did from his classes, and this learning, like the music through which he acquired it was experienced as an act of resistance. Mac seems to tap into this aspect of many of the books he reads. Part of the semantic dimension (Shusterman, 1996) of his artistic experience involves the syntactic density (Goodman, 1976) of an association with this resistance, an uncommonness of form.
CHAPTER 10

FINDINGS

Reasons to Read

The participants in this study make reading a priority in their lives; it is a practice they pursue, make time for, and miss when they are unable to do it, and there are key similarities in the reasons they give for having made a practice of reading in their lives. Although their reasons for doing so have obvious parallels, the language they use to describe these reasons differs. At this point in the analysis, I zero in more closely on some of the terms they use to describe this practice and why they engage in it, as these terms bear a cultural history and a particular sense, especially as they are tied the participants' backgrounds.

Escape

At face value, it might seem striking that while Jack asserts that “I'm trying to attack a book...I don't read for pleasure...If I want to be amused, I'll watch sports...I don't need books to be an escape.” both Russell and Mac talk about how reading provides them with an escape. It's also interesting that while Russell and Mac began escaping through books during and because of the unpleasantness of their school environment, Jack was home schooled and didn't attend public school until the secondary level. He learned to read because he felt competition with his sister and because he wanted to be able to read a certain comic book. Reading became for Jack a means to learning what he wanted to learn, but having been educated in childhood at home by a mother who was “flower child infused of 'It's better to have imagination than knowledge’” who “let [him] kind of wander up in [his] own way” seems to have had a lot to do with what he might
have been escaping from and what means he would use to do so. He associates escape with amusement, implying a degree of disengagement, of passivity which he doesn't at all seek in his reading. As with Russell and Mac, Jack wants to be challenged when he reads. However, he doesn't associate this challenge with escaping from something as they seem to have done, especially during their school years and during their deployments. Jack doesn't seem to have felt like he had as much to escape from early on, and given that he had a sort of reawakening, a “born again” experience through reading in adulthood, reading has become to him a source of self reformation, far more significant than a form of escapism.

One can escape from something, but one can also escape into something. Whereas Jack associates escape with leisure, something akin to putting up one's feet, opening a beer, and watching a baseball game, Russell describes as “a form of escapism” his hiding in the library with a book, away from the awkwardness and “nonsense” of the school cafeteria. Mac found in reading a different life, voices with whom he could communicate in his relative isolation who weren't the small-minded, incurious ones he encountered in his school and community. Russell and Mac seem to have had more to escape from in their youth. For them, there was the escape from the constraints of the school environment, both in terms of the social environment and, especially in Mac's case, in terms of the institutional and interpersonal restrictions of how education was modeled. Through their reading lives, they learned to learn despite their schooling.

Interestingly, though, all three seem to have, through their reading, escaped certain aspects of their background, reading in resistance to the influence of it on their identities, aspects which, although they may have encountered them differently, they share in common. Jack, Russell, and Mac all grew up in families and communities they describe as conservative,
evangelical Christian. A key aspect of this world view for them seems to have been its preeminence as a lens through which the world is interpreted, an ultimate, inviolable narrative which provides the purpose and guidance for life, as well as ways of understanding others in relation to one's self. Among many evangelicals, for example, the world is broken down into two camps: saved and unsaved, those who have “trusted Christ as their personal Lord and Savior” and are, therefore, going to Heaven, and those who have not and are, therefore, going to Hell. Many of those who consider themselves evangelical Christians, and certainly many in the lives and families of the participants, believe that the Bible is literally true from front to back, that the planet is roughly 7000 years old, that dinosaurs coexisted with humans. Moreover, God is often represented as cruel and arbitrary: people spend eternity in Heaven or Hell based on whether or not they express an intellectual belief in the narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as the son of God, say a certain prayer, pronouncing their recognition that they are a sinner, having inherited the guilt of Adam, and recognizing that Christ is the sinless son of God, who is tortured and punished in their place to appease the wrath of God against them. Notions of authority, fatherhood, morality, community, and so on often grow in a soil of fear. In the participants' families and communities, to question these notions, to challenge the dominant narrative, is to risk being considered on the wrong cosmic team. There is real pressure to represent oneself as being “one of the elect.”

The participants in this study resist this worldview, seek to escape it, and reading is integral to this resistance, an act of differentiation from their immediate culture. Each has rejected the religious beliefs of their families and communities, expressing a degree of freedom and embracing the unknown. Jack proclaims that he's no longer a Christian, “because [he's] read the Bible.” His willingness to read into extreme disorientation or to see Christian narrative
deconstructed or rewritten in imaginative ways highlights his quest from the land of his ancestors, so to speak. Russell observes the “mental walls” of his family, the aspects of life to which the lens of critical thought is off limits. Questions about the seeming disparities in the Christian story weren't appropriate; committing intellectual suicide, “taking on faith” that which seemed increasingly absurd the more he learned was a virtue. The pursuit of knowledge became a lonely one, a quest into which he was drawn at the expense of being acceptable to his family and immediate community. Nevertheless, the draw of the aesthetic, even in the experience of gaining new knowledge, of making sense of the world beyond his inherited narratives, led Russell to chart his own path. Mac's experience is similar; however, he seems to have begun this stretching away earlier in his life. He describes feeling suspicious at how the story the adults in church were believing seemed too much like a story: “like I couldn't believe as a kid like sitting in church, like why adults were believing this stuff. I mean maybe it was just, maybe it was because of my reading, and like I could spot fiction from a mile away.” Although Mac's sense of the word “escape” is expressed more in acquiring an altered state of consciousness: “Yeah, the Timothy Leary, what is it? Drop in? Tune in, drop out, yeah. That's kind of what it was. Just instead of sheets of acid I was doing it with ... a book.” Mac had not only something to escape from in his hometown, but something to escape to. His association of reading with a “meditative state,” a letting go of the material world and his immediate social surroundings, points to reading as almost a different life for Mac. This association with reading was reinforced during Mac's combat deployments: “it was a way to escape from all of the drama of all of the higher-ups screwing with people or the stress of maybe being killed tomorrow, and it was almost kind of a meditative state.” Even now, Mac describes “a reading” in terms of a complete escape from the world into another, one defined by relationship.
Relationship

Despite how reading might have been conceptualized or talked about in their families, communities, or schools, these young men have developed a profound and distinct relationship to reading; their experience with what they read is an engrossing and life changing one. What they describe as they reflect on it stands in stark contrast to the kind of reading they talk about having grown up around. Jack, having been home schooled, observed that in his family reading was primarily “a tool to gain religious knowledge” or to learn information.

The participants often describe their reading in relational terms, as being similar to the way a conversation between two willing partners without the constraints of time or an imposed agenda can flow freely and move from phase to phase, winding up in unpredictable places. Jack declares,

I'm looking for the conversation, what's actually occurring, cause it's great...The conversation for me is when you're getting what the author is wanting you to understand...seeing what someone else who has different life experiences feels. For me it's just all about getting a different perspective, especially when there are shared experiences. I can see through a different lens, and it's enjoyable. Take something that I think I understand and then learn something new about that. It's very enjoyable.

Jack shares with Russell this desire to engage in challenging and stimulating conversation with others through reading.

For Mac, this relationship has been marked by a particular intimacy. He describes how, especially during his deployments, “it was nice to have someone that you could relate to.” He found a relationship of solidarity and mutual understanding with Vonnegut, Orwell, Huxley, and
others during his “dystopian summer.” Jack found through the work of Daniel Quinn and other philosophical and religious metaphorical works a new relationship, one which was both illicit and incredibly seductive as it both challenged the metanarratives and prevailing religious beliefs of his youth and offered him a world of possibility and intellectual renewal. This experience was so intense for Jack that he cites it as one of the main reasons he broke up with his then fiance. Russell clearly reads in relation to his life and lives in relation to his reading. He becomes drawn into a dynamic process through which a particular interest opens up into a new world of potential and knowledge. What begins as an interest piqued through his reading must be consecrated, so to speak, in his actual life, as his initially practical interest in Arabic led to a determination to learn how to paint different styles of Arab calligraphy and to learn more about that art form. This process has helped him to learn much more about the cultures from which these styles originate.

Where did these young men learn or acquire these ways of relating through reading? None of them seem to locate their formal education as being a direct source either for how they read or for why. Interestingly, each one locates a person or a few key people who seem to have turned them on to reading, often in spite of how it was being modeled in school or their immediate communities. For Jack, there was a particular teacher who broke the rules, seeming to sense that he had had a genuine experience with *Moby Dick* even though he failed the test. This teacher recognized that Jack was learning and growing, even if it wasn't according to protocol, and sought to foster that growth through “tricking” him into doing more reading. Russell's grandmother allowed him to get books at the library of which his parents wouldn't approve, books about UFOs and such. A teacher in his class “one of the truly great ones” didn't allow his aversion to reading or his extreme discomfort with the class to get the better of him. She allowed him to read apart from the class and gave him a book, chosen specifically for him:
“She must have known that that would've made a connection with me...her giving me that book was giving me something that was immediately relevant, you know, to the kinds of experiences that I would love to have had.” Mac's grandfather seems to have sensed that reading would give him an advantage in life and presented it to him as a form of misbehavior, like giving him “cookies instead of salad.” He knew Mac's parents would never approve of what he was giving Mac to read, and Mac cites his discussions with his grandfather about books as a source for the happy memories of his childhood. He links the emotions of his current aesthetic reading with the emotions of this relationship.

For each of them, these relational aspects of reading extend into relationships with others. They seek out others with whom to identify around books and their impact. In the case of Jack, this became an actual mission, merging with his role as an army medic. He sought to establish a “safe space” in which warriors could encounter new voices in reading and have a place to talk about their experiences. Even during our interview and afterward, Russell sought to turn me onto what he was experiencing in the books he had been reading. Mac continues to converse with a group of readers he got to know in the Army. As their early reading-based relationships developed outside of the permissible or mainstream, whether that was Mac's grandfather sharing and talking about “forbidden” books with him or teachers breaking the rules of school in the name of encouraging Jack and Russell to read, their association with the practice of reading with outsider activity has become a significant part of their identity, a secondary, borderland discourse (Gee, 1996, p. 147). This discourse is defined both by the practices and experiences of reading shared between its members, including those being addressed in this chapter.

These shared experiences around reading, the dimensions of this discourse, help to contribute to the development of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), one in which the
“members recognize that they share experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation they will be understood by other members, thus being used to construct a reality for the participants” (p. 125). Each of the participants has been a member of such a community, and they continue to do so, even making efforts to bring me into the community as they recommend books and express an interest in how I might respond to the books they have been challenged and changed by. The practice of reading has become central in their lives, and, as others invested that practice in them earlier in life, they are compelled to invest in the continuation of that practice in the lives of others. Mac began to associate with other readers during deployment, a group of men with whom he continues to read and discuss books. Jack makes it his mission to bring the life-changing experiences of reading to other soldiers during war. This kind of community is marked by “the complementarity of participation and reification” (Wenger, 1998, p. 63), which make up a sort of symbiosis in the practice and experience of aesthetic reading. The intercourse between reading and talking about reading is integral to the life of the participants as self-described readers:

Processes of reification and participation can be woven so tightly that the distinction between them seems almost blurred... Words as projections of human meaning are certainly a form of reification. In face-to-face interactions, however, speech is extremely evanescent; words affect the negotiation of meaning through a process that seems like pure participation. As a consequence, words can take advantage of shared participation among interlocutors to create shortcuts to communication. It is this tight interweaving of reification and participation that makes conversations such a powerful form of communication. (Wenger, 1998, p. 62)
It isn't enough for them to have the uniqueness and value of the reading experience alone; it must be shared and communicated about. The words that hit them, leave them struck and transformed are completed in their being shared, in offering to others the possibility of sharing in the experience, and the participants seek to generate communities around this sharing.

**Challenge and Thrill**

For each of the participants, reading involves a degree of bravery, a willingness to be challenged, to have their current condition disrupted, whether that involves their beliefs at a given moment in their lives. It seems in the case of Russell that he has become accustomed to openness, that his identity has become one of dynamism. Process is his person, so to speak, as he remains consistently in a position of inquiry, interpretation, and redefinition, changing all along. He has grown familiar with becoming intellectually unsettled in the pursuit of expanding his knowledge and locating the connections between seemingly disparate things in the world: “I'm more than willing to hear everybody's side to the argument.” Mac likens the experience of reading to that of extreme sports. One steps from an uncomfortable edge into the unknown, stimulating a chemical reaction. It is risk-driven, both in the sense of its having unpredictable results (other than a feeling of the thrill) and in how it provokes a similar biological response. The reader won't be the same person after “a reading.”

Sometimes, as in Jack’s case, the ride gets too wild, but there can’t be a true thrill without actual risk, whether that is a risk to one’s mental state or to one’s identity relative to others, including a fiancé. Mac links the reading experience to that of engaging in extreme sports like bungee jumping in that certain endorphins and such are released in a sort of guided disorientation.
In all three cases, reading has been the vehicle by which they have departed the proverbial land of their ancestors, having taken the bold and risky step of leaving the world-defining confines of evangelical Christianity without a clear sense of what might lay beyond. Their own intellectual and self-defining quests lead them into the unknown where they allow themselves to be continually redefined, seemingly without regard for the opinions of others, including family. That takes a kind of courage. Whether that thrill took the form of mischief, as in the case of Mac reading books of which his parents would never have approved, or of being caught up in or possessed by the allure of inquiry, as Russell describes it, each of them associates reading with a pushing of experiential boundaries.

**Intellectual Edge**

One of the key ways the participants in this study construct their identities through their reading pertains to how they compare to those around them in terms of their own knowledge. What is most interesting about this aspect of their reading is that they don't seem to see formal education as essential in helping them to construct themselves this way. Russell knows there's more he doesn't know and that propels him, becomes a source for purposeful reading. Jack makes it a priority to be able to engage others authoritatively on a wide variety of subjects, and to that end, he reads his way into one subject from another. Mac declares outright that he wants to know more than others:

I, I like the feeling, I guess I don't, maybe not so much I like the feeling. I don't like the feeling of ignorance; I don't like it whenever I don't know something, you know, especially when I feel like I should know it, and, you know, reading things, you know like, kinda gives me, you know, maybe someone else's perspective on the issue, or more information on something that I like.
All three express a profound distaste for feeling ignorant, for finding themselves in situations, especially socially, in which they feel like they lack the knowledge to feel genuine agency in the moment. They have seen reading help them to gain increasing confidence in this area, and they site this concern as one of the key reasons for maintaining the practice.

To escape from cultural confines or into new worlds, to relate to other voices and perspectives, to enjoy a challenge or a thrill, or to seek to gain an intellectual edge over others have all been driving factors behind the reading practices of the participants. These associations with reading seem not to have come from any standardized or formal instruction in reading in their lives. On the contrary, these reasons to read seem to have emerged more as acts of differentiation from the strictures of school and the imposition of simplistic models of reality promoted by their families and communities. Reading as it was modeled to the participants was understood as having quite narrow goals, to gain religious knowledge or to learn specific material to be tested on later. Jack, Russell, and Mac see themselves as gaining far more from their reading than they could if they read merely with a specific instrumental goal in mind. In this way, they represent as a case a fairly radical notion of reading when compared to how it has been conceptualized in their schooling experiences. A recognition of this fact has been a wake-up call to me as a teacher of literature.

**Reading and Teaching**

Aesthetic experience will be strengthened and preserved the more it is experienced; it will be more experienced, the more we are directed to such experience; and one good way of directing us to such experience is fuller recognition of its importance and richness through greater attention to the concept of aesthetic experience. (Shusterman, 1992, p. 25)
The teacher of English is not, in fact, teaching English, and certainly not English grammar, or even 'language'. Rather, she is teaching a set of discourse practices, oral and written, connected with the standard dialect of English. More importantly, she is apprenticing students to dominant, school-based social practices. . . . The English teacher can cooperate in her own marginalization by seeing herself as 'a language teacher' with no connection to such social and political issues. Or she can accept the paradox of literacy as a form of interethnic communication which often involves conflicts of values and identities, and accept her role as one who socializes students into a world view that given its power here and abroad, must be viewed critically, comparatively, and with a constant sense of the possibilities for change. Like it or not, the English teacher stands at the very heart of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time.” (Gee, 1990, pp. 67-68)

Each of the participants in this study has a unique set of experiences and personal reasons for making a practice of reading. However, there are important similarities between them and their experiences of a reading-rich life which are important to examine as I consider what distinguishes their approaches to reading from how the act and practice of reading is being presented in many two-year and state colleges. As I consider the participants of this study to be a success story in the sense that currently their lives seem to indicate some of the key benefits of being a practicing reader, I consider the emergent themes in light of my role as a teacher and with regard to how reading is often modeled in the college classroom, pointing to significant distinctions between how they have come to have a rich reading life and how reading has been presented in a formal education setting. I then seek the potential for bringing some of the aspects of their success into the college classroom setting.
Apprenticeship

Although they currently consider themselves former believers as far as evangelical Christianity is concerned, for all of these young men, there is a faith to keep, so to speak. Each of the participants identifies either an individual or a few people they credit with quickening the practice of reading in their lives. For Jack, that person happened to be a teacher who seemed to recognize the difference between how he was reading *Moby Dick*, being engrossed in the story, and his ability to answer questions about the novel on a test. For Russell, there was his grandmother, who quietly encouraged his inquisitive mind by providing access to the kinds of books he didn't encounter at home, the teacher in his F.O.C.U.S. class, who identified his social anxiety and allowed him to read on his own. She chose a book for him based on his love of spending summers on his grandparents' farm, a book which struck him deeply and showed him how powerful reading could be as it interpenetrated his lived experience. There were also the librarians who overlooked the rules to let him spend his lunch period reading between the stacks. For Mac, it was his grandfather with whom he would trade and discuss books. These are standout memories for Mac, and he ties his discussions with his grandfather to how he experiences reading in the present. For Jack, it was a teacher who tricked him into reading more after recognizing he's had a significant experience with Melville.

Interestingly, each has gone on to be an advocate for the reading life in the lives of others in some way. In Jack's case, it has been direct. His decision as a medic to create a “safe place” in Iraq where he kept his books and would talk candidly with other soldiers afforded him the opportunity to inculcate an appreciation for reading in others' lives. He mentions in particular the Navy Seal with whom he developed this sort of relationship and who grew to recognize in Jack a kind of mind he envied. Russell holds “secret, backdoor conversations” with his younger
brother, through which he hopes to get him to follow trails of inquiry through reading and to counter the anticurious influences of the fundamentalist church school in which he is enrolled. He wants his brother to become open to how he might be changed through reading. He has a group of other former soldiers with whom he shares and discusses books. After a conversation we had about the difference between atheism and agnosticism, Russell insisted that I look into some of what he is reading before we continued. Mac also has a group of former soldiers with whom he trades and discusses books.

Their experiences seem to point to the tendency of the mentored to become mentors. In a manner not unlike the one who has had a religious conversion and is driven by zeal to communicate that to others and help them “see the light,” the participants are compelled to share the values of reading with others. Jack's literary missionary work in Iraq stands as an example. Creating conditions in which students like them feel free to share their reading lives with other students seems to be a worthwhile goal. Whether or not this would occur in a college classroom as such or as a para-classroom effort requires further inquiry. At any rate, their having been mentored and guided as young readers has been fundamental in their having developed rich reading lives, and the role of mentoring in the lives of students seems to be a necessary focal point in the process of hoping to foster an aesthetic orientation.

For each of the participants, but especially for Mac, the practice of reading is not something they associate directly with a curriculum they have encountered in their schooling at any level. Those who have encountered it in school have done so when teachers or others have been willing to break from the standard curriculum, either through making exceptions in a single student's case, as was Jack's and Russell's experience, or through attentively recognizing the potential “reader” and choosing the right book to get them started. Mac describes reading more
or less in spite of his formal education. In other words, there seems to be for him little connection between his reading life and the kind of reading he has done in college.

As a college teacher, I find this very troubling. I have come to believe that it is through aesthetic experience that cognitive development makes its most profound leaps in adult learners. As adults in America, many of us seem to exist in a strange combination of predictability and stimulation. Our lives are filled with regularity and responsibilities, and along the way we have easy access to many shades of surface-level stimulation, which might serve to distract many of us momentarily from the monotony of much of our lives. I left a fairly well paying job in the city, my hometown, in a growing industry and where I had connections and options in order to pursue graduate study in literature. I had continued to read (when I had time) and had found in it beauty and marvels, new ways of thinking, the ability to connect previously disparate aspects of life, empathy for other people, and I yearned to be able to devote more time to it. The idea of sacrificing my intellect and spirit on the altar of the American dream began to seem truly depressing, so I left. I went back to school because I was in love with the idea of having two years to devote entirely to reading and talking and writing about great writing. I didn't know what would follow; my professors warned me that with a Masters in Literature I would be about as unemployable as one can get, but I didn't care. It was a wonderful two years, which completely altered the trajectory of my life, thankfully. I certainly don't expect others to follow that path, but is it out of place to hope to communicate some of that value of literature to students in the college environment? I hope to help them become life-long learners, not merely good employees or entrepreneurs. The participants in this study remind me of something I had almost forgotten about what reading can be for. However, this holistic and qualitative focus is often
very difficult to communicate to administrators who are facing pressures to respond to a quantitative world.

**Attending to Lived Experience in Reading**

Although there is certainly value in reading from the “canon” of great literature, even if that is just to encounter new voices and such, the soldiers’ lives seem to have been most affected and enriched when their reading was reflecting and reflected in their lives outside of reading. Consider Mac's “dystopian summer” during the invasion of Iraq. He found not only topical relationships between the themes and characters he encountered in these books, but he also found great comfort in what he describes as an actual relationship with, a real identification with the identity behind the text. The *semantic density* (Goodman, 1973, p. 53) of his experience with the texts gave to Mac a confidant in the midst of the irrationality and insanity of what he was experiencing. Jack's ability to see the Christ narrative re-presented through different metaphors seems to have helped him to get out from under what he considers to be a generally uninterrogated set of beliefs among those in his community, leading to a stronger sense of his own individuality and independence.

Part of the problem, it seems to me, with teaching literature in college is that the role of the teacher is often formulated as one of imparter: “I have studied literature at a high level, and now it is my job to tell you what it is about or why it is significant when you read it.” In short, what is often being taught is a history of the work, either its cultural relevance or how it is representative of certain literary techniques and why it is important for students to recognize that. Literature in this case is conceived of and delivered purely as a cultural artifact, and the eventual requirement of assigning a grade means that in many cases teachers narrow the possibilities of what is relevant or valuable in order to account for whether or not students have “learned” some
of the important things about it. This approach is reinforced when teachers have a large number of students and classes, as is often the case in two-year and state colleges. For example, in a given semester, my colleagues and I have around 125 to 130 students for which we must not only assign a grade at the end, but for whom we are expected to account for certain “general education outcomes” in a given class, ranking them in a database on a scale of one to four in areas such as “cultural awareness,” “cultural comparison,” “recognition of technique.” This presupposes that I have tested or monitored each of them along these lines as they have responded in some form to the texts we've read. Incidentally, no one has ever explained to me why we are collecting this data or what it will be used for.

If the class is one on history through literature, great. That all makes sense, but this shouldn't be confused with a genuine artistic encounter. In order for that to occur, the reader must be culturally and cognitively situated to have an artistic experience. Arguably, that won't occur for most students when they are all reading the same Wordsworth poem (no offense to Wordsworth). Genuine aesthetic experience might depend as much on being able to identify what sort of text a given reader will be willing to “play the game” with, and a one-size-fits-all approach to the reading selections in a given class tends to work against this. I was fortunate that the work of the modern poets really struck me when I was an undergraduate student, had a profound effect on me, and led me to continue the reading life, but most of the students in that class expressed genuine hatred for the readings, and I wouldn't be surprised if many of them aren't practicing readers today.

Is it possible to create a literature class in which the teacher helps the students to identify work that might help to engender an appreciation for reading? The teacher would have to be positioned differently as one who helps students discover reading that does it for them. Attention
would have to be paid at the outset to what was currently significant in each student's life, which she or he would be compelled to “read into.” Some sort of artistic diagnostic would have to occur in order to get some sense of where to begin with each, but it might be possible to begin forming groups of readers among them at a fairly early stage. How have the participants in this study developed their small communities of readers which have been so important in their reading lives? What role has mentoring played in this process and how has that developed, been maintained, or shifted between members? Their reading communities developed among their fellow soldiers, so the broader context of being members of a kind of community, complete with shared experiences and boundaries, was the ground from which arose these small communities of “otherness” in which they passed around and talked about books. Are there aspects of their experience that might be transplantable into a college setting, making use of the context and its boundaries to foster conditions of alterity in their reading? A further study could look more closely at their experiences of moving with a group of readers through the growth of an aesthetic awareness.

Centralizing the Aesthetic

“All texts are read in relation to the contexts of reading” (Sumara, 1996, p. 1).

“Reading, curriculum, and the lives of those who experience them are inextricable from one another” (Sumara, 1996, p. 5).

Each of the participants seems to have an open-ended relationship to reading. In other words, they have an experience when they read which leaves them longing for more and which sends them off in different directions as they pursue further experience. As they exist, as they be on the vanguard of their own cognition, they are both living in and engendering a poetically-conditioned imagination. They claim that it is here that they learn. They learn what they feel
like they need to about themselves, the world, and themselves as part of the world. Everything they are up to that point is brought to bear in the *us/not-us relation* (Sumara, 1996, p. 118). I have read more than most people on earth, and still, there are those select works that I recall as having pushed me to a new level of consciousness. How might I have benefited if I had been more free to move from work to work, chasing the aesthetic, instead of having a door closed with the back cover of the book and the need to “cover the next thing” in class? Fitch and Loving (2006) declare, “[T]he educator has an ethical duty to both help establish a shared horizon of understanding and to open dialogue within that horizon….Once that shared horizon is established, though, the attitude and practice of openness, including competing and even conflicting ideas, forges the practice of critical inquiry” (p. 5). I see a primary goal of my very limited time with students as being to give birth to or to foster both a critical orientation and to deepen their ability to experience art. If they are to become life-long learners, they must have some experience of the pleasure or purpose of the aesthetic.

To make this a focus of a college-level class calls for a different sense of both the instructor's role in the class and the class’ overall structure, in terms of the student-teacher relationship, the student-student relationship, and the calendar of the course. The idea is to create and facilitate conditions in which genuine aesthetic reading can occur and to monitor students not for information they learn and can recount, but for the progress they make as they read. To that end, it seems to make sense to start where they are. For example, Mac developed an interest in biology through the lyrics of a rock band; it was part of a holistic experience; the music had an impact, and the lyrics gained significance enough for him that he chose to explore their subject matter more deeply. Shusterman (1992) uses rap music as an example not only of a more integrated cultural form, but of a potential starting place with certain students who find in it
both genuine aesthetic experience and self reflection in being able to project themselves more completely into the work. The nucleus for the aesthetic might lie in a variety of places, but the power of the experience itself to touch off an ongoing process of inquiry, one that can conceivably be guided toward greater learning and a wider expanse of possibility, is the source for a reorientation of the self toward a learning-centered life.

**Resisting Ignorance**

Another theme that emerges from the interviews, a characteristic shared by the participants, is a determination to be as informed as possible. This concern applies not only to remaining current on important subjects and events, but also to being versed in the outstanding art in various media. Mac admits to being a “news junkie,” but he also mentions books he intends to read, simply because he knows they are considered important to read as outstanding examples of fiction. Jack claims, “I want to know that I'm intelligent and I'm able to converse with people of all classes...I want to be well rounded.” Russell seems viscerally opposed to ignorance; he associates it with something very distasteful. I must admit, I very rarely observe this quality among my students, but it is among the most important values I hope to inculcate. What is it about the participants that makes them so determined to stand out in this way? They have talked about the role reading plays in this aspect of their lives, but from where does their fear of lacking knowledge come? I consider myself similar to the participants in this way, but I can look back at my life and trace some of the factors that influenced me this orientation. Although it will require another study to examine this phenomenon more deeply, it seems clear that they haven't acquired their fear of ignorance directly from immediate family or schooling. If anything, they seem to have identified themselves this way in opposition to family and school.
It gets down to how we as a society talk about and promote higher education, both directly and tacitly. Moreover, how knowledge itself is understood and talked about in college is crucial. What is the purpose of new information? What are the differences between information and knowledge? Are students learning in college primarily to gain a skill set necessary for a particular vocation? As the University System of Georgia began to revisit its core curriculum requirements a few years ago, departments were asked to defend their courses with regard to stated outcomes, and literature courses of the sort I teach basically fell under a “multicultural” requirement along with foreign language or other courses and were cut back. Although I'm quite supportive of using students’ time in college to help them become more culturally aware, that has not been, nor is it now the central reason I read or want my students to read. The rationale behind the multicultural requirement is to prepare students to be successful in a global society, to ensure that students gain understanding of significant aspects of more than one culture across the globe, demonstrate understanding of political, social, economic, or institutional developments across the globe, demonstrate an understanding of the world from different linguistic, cultural, literary, and aesthetic perspectives, demonstrate an understanding of the commonality and diversity among people and cultures across the globe, and demonstrate an understanding of their own cultures through the study of the world cultures and different cultural perspectives. (University System of Georgia Core Curriculum Guidelines)

Two humanities or fine arts courses or one fine arts course and a foreign language which includes study of the writing, music, art, etc. of another culture is a component of reaching this goal. It is possible, therefore, to get through college in Georgia without taking a literature course
as such at all. The stated outcomes of the humanities and fine arts requirement, of which one literature course or certain foreign language classes fulfill a credit are as follows:

- Students can compare and contrast the meaning of major texts from both Western and non-Western cultures.
- Students recognize themselves as participants in a particular culture and see how this affects their experiences and values.
- Students have the ability to make informed judgments about art forms from various cultures including their own culture.
- Students have the ability to recognize the fine arts as expressions of human experience.
- Students have the ability to critically appreciate historical and contemporary fine art forms as they relate to individual and social needs and values.
- Students have the ability to apply knowledge of historical, social, and cultural influences to understanding a work of art.
- Students recognize that an ethical issue is present and can distinguish ethical choices from mere self-interest.
- Students are aware of the ways that culture shapes ethical views and can critically evaluate those views. (University System of Georgia Core Curriculum Guidelines)

These goals are certainly positive ones, but little to none of them seem to be situated in or to depend on genuine aesthetic experience; it seems to me that most of what is called for here can be arrived at through direct presentation of information in a lecture format or through interpretive and analytical work in college classes. I hope to see students desire to gain these abilities for themselves, to be driven by curiosity and a culturally defined identity, an increasing worldliness,
and aesthetic reading seems to have been the primary vehicle for these values among the participants.

**Reading as Relationship**

There is an access of being in the same way as when, in a genuine conversation, something occurs to both partners that had not occurred to either of them before. When they come to understanding, something new is conceived. Something new happens, and what occurs in hermeneutic conversation is being. We come to realize that belonging is an ontological way of talking about the condition achieved by the fusion of horizons. (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 183)

One of the more striking themes that emerges from the data is the relational nature of reading as the participants talk about it. The nature of the reading transaction as they describe it differs strikingly from the formulations that defined my undergraduate and graduate level literature studies and which, arguably, remain prominent in both curriculum design and pedagogy at the community college level. Communicating information through reading or modeling ways to read doesn't teach students how to have a relationship through reading, how to meet and interact with other voices and shared experiences. That must come from having a genuine aesthetic experience, a shared being through the work, and that is something that likely can't be manufactured by choosing the right book for the class or illustrating to students why they should like or at least be impressed by this or that cultural artifact. As Mac says, they have to find the right book for them in order to touch off that process of aesthetic pursuit.

Although it might not be possible to teach students how to have a relationship with a book, how I as a teacher talk to them about reading, what I highlight as the kind of experiences they can have, how I talk about what I have read and how I have related to and through it all
offer to students a relational aspect of reading which may well have been missing in their formal education to that point. Additionally, establishing or helping to create the conditions conducive to aesthetic reading seems to be a promising project. As Sumara (1996) points out, “Once the relationship is established, it exists as part of the reader’s world and sometimes functions as a mediating space within which the reader negotiates other aspects of her or his life” (p. 50). Here, his work with his students offers some potentially useful ideas for creating conditions for aesthetic reading in a school setting.

For one, the experience of the classroom as a defined space with “rules” can provide an opportunity for altering the boundaries of a “commonplace location” associated with prior conceptions of reading, creating a new “space opened up by the relations among readers, texts, and the contexts of reading” (Sumara, 1996, p. 130). Sumara believes that as these boundaries are altered new possibilities open up for experiencing reading, and if this is reading done as a group, the students find their role or position in that group altered and, thereby, their relationship to the text. Reading as a relational act can be realized to some extent with the help of doing so in relation to a group of other readers:

One cannot learn much about the individual 'private' self without knowing the way in which that self is publicly constituted and re-constituted. Furthermore, these recursive explorations of 'self,' as known in relation to 'others,' typically occur within rituals and daily routines which often include narrations of past events. (Sumara, 1996, p. 135)

I have friends with whom I share art. We talk about what we read, what we watch, what we listen to. In so many ways we have “won each other over” to new works, not by a simple offering of “Here's something I like. Do you like it?” but a discussion of the experiences we have had with it, why, based on our cultural histories, we have responded to it as we have. Kinds
of music or styles of writing I might have otherwise dismissed have turned out to have had a powerful impact on me based on how friends have described its impacts on them. If I saw students begin to develop these kinds of relationships around aesthetic pursuits, my job would, in a sense, be done. I am convinced that for many adult learners an experience of that kind of dynamic interaction between art and community would be enough to set in motion a desire to grow aesthetically. Jack, Russell, and Mack don't come across to me as unusual at face value; they seem to fit in unimposingly among their peers. Begin a conversation with any of them, though, and one might become drawn into a rich and challenging discussion, a surprisingly meaningful interchange, and they are likely to cite books they've read as reasons for being the uncommonly intelligent and interesting men they are and to recommend these books to others.

**Freedom to Follow the Trail**

One thing that stands out among the participants is how reading is a central part both of how they become interested in a subject, author, kind of writing, philosophy, school of theory, etc. and how they explore it. Often this leads to new interests and avenues of inquiry. Think about Russell's interest in butterflies, slight-of-hand, or Arabic calligraphy; about Jack's exploration of Christian metaphor and the profound impact it has had on his identity or his tendency to “read the wrong stuff” in school as he became sidetracked pursuing something of interest from the reading.

Perhaps there's no way within the current structure and with the current budgetary and political pressures in higher education to see this kind of reading facilitated at the college level, but it is important, nonetheless, to highlight the distinction between the kind of reading set forward as being “college level” or “college appropriate” and the kind of reading that seems to contribute to significant cognitive development. It seems that all too often in a college classroom
a book is presented as a world of its own, limited by the number of its pages. The limits of what a student is asked to respond to, or worse, what a student is tested on, are defined by the covers of the book. For the participants, it is the aggregate of their entire artistic lives that is brought to bear in their aesthetic experiences through reading as well as the intellectual and artistic trails they follow from those experiences. Solid or artificial boundaries can't be drawn around them, so it troubles me to see approaches in education which seem to do so, approaches which seem to be sticking around. The Common Core Standards Initiative set forth for secondary schools, although they do in ways seem to represent some improvements as far as desired outcomes are concerned, seem to have been structured on an overly compartmentalized concept of the reading experience. I turn to the Standards here because they have a huge potential to establish students' understanding of reading and its purposes before they enter college.

Although attention is paid in the Standards to “an integrated model of literacy” and its stated outcomes describe students who are interdisciplinary, multicultural, and media literate, the language used in the various criteria call for a focus on individual texts, beyond understanding “text types and purposes” into recognizing specific techniques, rhetorical and literary, analyzing and evaluating structure, and so on, citing specific groups of texts as essential. As valuable as these skills are, it seems implicit in the Standards that texts are entirely individual entities, which will serve their purpose whether entirely isolated from other texts or read as part of a larger project. The “College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading” (p. 35) describe a student who can demonstrate awareness of “key ideas and details,” “craft and structure,” and “integration of knowledge and ideas” as well as “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.” Indeed, these are all skills I want my students to have; they are crucial. My concern, though, is how schools will try to “teach” these
skills. Each of the participants in this study seems to excel, even beyond their peers in these key areas, yet they seem to have lacked much direct instruction in them. The point is that the participants got here not because of their formal education in reading, but in spite of it, as an act of differentiation from it. Mac had read enough fiction to understand its conventions, even in childhood, and, therefore, to be suspicious of the fictional elements of the stories being centralized in church: “Adults are believing this stuff?” Reading taught him to read and to “read” the world around him. In a manner similar perhaps to that of a farming family reading the natural world around them, he learned through reading, through engagement with narrative and voices, to read the cultural world around him.

A high school teacher will be expected to make sure seniors can “Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics” (p. 38). As valuable as it might be to have exposure to a variety of texts from the past three centuries, I see that as a historical project, not at all a guarantee of an artistic experience. Learning about the art of a different culture and historical period needn't have anything to do with transformative artistic experience of the sort Dewey and his followers promote. “Foundational” is variable, depending on one's cultural background, and to this end there might be just as much value as a class in interrogating the presence of this or that text in the Canon as in unquestioningly accepting its value. I don't intend to conduct an extensive analysis of the Common Core State Standards or the common core curriculum for state university systems. I simply hope to draw a contrast between reading as it is conceptualized in those missions and reading as it has been understood and experienced by Jack, Russell, and Mac. How would
students like them fit into the regime of these standards? What value would there be for students like them in being immersed in and held accountable to a system defined by these criteria?

Jack claims, “I don't view education as my means to success by any stretch. I want to be educated for my personal well being. I want to know that I'm intelligent and I'm able to converse with people of all classes. Be at a party on the back porch having a conversation about finance, impact of floating currency, etc. then go inside and have an hour-long screaming match about the best shortstop of all time. I want to be well rounded.” Jack has left college and claims that if he ever returns it will be one college in particular: St. John's in Philadelphia,

because there's no curriculum. You don't know how it works; you know why it works...Essentially, you're able to chase that stream of knowledge. Because you understand what Newton said, you're able to know what this guy said about that. You can not even have the formula, but you understand it. It wouldn't give you a ‘useful’ education; it would essentially teach you how to formulate creative ideas. Because I know plenty of smart people that I can't stand and hate and who can't tie their shoes. It's great you're very intelligent, but can you apply that helps me out with my problem today?

My goal as a teacher is to help create life-long learners, for the semester to be the beginning of something, not necessarily a complete cycle of some sort. Students like the participants in the study stand out to me as those who can truly benefit from their learning and can contribute to new knowledge and genuine progress among those with whom they associate.

As a result of this research, I have completely altered my approaches to teaching reading at the college level. In the spirit of “starting where they are,” I begin each semester by having the students identify works they associate with aesthetic experience. These can be anything, not just printed texts. From there, I have them reflect on the experience, relative to the work, and to
try to communicate to others the reasons they think it has had that impact on them and what they would want others to know about the work and its importance to them. From there, they begin to seek and acquire other texts, reading themselves into an area of their choosing and responding along the way, keeping a journal of sorts of the process. My hope is to help them to see the class as a community of practice around the individual and collective pursuit of aesthetic experience. This approach is a new one for me and is a move into uncharted territory, but so far I'm excited by the results.

I should be open, however, to the potential limitations of the classroom setting with regard to fostering and maintaining communities of aesthetic readers. Given the ability of many students to communicate on some level in real time with other people in many parts of the world, it seems that increasingly the walls of the classroom. More and more, my students go online in search of information based on things I've said in class and bring what they find right back into the discussion. They communicate with friends and acquaintances with whom they associate very specific interests or aspects of their lives. This capability and way of engaging with others is just one of many potential areas of focus I'm interested in as I imagine what possibilities might exist for establishing reading communities around shared or converging trails of interest. The classroom as such might be just one aspect of helping to engender aesthetic reading and communities of practice around it.
CHAPTER 11
CONCLUSION

“Indeed, the power of aesthetic experience to flout definitional limitations and break the bonds of encrusted conventional divisions is precisely what makes it so important for a reformatory aesthetic such as Dewey's.” (Shusterman, 1996, p 29)

An Expanded, Though by no Means Simple, Concept of Aesthetic Reading

Rethinking Rosenblatt

My work with Jack, Russell, and Mac has, among many other things, helped me to reconsider what aesthetic experience is and can be, especially with regard to reading. My research into aesthetics, theories of reader response, and the social formation of mind had begun to help me understand the experience of art as a dynamic convergence of sociocultural forces, as a shared participation in the being of the work, as itself being a source for the growth of culture in the transformation of a mind, which will then alter the sociocultural landscape through which it moves. Working with the participants, considering their experiences with reading, especially in light of their cultural background, has led me now to reconsider the role of the art product in aesthetic experience, the individual book in aesthetic reading. Here I revisit reader response theory as defined by Rosenblatt (1968) (1978) (1985). I turn back to Rosenblatt here, as her work is held up as central in reader response theory, as a having made progress in dismantling prior, overly static concepts of reading associated with New Criticism in which the properties of the text and intentions of the author were the focal points of analyzing aesthetic reading. Rosenblatt's contribution to conceptualizing aesthetic reading is significant given the prevailing
theories about the roles of reader, text, and author during her time, theories still persistent in our own, especially in curriculum development in two-year colleges. Her work has been especially relevant to mine, in that it goes to great length in considering a Deweyan concept of the aesthetic with regard to the reading event. She points out rightly that the presence or not of aesthetic experience does not depend on particular literary elements in given texts. However, in light of how the participants in this study talk about their reading, her understanding of aesthetic reading seems insufficient.

As significant as her work might have been in its academic context and has been in much of theory and research in reading, it remains grounded in and oriented toward an event involving one reader and one text in a given setting and, therefore, seems somewhat unsuited to address the kind of reading the participants in this study describe. Her binary formulation of “efferent,” based in the Latin effere – “to take away,” versus “aesthetic” presents a problem beyond its binariness: “At the aesthetic end of the spectrum, in contrast, the reader's primary purpose is fulfilled during the reading event as he fixes his attention on the actual experience he is living through” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 27). The experiences Jack, Russell, and Mac are living through in their reading are mediated by the experiences they have already had, even their prior reading, and their lived experiences beyond the reading event are “read” to some extent by their aesthetic reading experiences. The boundaries, therefore, can't be drawn by the confines of the “event” as Rosenblatt defines it. These worlds continually overlap. The “literary event,” as she refers to it, is aesthetic as much for its relatedness to life as it is for the experience of being lost in it. The literariness of life is just as important to the participants in this study. Rosenblatt (1978) claims, the aesthetic stance brings with it a certain distancing from “reality” because it is known that the experience is generated by the words and not by such images, situations,
characters, actions observed directly without verbal mediation. The attention is consciously focused on what the words are stirring up. This may be felt to correspond to what is known as actual reality – realism derives from such a judgment, but such realism is not confused with reality. (p. 30)

It seems to me that the participants in this study wouldn't draw such a sharp line between actual reality and an aesthetic one. The two are mutually formative. Their reality is defined as much by their reading as their reading is defined by their reality, and for them, that seems to be one of the main reasons to read at all. It is a way of making meaning of and sense of the world. The “taking away” is an important element of the aesthetic experience for the participants in this study, and, though their reading might not be “instrumental” as such, it is an activity mediated by a purpose beyond being merely lost in the experience. Yes, they are reading closely, but they seem to be reading as much for experiences related to their lives, for ideas that speak to their lives' concerns, and the “event” doesn't just end when the book is closed and they make something to eat or get in their car and drive to work. Their reading is not something they do alongside their lives nor as a break from living in the world; it is an integrated part of their lives, an aspect of themselves as much a part of them as their arms and legs.

Whereas Rosenblatt would situate the aesthetic as a way of exploring literature, a “stance” toward a given text, through this research I have come to connect the presence of the aesthetic to the reader's finding her life through the text and having it reshaped as her lived experience is re-presented in some way. Jack's experience of Jonathan Livingston Seagull is a good example. His profound experience with that book had everything to do with his particular religious and cultural background, with his sense of self at the time he encountered the book, as well as the particular characteristics of the text. It was a book that “did it” for him, and “it” is an
indication of the aesthetic, yes, but “it” continues beyond the book as he pursues a deeper sense of the related experience, seeks to have life and self brought together in it. The condition of alterity doesn't just pass away once a reading is over; it arises anew as the reader comes to resist the unliterariness of life in some way and is driven to read. The given text might be important, but it is merely a touchstone in a wider relational process going on between the reader and her sociocultural surroundings. Just as the “mind extends beyond the skin,” the aesthetic reading extends beyond the book, forming life and becoming a motivating force of it, an awareness to be sought out precisely for its relatedness to one's life; it is an experience through which an individual's lived experience is spoken to, reflected, and redefined in some way.

**Jack, Russell, Mac, Sumara, and Gadamer**

For a hermeneutically-trained consciousness, the text being read and experienced at a given moment is merely a touchstone in a growing, ongoing process. The reader's experience of it is being mediated to some extent by not only by the entire aggregate of her reading life to that point, but her entire lived experience as well. The text, the art product, helps to produce an aesthetic experience for the reader when aspects of it and its cultural history lead her, enculturated as she is, to a condition of alterity combined with a welcoming of otherness, disorientation with the possibility of new equilibrium. Indeed, the power to provoke this literary experience lies not in the text, but in the convergence of it with the sociocultural history of the reader in the act of reading in conditions conducive to such experience. There are no texts which can of themselves guarantee aesthetic experience for any reader. Indeed, no text can be read in exactly the same way, even by a single reader. The experience of reading a book is mediated by, among other things, the experiences of all other books read, and no two people have the exact same reading history, much less the same lived experience. Therefore, to focus too narrowly on
an individual text or work of art, even as experienced by an institutionally defined majority, in
order to understand the dimensions of aesthetic or literary experience is misguided. Policies or
research which emphasize one reader and one text in one event is not how aesthetic reading
should be understood. For the participants, to read aesthetically is a way of reading in their lives,
not a skill set for reading an individual text. Literature is a way of exploring life.

No Obvious Profile of an Aesthetic Reader

Although I initially hypothesized that it was their experience as soldiers which set them
apart as aesthetic readers, something about the extreme nature of their experiences in young
adulthood which was mediating their seemingly extreme experiences of reading, this study has
shown that these young men have been reading their lives since before their time in the military.
Certainly, their soldiering experiences mediate their reading experiences and practices in
particular ways, but so do their experiences in their families, communities, and schools. I
initially was focused on their shared experience as soldiers, but through the research process, I
became just as interested in other aspects of the participants' backgrounds: the role of religion,
the prevailing values of their communities and families, their experiences in school. Reading
was an integral aspect of their lives even before they were soldiers, and it served an extremely
important role during, but also after, their time at war. Each young man's self construction
relative to his sociocultural world has both driven him to read and defined how he has read and
experienced reading in an ongoing process of transformation driven by aesthetic experience. In
short, readers make good readers.

This realization is very important for me as an educator. A vital and enriching reading
life, one which both engenders and rewards curiosity and openness, humility and intelligence,
seems to depend far more on one's having aesthetic reading experiences enough to lead one to
seek more than it does on any specific experiences in life otherwise. Jack, Russell, and Mac might come across at face value as “good American boys” within their communities, communities in which, by their own admission, reading and higher education are devalued if not viewed with outright suspicion. If they can become the intelligent, inquisitive, hermeneutically-conditioned people they seem to be, that possibility surely exists for others with similar backgrounds. The key seems to be not that they read certain texts, but that they read the “book that does it for them.” As an educator, this realization has lead me to rethink entirely how I conceive of reading and its purposes in a college English class. Helping students to find the book that does it for them might be the best gift I can give. I was fortunate that I happened into a class late in my junior year of college in which I encountered poetry which had a profound impact on me and launched me into a new kind of living, a class in which a professor seemed to care more that I be changed by literature and talk about how than that I learn specific things about given texts. My experience was quite unusual, though, and rare as far as I can tell. If I can help more and more of my students to begin to live lives which include the practice of reading, not to read specific books, but reading in pursuit of the aesthetic, I will have gone a long way to helping them become life-long learners.

Where Are They Now?

Jack has left college and claims he has no plans to return, preferring instead to educate himself through reading and conversation. He has moved to Asheville, NC and recently married. He loves cars and is currently pursuing a vocation as an auto mechanic. Jack continues to read voraciously. We communicate periodically. Russell continues to work for the Pentagon as an intelligence analyst and is often traveling. He expresses a profound awareness of the impacts his decisions can have and have in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, and other locations. He and
his girlfriend share an apartment in North Carolina. When we last spoke, he was reading in 
exploration of the relationships between notions of power and the structure of urban 
environments. Mac has spent the past year and a half working as a private investigator. He 
moved briefly to Kansas City then back to Georgia, where he lives with his girlfriend. He has 
recently been enjoying differently approached works of travel writing. He has accumulated 
some interesting and very funny stories from his current line of work, but he hopes to be able to 
get a different kind of job.

**Reading and Hope and Some Thoughts with Regard to Soldiering**

Jack, Russell, and Mac are in many ways a success story. These are young men raised in 
homes and communities in which critical thinking was discouraged or at best limited to 
vocational aspects of life, in which reading for reasons other than religious or educational 
purposes was hidden. They are veterans who have returned from war to retake some control over 
their lives and their destinies, and they seem relatively well adjusted. Throughout the difficult 
experiences these young men have been through, reading has been both a source of comfort and 
perspective, a means through which they have understood themselves relative to their 
circumstances while seeing new possibilities open up and voices from other worlds arrive. 
Through reading they have generated and maintained a hermeneutically-trained consciousness, 
and it has been this consciousness that has propelled further desire to read. It is difficult to say 
which came first, but it seems clear that what is being produced is a boundless curiosity, an ever 
enriching understanding of the world, a drive to learn and to see themselves always changing, 
unhindered by the categories and narratives defined by others. Russell and Mac completed 
college degrees and entered the workforce. Jack, although he was a successful student and more 
than capable of succeeding in higher education, has chosen to follow a different career path. He
seems quite stable, though, and focused on his goals and his new family. Although it might have taken some time, all three seem well adjusted and seem to have gained a more-or-less healthy perspective on their time as soldiers. They are very bright young men.

Unfortunately, the same encouraging things cannot be said for many of the young people who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. There are currently more soldiers committing suicide than are dying from combat related injuries, and many others are having a difficult time adjusting to family or work life after deployment (Harrell & Berglass, 2011, p. 2). The participants in this study seem to have weathered their difficulties well, and each cites the practice of reading as having served a central role in keeping him integrated and helping him maintain some perspective throughout his military service. Reading supports their self-confidence, provides them an endless set of lenses through which to see and interpret the world. It has been both an anchor to and a transforming force in their identities.

Although the separation of church and state precludes federal statistical programs from collecting data on religion, a comparison of survey data from various non-profit and other organizations show that Protestant Christians make up a disproportionate number of active-duty service personnel, almost equal to the number of those of other religions combined. In recent years, there have been concerns expressed and lawsuits raised in response to the perception that evangelicalism pervades military culture (Lichtblau, 2009, p. A14). The Military Religious Freedom Foundation filed a lawsuit in 2009 based on the advice in the U.S. Army's suicide prevention manual that chaplains promote “religiosity,” specifically Christianity. They sought to challenge “the noxiously unconstitutional pattern and practice of fundamentalist Christian oppression in our U.S. armed forces” (Leopold, 2009, press release). I presume that, as with any institution, the military reflects the values and worldview of those who have constituted it and
taken on positions of leadership, and it seems reasonable that the faith practices of a majority of the members would tend toward prominence. Although I don't intend extrapolate the experiences of these participants in my analysis of America's armed forces, they come from a cultural background which is similar in significant ways to those of their fellow soldiers. The participants use reading as a form of differentiation from the confines of the religious narratives of their families and immediate communities. These acts of differentiation, however, are mediated by schema inherited from these narratives. It seems reasonable to presume that aspects of the evangelical narrative mediate the cognition of many other soldiers. I touch on this because this is a population I hope to continue working with in future research, and what I have learned from Jack, Russell, and Mac has helped me to consider more deeply some of the sociocultural schema mediating their reading. Based on what I have learned so far, I'm curious about others from similar cultural backgrounds.

Through this work with Jack, Russell, and Mac, I have come to believe that a life that includes the practice of reading is a richer one, one which is likely to produce as Mac claims, “a more well-rounded person,” yes, but more than that, a person who experiences life itself in a more meaningful way. As a person who has pursued a career in and around literature, I have found myself around others who have shared my appreciation for the reading life. However, before this study, I had never encountered readers like Jack, Russell, and Mac. I must confess a degree of envy for them. They seem to grow fast, far, and beyond their own expectations for themselves. They are on a trajectory, and they don't seem hindered by fear, either of what family or peers might think or of what kind of beliefs they might come to hold or lose along the way. They are pleased to see themselves consistently transformed, regardless of where that leads.
From my vantage point, they seem to be making the most of their lives, and reading is an essential practice in their living.

As a teacher, these young men have offered me a goal. If I can somehow encourage others to embrace the reading life, to enter into the self exploration and self formation it can provide, I will have given them far more than I can by teaching them about the work of certain authors or how to analyze literary texts of my or the academy's choosing in ways that might help them write effective essays about it. Jack, Russell, and Mac are life-long learners who will, I believe, have a powerful impact on the world around them. They give me hope, reasons to teach and to keep reading, and I hope to learn more from them and others like them as I bring my research to bear in teaching literature in college.

**Next Steps**

Initially, I had focused on the participants' shared experience of having been soldiers deployed in combat. However, as I considered the data and consulted with my dissertation committee, I began to see that their lives as soldiers wasn't the primary focal point for their reading lives I initially imagined it was. I do believe, however, that it sets them apart in some very important ways that I'd like to consider more closely. In order to respect their confidentiality and to avoid exposing aspects of their experiences to which they might have been sensitive, I chose not to reveal some of the more violent or troubling details. I have spoken with two of the participants (one has been out of the country) about returning to this work and having them write their own stories, serving as co-authors of any published work that we develop. I'm much more comfortable with this approach, as it keeps me from potentially exploiting their suffering for academic reasons. They have been quite receptive to this idea and seem excited to contribute to this project, so I intend to continue working with them in the near future.
This research has led me to an emerging concept of aesthetic experience which I hope to explore in subsequent research, especially as it might be brought to bear in the teaching of literature in college. As I mentioned earlier, the findings of this study have already led to new approaches in my own teaching, and I am eager to begin to further conceptualize and implement an aesthetically-driven approach to teaching literature in college. The ideas of students like Jack, Russell, and Mac will be invaluable as I pursue this research.
REFERENCES


