

Published in the *E3W Review of Books*, Spring 2014

Timothy Aubry

Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans

University of Iowa Press, 2011

258 pages

\$39.95

Reviewed by Laura K. Wallace

In the opening sentence of *Reading As Therapy*, Timothy Aubry asks, “How does fiction help people?” The question is both an individual one and a social one. The prevalence of the belief that fiction *does* help people supports Aubry’s claim for the dominance of the therapeutic paradigm. The concept of the therapeutic paradigm describes how, in response to increasing prosperity and homogenization post-World War II, middle class Americans turned away from the public sphere and began to regard individual happiness and fulfillment as the goals of human life. Psychiatry went mainstream, the self-help industry and recovery movements exploded, and their methods and principles permeated popular culture. According to many critics, this paradigm allowed people who might otherwise be seen as privileged to claim that they, too, experienced the kind of suffering that built character, but through psychological, rather than material, deprivation. Aubry contends that this paradigm structures expectations about what literary fiction can and should do in the contemporary US.

Aubry focuses on mid-twentieth-century debates about the rise of the therapeutic paradigm, and on the relationship between academic and popular reading practices. Aubry’s and my use of the term “middlebrow” denotes this distinction between reading done by scholars and students and reading done outside educational institutions. Additionally, the middlebrow is associated with mainstream culture, rather than an avant-garde or subculture. It is not meant to be evaluative. Rather Aubry uses the term to indicate that each of these books appeals to and is read by a large audience of mostly middle-class, highly educated readers who read fiction for personal edification.

Rather than arguing that reading fiction is or is not good for individuals and society, Aubry demonstrates how texts and readers reveal their investments in the therapeutic—that is, how the beliefs that literature is therapy and that therapy improves the social world affect reading, writing and publishing practices. Six in-depth case studies comprise the body of Aubry’s book, each examining a novel from the 1990s or early 2000s that belongs to the genre of middlebrow literary fiction. Aubry is skeptical of critical arguments that “the urge to identify with fictional characters [is] a naive surrender of critical distance” or that “middlebrow fiction [...] fosters the self-indulgent impulses of its readers, promoting liberal individualism and the evacuation of the public sphere.” His project is “critical as well as recuperative.” It is also “speculative,” as Aubry prioritizes close reading, often imagining how other readers might interpret a passage, and “ethnographic,” since he looks to Amazon reviews and Oprah’s Book Club discussions as well as scholarly studies and popular journalism in his analysis of each book’s reading public. Aubry depicts reading as a social practice, and, while he acknowledges that its traces are often diffuse and ephemeral, he sees these resources as “a legible record of [the] process” of “the formation of an interpretive and affective consensus” about each book he analyzes, and about literature in general.

Each book Aubry analyzes dramatizes an encounter with difference: Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) frustrates readers' (and Oprah's) expectations about racial identity and realistic fiction; Rebecca Wells's *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (1996) depicts the conflict between the isolating therapeutic individualism of the city and the warm, complex community of the small town; David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) stages a collision between the detached, ironic cynicism of the 1990s and the earnest fake-it-til-you-make-it philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous; James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) jars readers by revealing the proximity between white, middle-class suburbia and the jagged squalor of crack addiction, and, when it is revealed as largely fictional, calls the idea of literary truth into question; Anita Shreve's *The Pilot's Wife* (1998) similarly investigates the "incursions of the political" into "ordinary" life when a widow discovers her husband's secret affiliation with the Irish Republican Army; and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) exposes post-9/11 US readers to the people and culture of Afghanistan. Aubry suggests that *The Kite Runner* and books like it pose an interesting challenge for literary instructors, who might take advantage of the therapeutic paradigm by allowing students to make "affective negotiations with cultural difference." Each of these novels, in its own way, reveals the power of cross-boundary identification—or at least the power of readers' belief in it, and the vehemence with which they express their anger when they feel their empathy has been violated or betrayed, especially in the case of *A Million Little Pieces*.

I will not have room here to examine each of these chapters in depth, but perhaps their most fascinating facet, aside from the eclectic methodology, is how Aubry puts these texts and the interpretive and affective communities around them into conversation with one another. For example, he notes that "If Morrison [...] slyly employs conventional middlebrow tropes in order to enlist her insecure readers in an engagement with highbrow interpretive difficulties, then Wallace employs highbrow techniques in order to persuade his intellectual readers to try out middlebrow responses." In *Paradise*, many characters' racial identities are indeterminate and their fates are unrevealed. Middlebrow readers assume these characters each have real identities that Morrison intentionally obfuscates, that she knows what really happens to the characters after the book ends. Thus this episode of Oprah's Book Club depicts the encounter between middlebrow readers and a more "highbrow" literary text that might seem unnecessarily difficult. Many are determined to "get it" anyway, both to prove that they are capable readers, and because they believe it contains valuable truths. Aubry analyzes Morrison's conversations with Book Club participants on Winfrey's show and concludes that Morrison intends readers to question race as a way of knowing. Additionally, she seeks to trouble readers' belief in fiction as a "mimetic fantasy" that exists beyond the pages of the book, as well as to get them thinking about how they determine others' identities and why they sympathize with some characters and revile others. Morrison's novel thus works most effectively for the reader who approaches it with middlebrow expectations, which can then be confounded. By contrast, *Infinite Jest* is not designed to appeal to the middlebrow sensibility. It looks like a postmodern novel: it is over 1,000 pages long, riddled with footnotes and packed with a staggering number of intertwined characters and plotlines. However, according to Aubry, Wallace's novel is ultimately an argument for middlebrow, therapeutic ways of knowing exemplified in the novel by the recovery movement, which can help individuals survive when highbrow irony fails them.

Aubry is more effective when he draws claims from his diverse archive than when he makes his own evaluations. Curiously, this text refuses to be transparent about its author's subjectivity, a move perhaps designed to avoid dismissal as reader-response criticism. Readers may quibble with Aubry's assessments when he contends that "the sadness of *Infinite Jest* consists of its incapacity to express or evoke sadness" or when he includes *White Oleander* by "Janet Finch" [sic] in a list of Oprah's Book Club titles that "depict quirky rural communities" when that novel is set in Los Angeles, but the value of *Reading As Therapy* lies not so much in

its sub-arguments as in its broader claims and its methodology. Critics of literary empathy focus on material consequences, or lack thereof, in the public sphere; Aubry argues that these novels do “alter the social world” in their construction of affective interpretive communities, which are, of course, imagined.