

FICTION and the OPRAH FACTOR

A discussion of the literary merits and influence of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club

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When Oprah Winfrey announced earlier this year that she would no longer be running her monthly Book Club on a regular basis, the book industry in general was seized by a fit of despondency. For, say what her detractors will, Oprah has exerted an enormous and salutary influence on book sales and reading habits since she launched her Book Club in 1996.

Jacquelyn Mitchard was the first writer to feel the effect of this when her debut novel, **The deep end of the ocean**, was chosen. As **Time** magazine put it in the 2 December 1996 issue: 'Oprah recommends a book on television and - bingo! - her viewers turn it into an instant best seller.' This was borne out by the second recommendation, Toni Morrison's **Song of Solomon** first published in 1977. The book had sold modestly over the years but after the Oprah choice sales shot up dramatically.

When the Book Club began Oprah Winfrey was well established as one of America's most watched and most powerful talk-show hosts. Clear evidence of this is the panic that spread through the meat industry when - not entirely seriously - she renounced hamburgers.

Born in 1954 Oprah was taught by her grandmother and could read by the time she was three. Shunted around a great deal as a child from grandmother to mother and boyfriend, to father and stepmother, she had anything but a protected childhood. All the more amazing then that she did well at school and was not put off books by her stepmother's insistence on her reading five books a fortnight.

On the contrary, this clearly laid the foundation for her future devotion to literature. At nineteen she left college and became a newsreader on Nashville television and later moved to Baltimore, still doing news broadcasts. By 1977, she was hosting her own show, **People are talking**, which ran for six years; from here, as we know, she went from strength to strength, exerting increasing influence as her audience grew.

Though Toni Morrison had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 it was the selection of **Song of Solomon** (and later **The bluest eye** and **Paradise**) that gave the bigger boost to Morrison's popularity. Similarly, Jane Hamilton's 1989 novel, **The book of Ruth** (Oprah's third selection) put the author on the literary (and commercial) map. By the time Hamilton published what is perhaps her finest novel - **A map of the world** - in 1994 she was established as one of America's leading writers with three Oprah credits to her name.

The reasons Oprah gave for these early choices were 'because they are readable, poignant, thought-provoking', and these words remain appropriate to most of the later choices. Even the few works so far mentioned suggest a progression in Oprah's choices from the rather soft-focus, slightly sentimental work of Mitchard, to the more profound fiction of Morrison and Hamilton. A more powerful and taut treatment than Mitchard's of the theme of missing children is a later Oprah recommendation entitled **Vanished** by Mary McGarry Morris. Three books by this author have been chosen but it was only after the success of **Songs in ordinary time** (1998) that Morris's 1988 debut, **Vanished**, was reissued.

In this tense novel, Aubrey, a road worker, and his forceful partner, Dotty, disappear from their small Vermont town one afternoon. The next day a baby is kidnapped two states away and Morris traces the hunted, joyless journeying of this trio over a period of five desperate years.

I'm not suggesting that every one of the nearly fifty books chosen over the last few years is equally commendable, but there is little doubt that on the whole the choices have been books of quality. There is also no doubt that the Book Club has had an appreciable and beneficial influence on publishing and the reading public, above all by focusing attention on books and the importance of reading.

One of the paradoxes of all the hype that surrounds Oprah Winfrey and her television talk-show is that people who normally care deeply about books, such as teachers and academics, have tended to scorn her Book Club, rejecting her literary taste as shallow and too 'pop'. This is a serious error since so much that she has recommended - as I hope to demonstrate in the course of this article - is really worthwhile.

By now the notorious case of Jonathan Franzen, author of the critically acclaimed **The corrections** (2001), has been largely forgotten. However, in November last year Franzen astonished the reading world by refusing to allow his novel to be selected for the Oprah Winfrey's Book Club.

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A storm broke out when Franzen declared that 'I feel like I'm solidly in the high-art literary tradition' and disparaged the Book Club as a promotional vehicle for 'schmaltzy, one-dimensional novels'. He was, presumably, ignorant of the fact that among the chosen writers are a Nobel Laureate and a couple of Pulitzer Prize winners, not to mention several National Book Award title-holders.

Notwithstanding Franzen's later withdrawal of these remarks and other denigrating 'women's writing', his comments illustrate a snobbish and artificial isolation of what he conceives of as 'high art' literature. An irony which one trusts he did not miss is that the same prestigious institution which honoured him with the National Book Award in 2001, had at the 1999 ceremony bestowed on Oprah Winfrey a special 50th Anniversary Award for her services to literature. As the citation made clear, not only has her Book Club focused wide-spread attention on reading, but it has brought unknown and lesser known writers to the fore, encouraged reading and created many new readers.

Literary doors have been opened for thousands of people who might not have thought of themselves as serious readers and would certainly not have picked up any book regarded as difficult or too literary. These same people found themselves devouring novels such as Barbara Kingsolver's **The poisonwood bible** (1998), a complex and many-layered tale of a family surviving in the Congo. This is the saga of the Price sisters - Rachel, twins Leah and Adah and Ruth May - together with their mother, Orleanna. In 1959 they are dragged from their Georgia home to an isolated mission by their fanatical Baptist father, Nathan, who intends to bring Christianity to Congolese villagers.

Kingsolver uses the alternating and wonderfully delineated voices of the five female Prices to tell their story which coincides with the Congo's painful evolution towards independence. Tragedy rubs shoulders with black humour, both arising from Nathan's often comic but extremely dangerous misunderstanding of everyone around him.

This thoroughly absorbing book manages to combine a family chronicle with the unfolding of history. As Jane Smiley remarked of **The poisonwood bible**, 'There are few ambitious, successful and beautiful novels. Lucky for us, we have one now'.

A reader's encounter with such an outstanding novel would certainly ensure an interest in Oprah's later choice of **Prodigal summer** (2000) in which Kingsolver interweaves the fortunes of three very distinctive and somewhat unlikely couples with the themes of ecological awareness and conservation. Not an easy read but definitely a rewarding one.

It is not possible to discuss all the books selected, so my intention is to concentrate on what I regard as the literary highlights and also to distinguish one or two recurring characteristics of Oprah's choices. Several of these are evident in Maya Angelou's work, not least in her autobiographical sequence which opened in the 1970s with **I know why the caged bird sings** and (purportedly) closes with ***A song flung up to heaven**, published earlier this year. Like the personal history of Oprah herself (to whom Angelou dedicated **Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now** in 1994 'with immeasurable love'), and of countless other African-American women, Maya Angelou has been through many

harrowing and oppressive experiences. It was probably her fellow feeling, in addition to its literary quality, that led Oprah to diverge from her usually fictional choices to select **The heart of a woman** which is the fourth volume in the autobiographical sequence.

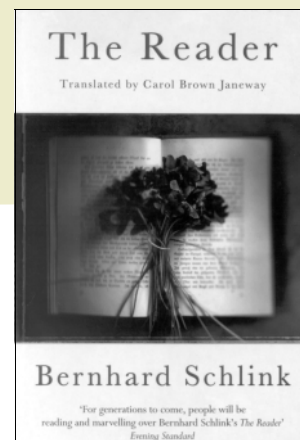
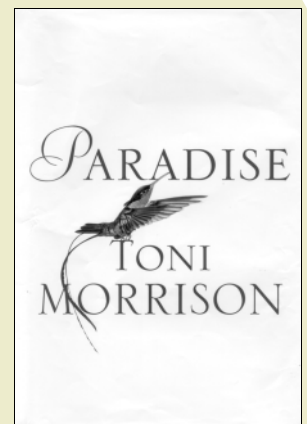
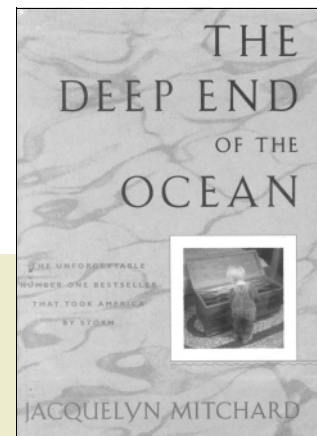
As we learnt in **I know why the caged bird sings**, Maya Angelou's early suffering, including rape at the age of eight which led to a long period of shock-induced aphasia, failed signally to destroy her spirit. She went on to achieve literary and personal success and was able to give the third volume in her autobiography the joyous title, **Singin' and swingin' and gettin' merry like Christmas**. The rest of Angelou's story is common knowledge, but what her writing represents is a significant theme for Oprah often identifiable in her selections. This is the triumph of the individual over apparently insurmountable odds. Closely allied to this theme is the condition of women, so often the underdogs of society, as well as of minorities and of oppressed groups and the powerless in general.

Lalita Tademy's inspiring novel, **Cane River** (2001), exactly fits this matrix, recounting as it does the fictionalised but essentially true story of four generations of black women and their struggle for dignity and self-respect. This epic was inspired by Tademy's finding her great-great-great-grandmother's bill of sale as a slave and tracing her forebears' history from that time in Louisiana, through the Civil War with its promise of undreamed-of freedom, up to the present.

In slightly different vein, but also about people in the deep South seeking identity, family and love, is Melinda Haynes's **Mother of pearl** (2000). Here the protagonists are Even Grade, orphaned as a child, and Valuable Korner, daughter of the town whose name was derived from a real estate sign. These two dislocated souls team up with other misfits to create an unconventional but supportive family group.

Though the choices for Oprah's Book Club have been predominantly fiction by women, she has also picked several works by distinguished male writers. Among these are three books by Bill Cosby, and one each by Andre Dubus, Ernest J Gaines, Bret Lott, Robert Morgan and others discussed below.

When Oprah chose Bernhard Schlink's book, **The reader** (1998), it had been enthusiastically received by critics and public alike. A translation from the German, it is about a former, illiterate SS guard with whom the young narrator has an affair. It is only much later when the woman is brought to trial for a horrible atrocity that he learns the truth about her past and her illiteracy. A wide range of



people were impressed by the apparent new perspective on guilt and responsibility and it is only lately that voices of dissent have been raised.

In March this year the **Times literary supplement** was the forum for a heated debate when such luminaries as Frederic Raphael and Gabriel Josipovici took issue with Schlink, questioning the probity of **The reader**. The arguments have been so interesting that it seems worth quoting some of them here.

Raphael argued that 'There is a wilful refusal... to see that even-handedness between the killer and his victim, the torturer and the tortured (requiring both of them to be "understood" and, if the latter have survived, "harmonised") is a form of connivance with evil, not a remedy; a shrug, not a worthy response'. Josipovici endorsed this view, calling **The reader** 'sentimental and morally outrageous', while Graham Chainey dismissed it as 'a clever exercise in moral prestidigitation'. He goes on to assert: 'Its trick is to seem to equate great betrayals with trivial ones, big evil with lesser evil, and to make everyone seem equally victim or oppressor. In this way, what was done by Germans under the Nazis is pasteurised for a new generation. Hence the book's success in an age of denial, appeasement, correctness.'

Jeremy Adler is equally outraged when he contends that 'by inventing a single, homogenised condition of victimhood, Schlink plays fast and loose with the evidence'. This interesting controversy in no way discredits Oprah's choice of a book which at the time took so many of us by storm. The arguments serve as an appropriate preamble to the work of Ursula Hegi who was born in Germany soon after World War II and emigrated to America in 1965 (naturalised at twenty-four in 1970). Set in Burgdorf, ***Floating in my mother's palm** (1990) is shaped by this theme which is sustained in **Stones from the river** (1994), the Hegi novel chosen by Oprah. **The vision of Emma Blau** (2000) is a companion piece in which the pater familias, Stefan Blau, leaves his home town of Burgdorf in the early 1900s to make a new life in the USA. Well up to the standard of her earlier books, this is a lucid and convincing multi-generational epic chronicling the lives of Stefan's three successive wives and their descendants.

A riveting story is told by Chris Bohjalian in **Midwives** (1997) which centres on the trial of lay midwife Sybil Danforth, charged with involuntary manslaughter after performing a home Caesarean on a woman she believes to be dead. The narrator is Sybil's daughter, Connie, who was fourteen at the time of the trial and looks back now as an adult on an event which has had an indelible effect on her life.

Equally harrowing but in a totally different way is one of Oprah's final Book Club choices, **A fine balance** (1996) by Rohinton Mistry. Described by Amanda Craig in the **Literary review** of March 1996 as 'a work of genius' and as 'the' Indian novel, the Booker short-listed work manages to incarnate in its four

main characters much of the spirit and complexity of life in India.

Set in the dark days of the 1970s Emergency, circumstances bring together two Hindu tailors from the plains, a Parsee student from a hill station and a city widow. This ill-assorted foursome manages to achieve an oasis of hope and tolerance in a world of prejudice, cruelty and horror. Fired by outrage at conditions under Mrs Gandhi's government, Rohinton's writing is full of compassion and - despite the abuses he notes - a powerful affirmation of the value of life.

This affirmative quality informs the majority of works endorsed by Oprah's Book Club and is an important ingredient in both the Wally Lamb novels chosen: **She's come undone** and **I know this much is true** (1998). The latter tells the gripping story of Dominick whose whole life is overshadowed by the schizophrenia of his twin brother, Thomas. Torn between frustration and affection, Dominick has to deal as best he can with the consequences of Thomas's unpredictable behaviour.

Another young person coping with responsibilities thrust too early upon him is the hero of **Back roads** (2000) by Tawni O'Dell. In this debut novel twenty-year-old Harley Altmeyer is marooned in the Pennsylvanian backwoods taking care of his three younger sisters after their mother's incarceration for killing his abusive father. O'Dell handles this theme and Harley's conflicts with a maturity and assurance surprising in so inexperienced a writer.

Astrid, the first-person narrator of **White oleander** (1999) by Janet Fitch also has an imprisoned mother, Ingrid. Astrid has been in a series of nightmarish foster homes from the age of twelve when Ingrid was arrested for the murder of her estranged lover. A poet, she becomes an unlikely icon of the feminist movement and when her poetry is published ('a jailhouse Plath' as her daughter sardonically remarks) Astrid is relegated to a past 'that had to be burned away'.

Fitch's imagery is vivid and evocative (hatred 'glittered', voices became 'serrated' with emotion, Russian cities have 'turbaned towers') and the examination of the mother-daughter motif is perceptive. As Astrid recognises, it is important for both generations to let go and break free and this she achieves when she decides to destroy her mother's letters:

'The ink of her writing was a fungus, a malignant spell on birch bark, a twisted rune. I picked up the scissors and began cutting, snapping the string of her words, uncoupling her complicated train of thought car by car. She couldn't stop me now I refused to see through her eyes any longer.'

This is creative writing at its best and one wonders where Jonathan Franzen would place it on his 'schmaltz' to high-art register! As an act of liberation Astrid's destruction of her mother's letters is cathartic for both the character and the reader. The break takes the sort of emotional courage that Fran exhibits in Anna Quindlen's **Black and blue** (1998) - another Oprah selection - when she escapes from her abusive marriage to start afresh in Florida. (This novel has in turn a generic parallel with Roddy Doyle's 1997 novel, **The woman who walked into doors**, both for its savage realism and haunting aura.)

It may be apparent, that there is a preponderance in the

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novels chosen for Oprah's Book Club of dysfunctional families, though, as suggested earlier, her preference is for books with an element of optimism and affirmation. In Isabel Allende's **Daughter of fortune** (1999), for instance, the heroine, Eliza, leaves her sheltered home in the British colony of Valparaiso to follow her penniless lover to the California goldrush. In this exciting story, for which Allende has wisely abandoned magic realism in favour of compelling actuality, Eliza witnesses some terrible examples of inhumanity, not least the fate of the expendable 'singsong girls' and their painfully short life expectancy. Despite the horror and the cruelty she experiences, the novel ends on a positive note with Eliza's triumphant declaration in the final line, 'I am free'.

One of the many indirect benefits of Oprah's Book Club is that readers are likely to watch out for the names of authors already chosen and to follow up with further reading of their earlier and subsequent work. So, in the case of A Manette Ansay's **Vinegar hill** (1995), a seering tale of a couple returning to live with the husband's hard and embittered parents, Oprah's recommendation may well have alerted readers to Ansay's next book, **Midnight champagne** (1999).

As the title with its hint of celebration might suggest, this is less bleak than **Vinegar hill**, a name which evokes the very bitterness the heroine encounters. **Midnight champagne**, on the other hand, takes as its occasion the wedding of April and Caleb on Valentine's Day in a rather sleazy, non-denominational venue attached to a sometime brothel, the Hideaway Lodge. The book is divided into six sections defining the wedding arrangements: ceremony, reception, supper, dance, bouquet toss and midnight champagne. But the orderliness and composure that this suggests are disrupted throughout the narrative by unforeseen emotions, events and discoveries, which make this an engrossing, often hilarious and at times very moving novel.

Joyce Carol Oates is in her mid-sixties but her versatility, inventiveness and literary mastery show no signs of abating. A prolific writer who won the National Book Award in 1970 for **Them**. Oates habitually chronicles the violence of contemporary life in America, often basing her work on fact. Examples of this are ***Zombie** (1995), inspired by the Milwaukee cannibalistic killer; **Black water** (1992) which recalls Senator Edward Kennedy's involvement in the fatal Chappaquiddick accident; **Broke heart blues** (1999) echoing the shocking stabbing death of Johnny Stompanato at Lana Turner's mansion in 1958, and **Blonde** (2000), a retelling of Marilyn Monroe's ill-fated history.

The Joyce Carol Oates book picked by Oprah Winfrey for the Book Club is the masterly **We were the Mulvaney's** (2001) which examines the effect of a single traumatic incident on the lives of all the members of a previously united and happy family. One of the ideas she emphasises here (and elsewhere) is the disintegrating effect of misfortune. Rather than bringing the family - and especially the parents - closer together as one may have expected, in Oates's perception tragedy drives them apart. She is not unique in this - one could mention several other writers in this context, Andre Dubus being a random example - but Oates's dramatisation of this notion is particularly persuasive.

Another concern to which Oates repeatedly returns in her writing is the way individuals suffer through their

conformity to the stereotypical roles assigned to them by society. This is certainly true of Marianne and her father in **We were the Mulvaney's**, and it is often an inability to rise to the expectations imposed by these roles that leads to failure and loss of self-esteem. (The memory of that archetypal sex-kitten, Marilyn Monroe, has special relevance here. Her manufactured image - the embodiment of a cliché - represents both the commercial exploitation of the female form and the extinction of individuality)

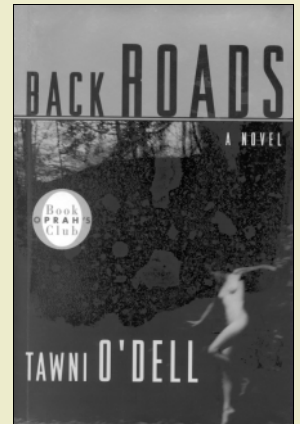
The theme crops up once more in **Middle age: a romance** (2001) in the guise of a modern, somewhat black comedy of manners. Here Oates examines affluent suburban life in Salthill-on-Hudson, a fictional Princeton where the action hovers between farce and tragedy. When a greatly admired local sculptor dies suddenly, symbolically on the 4th July, a change is experienced by the other characters as they discover that everything they had believed about the dead man is illusory.

This study of identity, disappointment, hollow marriages and the dangers of platitude and stereotyping is one of Joyce Carol Oates's most accomplished fictions. One can only hope that Oprah's recommendation of **We were the Mulvaney's** will serve as an inducement to keep up with Oates's never-dwindling output and to explore her earlier work.

The same could be hoped for the writing of Anita Shreve of whose many fine novels, **The pilot's wife** (1998) was selected for the Book Club in March 1999. Like Oates's **Middle age**, this is an account of the shock experienced when one's illusions are rudely shattered. After Kathryn's husband dies she discovers that most of what she believed about him has been nurtured by deliberate deception.

An excellent book with many surprises and well-drawn characters, **The pilot's wife** was followed by **Fortune's Rocks** (2000), and ill-starred love story set at the turn of the nineteenth century, and **The last time they met** (2001) about separated lovers looking back at their earlier meetings. **Sea glass** (2002), Shreve's most recent novel, deals again with thwarted love and describes the fortunes of a group of people living on a stretch of the New Hampshire coastline around the time of the 1929 stock market crash.

Good as all these books are, none quite reaches the heights of **The weight of water** (1997) with its parallel structure: a double murder committed in 1873, and a modern-day investigation into the crime by Jean, a photo-journalist. Her assignment is to provide background for a magazine article about the murders which occurred on an island off Shreve's beloved New Hampshire coast. The



narrative comprises a clever mix of fact and fancy: the murders were real enough as is the transcript of the trial, but the rest - seamlessly integrated with the known facts - is imaginary. The finished product has some similarities to Margaret Atwood's wonderful **Alias Grace** (1996) and, like that book, leaves the reader disturbed and not quite sure where the truth lies.

It is perhaps a fairly easy task to choose good titles from the works of established and highly regarded authors. More difficult is to spot the promise of the untried writer, a facility for which Oprah seems to have developed a finely-tuned ear. She has, as I mentioned earlier, given prominence to quite a number of novices, unerringly homing in on true talent. Among these is Billie Letts whose debut, **Where the heart is** (1995) was turned into a disappointingly mawkish film.

This did no justice to a novel whose courageous young heroine, Novalee, though left penniless and pregnant in a town she doesn't know manages to triumph over her misfortune. She becomes part of a vital makeshift family, somewhat along the lines of the one in **Mother of pearl** (discussed above). To give an idea of the vigorous writing of which Letts is capable here is a stunning passage which describes a hurricane hitting the area:

'Then Novalee saw it. Coiling, spiralling...dipping down like a giant gnarled finger reaching for the earth. The air filled with a roaring noise and the sky turned hot and began to swirl, stinging her skin, biting into her flesh. Just as she started for the house, something struck her in the arm, something small and hard that skipped across the yard and into the street. She saw Dixie's beauty shop sign sail into one of the sycamores, and watched Henry's john-boat hurtle down the alley and smash into the hen house.

'Novalee knew she couldn't make it to the house, so she struggled back to the cellar, got one foot on the top step, then grabbed the door. She was able to lift it a few inches before the wind slammed it back against the concrete slab. She tried again, but the wind was too strong, and when she leaned farther out, farther away from the cellar steps, she felt a powerful current of air lift her, felt her body grow lighters as if she might be swallowed up by the sky.

'Then hands grasped her ankles, pulled at her legs. She bent her knees, ducked down and reached behind her, found Mrs Ortiz' hands and gripped them as hard as she could, held on as Mrs Ortiz ripped her away from the wind, pulled her down the steps and onto the cellar floor.'

It is important to see the extract in its entirety in order to appreciate the skilful way Letts builds up tension in the scene. As the passage progresses her urgent prose seems to imitate the relentlessness of the storm and to capture its strength and Novalee's helplessness.

Impressive in a different way is Ruth Schwartz's debut, **Drawing Ruth** (2000), in which the protagonist swears she remembers drowning:

"That's impossible", Aunt Amanda said. "It must have been a dream." But Ruth maintained that she had drowned, insisted on it for years, even after she should have known better.'

This evocative passage, occurring near the start of the novel, immediately catches one's attention and establishes a mood of suspense which persists throughout. Told through a series of flashbacks in the voices of Ruth and Aunt Amanda, the secrets behind Ruth's recollection are gradually revealed with a deftness one might expect from a far more experienced writer.

It is not possible to discuss all the Oprah Book Club choices in the course of a single article, but writers that deserve at least a mention are Elizabeth Berg, Maeve Binchy (not well-known to American readers prior to Oprah's recommendation), Kaye Gibbons and Alice Hoffman. The latter's **Here on earth** (1997) was an Oprah choice but it is too reminiscent of **Wuthering Heights** for my taste. **The river king** (2000) is a stronger book, evoking echoes of Donna Tartt's **The secret history** (1992) with its clandestine group of elite students who commit a horrible crime. Though Hoffman uses an exclusive private school rather than a university, this is, in effect, a campus story juxtaposed with the conservatism of its small-town setting. The precocious perpetrators seem older than their mid-teens, as do the two central and more appealing characters. This book exudes menace, even after the crime occurs. But **The river king** is more than simply a thriller; examining as it does the nature of privilege, cruelty and guilt.

Sue Miller, too, is an accomplished writer whose novel **While I was gone** (2001) was a fairly recent choice. A sensitive observer of domestic life and its stresses, Miller has been described as the American Joanna Trollope, but I think her latest novel, **The world below** (2001), has more substance than the soubriquet allows.

Even after so cursory a survey, I trust that something of the quality of the works chosen by Oprah Winfrey for the Book Club has emerged, giving the lie to the doubters and scoffers. It is easier to dismiss the whole project as trivial than to account in detail for the variety, consistently fluent prose and expert plotting of the novels outlined above. Though there are several recurrent themes among the works, there is nothing repetitive or predictable about the selections. Taken together, in fact, the books are a testament to the vitality and inventiveness of contemporary literature to which Oprah Winfrey's Book Club has given encouragement and paid eloquent tribute.

Rather than signalling Oprah's loss of involvement with literature, her decision to curtail the Book Club is a mark of her wish to do fuller justice to the many novels published each year. This plethora of material takes a great deal of time and effort to assess and to delegate the selection process would be to negate the personal nature of the Book Club. It is therefore a wise decision to cut back and, paradoxically, one that can only ensure the excellence of the occasional works that Oprah will continue to highlight.

*Note: Titles marked with * are not available in Library Service stock. See also Sabrina Gosling, Oprah's Book Club, CL May/June 2001, pp. 22-24.*

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