Everyone's a Critic: a Qualitative Study to Investigate the Perceptions and Attitudes towards Book Review Websites on the World-Wide Web

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Abstract

This dissertation looks at the phenomenon of online 'reader reviews', in which book reviews are submitted by ordinary readers, rather than professional critics, to be read by other readers on a website. This project aimed to discover whether users trusted the opinions of other ordinary readers, whom they would not know, and which factors increased or decreased this trust. It also aimed to discover why users wrote reviews on these websites, and which features users found useful in a book review to help them choose a new book.

10 student participants were asked to look at online book review on four different websites, each website possessing different features and house styles and each having a different origin. Participants were given instructions on how to use the websites and then allowed to explore them in their own time. The participants were then interviewed about their experiences and views of the websites.

Participants accepted the reviews on the websites as being the reviewers' own genuine opinions, apart from a few suspicions about commercial influence biasing the reviews on retail websites. With one exception, there seemed to be no preference for professionally-written reviews; most participants seemed happy with reader reviews so long as they were of sufficient quality. More important than quality or veracity was the need for the reviewer to share a similar taste in reading to the user; becoming aware through experience that they share a common taste seems to be the reason that friends and family were commonly-cited sources of information on reading amongst participants.

Because only a minority of participants habitually wrote book reviews, it was not possible to discover anything certain about why users write reader reviews, although there are some suggestions that it might be because they enjoyed the sense of community it engendered. There is a worrying possibility that some users may be deterred from writing because they feel their writing ability or taste will be ridiculed by others.

The two features that participants found most useful in a book review were: a synopsis, which should cover plot, characters, themes, genre and writing style, enabling the user to quickly focus their search on books of a type they enjoy; and an explanation of the reviewer's opinion of the book, enabling the users to understand what a book is like to read. Links to similar books were also popular.

" Critic: Like *Homo*, a name common to all the human race."

Henry Fielding, quoted in Uglow (1998)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation deals with the phenomenon of online reader reviews, book reviews written by ordinary readers rather than professionals, and the reactions and attitudes of users towards them and the websites on which they appear . The library world and booktrade host several such sites, and a greater knowledge of users' perceptions of them could be beneficial for future work in this area. This section provides some background to the topic and details the research objectives of the study.

1.1: The Background to the Study

Due to an apparent lack of interest in the field, it has proved impossible to assemble any previous studies to provide a literature review of the subject. In lieu of this, an overview of some of the topics relating to the topic has been provided, covering areas such as professional criticism, previous public library work online, how readers choose their books, and finally reader reviews themselves.

1.1.1: The Professional Book Review

There is a school of professional reviewing online, exemplified by such works as *The New York Review of Books* (2005), *The London Review of Books* (2005) and *The Times Literary Supplement* (2005) and echoed in the literature section of the dailies such as *Guardian Unlimited* (Guardian, 2005). Such reviews provide detailed break-downs of the book and potted biographies of the writers, all in an analytical, literary style. Unlike the reader review, such reviews are signed and are not anonymous (Walford, 1986): indeed, the reviewer may be a celebrated writer in their own right. This is the review as art, and also, in the case of the first three, the review at a price.

There seems to be some efforts to press this style of reviewing upon everyone: McGinley & Conley (2001) discuss the fact that the guides for reading groups produced by the major publishing houses are designed to enforce this refined, literary concept of reading. To look at these reading guides, such as those of Random House's Book Group Corner (?) and Harper Collins's Harper Collins.com (2005), one finds that they read very much like a school exam paper, asking analytical and factual questions, rather than asking for any emotional response. Indeed, the majority of reading groups Hartley (2002) studies turn out to reject reading guides for exactly these reasons.

But are such reviews really useful for the everyday reader: Fine (2000) criticises them for failing to engage with the National Year of Reading and for producing reading guides and articles on the same, stale works. Long, cumbersome articles and an elitist attitude do not necessarily aid the ordinary reader.

Such reviews may not be the proud, unbiased literary giants they would like to be. After all, publishers work to actively promote their new works to critics to be reviewed; Baverstock (2000) explains how to do this. Serebnick (1984) also confirms what previous studies had discovered, which is that such reviews tend to be largely favourable. This may be for the reason Sage (1998) gives:

> "Reviewers can never- or very seldom- afford to say one of the most pressing things they know, which is that most of the writing they read is neither good nor bad nor distinctive, but just part of the mulch of the contemporary literary imagination..." **Sage (1998), p262**

In other words, the livelihood of the book reviewer depends on them pretending they actually have something worthwhile to say, even if this is not the case. Mann (1971) also picks up on the fact that professional book reviewers have to select what they review to create maximum variety and interest, even if that does not actually mirror what people are reading.

1.1.2: Electronic Library Services and Reader Development

So what are libraries doing to engage readers through the Internet? Hoffert (2003) details several schemes by American public libraries to provide their users with advice on fiction, citing library workers' knowledge about books as an advantage. There are some extremely fine examples of what can be done; the online resources and awareness services of Morton Grove Public Library's (2005) Webrary are particularly impressive. Even the humble OPAC can enter into proceedings: the City of York Public Libraries' (2003) OPAC features brief synopses appended to many of its books, while the awesome OPAC of Hennepin County Library (?) features synopses, excerpts, reviews and even MARC records for the books on it, as well links to related titles through subject headings.

Library websites may have an advantage over commercial ones in that the public may deem them more trustworthy. While only an opinion poll as opposed to an academic survey, a MORI (2005) poll conducted for the Common Information Environment produced the finding that more respondents, (89%) trusted web content that came from a library service or museum than any other source. At 30% of respondents, reputation was the primary criterion for judging reliability; in a similar vein, Bide (2002) cites authority and reputation as the most valuable commodities in the world of the

electronic book trade. Does this mean that libraries have an advantage over their commercial rivals?

Of course, the commercial and public worlds need not not be at each others' throats. Gerrard (1999) and Davidson & Johnson (1998) both cite projects in which public libraries co-operated with publishers or publishers to publish compilations of reader reviews to help library users; Phelan (1993) and Thebridge & Train (2002) list many more co-operative ventures that span both sectors, dating back to the 1980's. Phelan (1993) and Forrest (2001) both point out that a commercial hand in promotions may add a glossier and more professional edge that librarians can not provide themselves. And it does seem that heavy readers are interested in books no matter the source; various surveys undertaken by Book Marketing suggest that heavy readers partake more in all book-related activities, from reserving to re-reading books, from buying books second-hand to discussing them in depth (England, 1992 & 1994; Book Marketing Ltd, 1997 & 2000). Nevertheless, the two sectors are not always harmonious: on the Opening the Book Website (2005), van Riel criticises the BBC's Big Read campaign for being launched without establishing prior arrangements with public libraries, thus cause many problems with demand for the key titles.

Most of the services we have discussed so far are there to help readers find new books to read. There are two different terms used for this, reader advisory and reader development, which have slightly different connotations. Train (2003) differentiate between reader advisory and reader development in this way: reader advisory is telling people what to read, reader development is helping people to choose what they want to read. Of course, others may define them in other ways or regard them as more or less synomynous, but it is a good working definition.

Having said this, one must bear in mind that those carrying out reading promotions perhaps do not always quite enter into the spirit of acceptance of all reading tastes and levels:

"Moreover, unless libraries do challenge or encourage their readers, their own progression from literature treasure house to drop-in centre for romantic novels and family sagas can only end in the public lending library being supplanted by the reference library." **Phelan (1993), p4**

"...collections of family sagas have massive take-up, while collections of cult fiction don't go at all. This is exactly the situation that Branching Out came into existence to change." **van Riel & Fowler (1999), p58**

The attitude of these writers towards the readers of romance and family saga novels can only be described as deeply patronising and just a little offensive, especially considering some of the

research that suggests these readers know exactly what they are doing and are perfectly happy with their choices (1.1.4). Clashes between these conflicting attitudes can sometimes result in rather mixed and confused views:

"One person's trash is another person's treasure... As librarians, we know which books are particularly worth the time..." **Towey (2001), p136 & p137**

Librarians can also be slightly over-awing, which may deter readers from asking for help. Saricks (2001) says that readers often feel embarrassed to ask for suggestions of books to read, feeling that it is rather frivolous; while Towey (2001) says that awe-struck readers may feel compelled to accept the book the wise librarian thrusts on them, without realising that they have the freedom to refuse.

However, other writers do seem to believes that librarians can not promote reading alone. Ross (Ross & Chelton, 2001) believes that it is perfectly permissible to rely on the recommendations of others to boost a librarian's personal knowledge, while Forrest (2001) believes that without the input and enthusiasm of the readers themselves, any reading promotion is doomed. Gordon (2003) suggests that librarians should be more willing to present a human face on line and listen to public comments, in order to foster a sense of community. There are even some instances of 'semi-professional' reader review websites, where individuals manage the website with funding or affiliation from library or education bodies, such as children's book websites Cool-Reads (Cross & Cross, 2005), Reading Matters (Marshall & Marshall, 2005) or Mrs Mad's Book-a-Rama (D?, 2005).

1.1.3: Reviews and Choosing Books

Goodall (1989) reviewed eight different different previous studies which looked at how users selected the books they borrowed from the libraries. There seemed to be little consensus between studies about the role of book reviews, although interestingly the blurb on the back of the book, which acts as a proto-review as it were, regularly proved to be the most, or second most, influential factor. However, heavy readers do make more use than average of book reviews, although the same is also true for recommendations, making recommendations and media and bookstore promotions (Book Marketing Ltd, 1996 & 2000); some people just want to find out as much as possible about books. Goodall (1989) also notes that it the so-called 'literary' novels that are best served by professional reviewers, while other genres are poorly represented; Mann (1982) agrees with her.

Ross's (Ross, 2001; Ross & Chelton, 2001))research into how heavy readers selected books found that they most commonly asked trusted known individuals, mined out the works of a given

author and relied on personal knowledge and experience about reading. This experience can be crucial; genres can have languages and conventions of their own, and a tyro reader picking up a science fiction novel, for example, could easily be confused by the lack of emphasis on character or references to genre staples such as AI, arcologies or exotic matter. The mood of the reader was most important in deciding which particular book they might read. Elkin (2003) agrees that experience is crucial in making book selections; but also that readers tend to be unadventurous and go with what they know. However, Ross's research seems to have focused on experienced readers, and so may not be so helpful in revealing how such readers become experienced.

Men are also much more cautious than women in selecting new books to read; women seem far more content to dispense with books they start to read but do not enjoy (Book Marketing Ltd, 2000). Women also seemed far happier to discuss their reading; men tended to be much more private about it.

1.1.4: Reader Reviews

A worthwhile point to be made is that readers are not dumb, passive beings who rely on librarians to tell them what to read. Mann (1982) and O'Rourke (1993) come to much the same conclusions about the much-derided readers of romantic fiction; such people read what they do for a reason- escapism, yes, but people need to escape sometimes- distinguish between books and writers and are generally very knowledgeable about the genre. Mann teasingly turns the paucity of reviews on romantic fiction in mainstream sources on its head:

"...there are hardly any reviewers who have the knowledge of romantic fiction which would enable them to write a competent review anyway." **Mann (1982), p170**

One must never think that it is only the librarians and critics who have the access to knowledge.

Indeed, Twomey (2003) produced the interesting finding that even when not aware of reading development as a formal concept, readers were sympathetic to its aims. Even without librarians to prompt them, people do want advice and assistance in broadening their reading and finding new books; this may well account for the various social activities, from listservs to book groups, that Chelton (2001) lists as having sprung up on the Internet without any formal involvement from the book trade. People actively want to discuss books and learn about them, with or without librarians. It

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also means that when libraries or the booktrade offer a them a chance to express an opinion, they will seize it with glee. There are also advantages for the hosts of the website; reviews from "Someone like You" (Gethin, 2002, p236) can be seen as being friendlier or possessing less of a commercial bias than those from a professional.

Of course, not all readers will regard discussing books writing reviews as a positive thing: Heather (1981) points out that writing book reviews are often assigned as school projects, making reading a chore and creating bad associations for reviewing.

The focus of this dissertation is on the particular example of the reader review. Like the other types of activity in the previous paragraph, while there are many, many websites created by private individuals, the best know examples tend to be those created by larger bodies, whether they be public or commercial. While there is a whole new dissertation in covering those created by private individuals, it did not prove possible to find enough such sites that were well-known, extensive or good enough to compare with those produced by bigger organisations with more resources.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to trace the origins of reader reviews; those works that mentioned them were more interested in the wider behaviour of their writers than the reviews themselves. van Riel and Fowler (1996) may suggest one possible origin in the famously active field of science fiction fandom and fanzines:

"The relationship between writers and readers is often more democratic in SF than in mainstream fiction... All writers receive fan mail: it is only SF writers who receive letters offering advice or contrary viewpoints." **van Riel & Fowler (1996), p99**

Although efforts were made to find out more, there was not enough information at hand to make it certain that this lead was worth following, but it is an intriguing possibility for future research.

1.2: Research Objectives

Several questions have been raised in the previous sections, which will form the basis for the objectives that will form the basis for this study. They are as follows:

1. What features do users find most helpful in an online book review for helping them to choose new books?

2. Given that reader reviews can be written by anyone, probably by someone the user does not know, do users trust their reviews to make decisions to choose books? If they do not trust them, whose opinions do they trust? Do they prefer reviews from professional critics, or from sources with which they are more familiar? Can the various quality-controls in place on the websites raise the levels of trust?

3. Does the commercial or public origins of a website affect users' perceptions of its trustworthiness?

4. What motivates readers submit books? Is being able to express one's own opinion as important as being able to find a new book to read? Does putting in quality-controls to improve the standards of book reviews to aid those choosing books deter those who wish to write reviews by making the process more difficult?

In the dissertation proposal for this study, additional objectives were proposed, trying to relate participants' social activities to their use of online reader reviews and asking whether participants regarded librarians as being particularly knowledgeable about books and reading compared to other people. However, while there were questions relating to these objectives in the final interview (especially A.1, question 12), they were not covered in depth, and there was not time or space to cover them in the final work.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter covers the methodology used in this study, both the methods used to collect data and the selection of participants, and explains the background of the websites chosen for the study and explains why they were picked. It also contains a more detailed explanation of why this dissertation does not contain a literature review, and explains how the results of the study will be presented.

There are several documents related to the methodology contained in the appendices. The questions asked in the interview are in appendix A.1, and the Participant Information Sheet, Participant instructions and Optional Question are in appendices A.2.1, A.2.2 and A.2.3 respectively.

2.1: Literature Review: an Apology

It is usual to include a review the methodologies and findings of previous studies when undertaking a research project, but, as mentioned in the introduction, the researcher was unable to find any previous work either on online reader reviews or on book reviews in general. Such works may exist: the researcher's efforts were not aided by the fact that search terms or subject headings for the topic proved extremely difficult to pin down, and existing studies may have been concealed because of this difficulty in finding appropriate search terms. Not the least part of this problem was the fact that the phrase 'book review', when entered into a database, inevitably brings up thousands of articles which are book reviews, rather than articles about book reviews. While many databases possess features that allow users to search for a particular form of article, very few allow users to exclude particular forms. This forced the researcher to use alternate search terms, which may have caused him to overlook relevant titles.

There were articles on related topics: indeed, there were several on how users select books, some of which touched on book reviews. However, in all of these, book reviews were a peripheral topic and no study the researcher could find dealt directly with the topics with which he was concerned. As a result, a decision was made to omit a literature review as part of the dissertation. This also means there are no previous examples of good practice to cite. It is hoped that the overview given in the introduction is enough to help readers gain insight into the topic.

2.2: Methods

This section discusses the methodology used in the study to collect data and the potential and problems and distortions that might arise from the methods. Information on the means by which participants were selected is included in section 2.3.

2.2.1: Methodology used

This study followed a qualitative format: with little previous research apparently having been previously conducted, the researcher was unsure of the important points that would need to be focused on in a quantitative. While it might be possible to say that some features and factors might be influential, it was impossible to say so for certain, and there was a danger that without clarification irrelevant questions might be asked. Therefore, it seemed sensible to conduct a qualitative study to establish the groundwork from which to act. Moreover, questions such as those of what factors influence trust require complex explanations and answers, which are much better suited to a qualitative study. It was decided that this would be done in a series of interviews.

From personal experience, it seemed that use of reader reviews was comparatively rare, especially usage across different websites. This was one reason that interviews were favoured over user logs or observations; it was not certain that participants would make regular enough use of these websites to produce worthwhile data, and, in the case of log books, it would again depend to an extent about having existing ideas of what to ask the participants to note down. For these reasons, it was decided to set the participants tasks, to ensure that they had at least some experience of online reader reviews. They were asked to look at four different websites, each possessing different features; details of the websites are listed in section 2.4. Instructions on how to use the websites were provided (A.2.2). Participants were allowed to perform the tasks in their own time, which would be more convenient and relaxing for them, and were allowed to explore what they wanted on the websites and for however long they wanted. The researcher was aware that the setting of tasks had already created an artificial situation in which the participant would not necessarily behave as they would normally do, and so it was decided to withdraw the intrusion of the researcher as much as possible to lessen this effect by letting the participants have as much freedom as possible.

There was likely to be a period of time during the participant carrying out their tasks and the interview being conducted, during which the participant might forget what they wished to say. Therefore, participants were issued with an optional questionnaire (A.2.3) with a few brief questions

to answer based on those that would be used in the interview, to allow them to jot down their thoughts as they browsed the websites if they wished , so that they could recall all they wanted to say. This might been seen as having a constraining effect in the same manner as a log book, but it was felt that because it worked in tandem with the interviewsuch effects would be mitigated. All participants seem to have used it- possibly it was insufficiently clear that it was optional- but those asked do appear to have found it a useful aid.

The interviews were carried out in familiar, relaxing environments, such as cafes, common rooms, sitting rooms and the Sheffield Winter Gardens, which also had acceptable levels of background noise. Participants were asked for their consent to being recorded before the interview began. They were recorded on a Sanyo TalkBook dictaphone using minicassettes, which was placed in plain view on the table in front of the participant. Each interview lasted between 20 and 35 minutes, with approximately 25 minutes being the most typical length.

The interview was based on a schedule of questions (A.1), with prompts to help the researcher to explain the situation to the participant and to thank them at the appropriate moments. This schedule was followed in all interviews, meaning that all interviews followed the same course and were comparable. However, there was some flexibility, and some questions were rephrased or reordered according to what the participants said; for example, a question might not be asked if a participant addressed it in a previous answer, or an additional question was asked to clarify a point. This gave the researcher sufficient freedom to deal with individual response or pursue new lines of enquiry.

This process went through a single trial, although in retrospect more testing would have improved the questions.

2.2.2: Potential Flaws in Methodology

There are, however, some serious problems with this methodology. Not the least is that information from an interview is third-hand information. The researcher selects what he believes to be the participant's motivations or beliefs from from what the participant believes to be her motivations or beliefs. The result may be highly at variance with what is genuinely going on. There were several instances of this, most notably in the cases of participants who said they were suspicious of the reviews on retail websites, but used the websites nevertheless (4.4.1), or participants whose judgement of the quality standards of a website seemed to have been influenced by their prejudices towards that website (4.3.2). However much a researcher tries to be unbiased, they will pick quotations from

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interviews that address the issues they are interested; by definition, they are unable to consider questions of which they have not thought, even if it is those what the participant is discussing. This can also mean that some questions asked by the researcher in the interview proved to be irrelevant to the participants and yielded no useful information, as with the question about comparisons between fiction and non-fiction (A.1, question 6). In addition, even if transcribing an interview directly after recording it, the researcher is working with inanimate tapes and fallible memories and is so unable to clarify any points of which he is uncertain; the difficulties of separating out length and detail in participants' comments are an excellent example of this (3.5). What a user's reasons for doing or thinking something, and what the user believes those reasons to be, and then what the researcher believes those reasons to be, may be three entirely different things.

The participant's memory also affects the results. The researcher relies on what the participant can recall to understand the behaviour, and the participant's memory may not always be that precise. This means that the resultant data can be rather vague and unreliable for drawing conclusions, as in the case of differing usage on different websites (4.4.2). Log-books or observations might help obtain a more accurate idea of behaviour, but at the cost of greater effort on the participant's part or uncomfortableness at being observed. The optional questionnaire supplied to participants did go some way to alleviating this, for the websites in the study if not for behaviour outside it, and several of the participants did report that they had found it useful. However, it does force the participants to only think in terms of the questions of which the researcher has thought, a problem described in the previous paragraph. If an issue arose which the questionnaire did not cover, the participant might not be cued to report it.

One great flaw in the study is that the participants' behaviour on the websites was not natural behaviour, in the sense that they would have not have looked at those websites if the researcher had not asked them to do so. Therefore it can not be said for sure if their actions and attitudes would correspond with those of people who access such sites of their own volition. In addition, many of the participants were rushed for time when carrying out the study, which would have further distorted their actions. It might have been possible to remedy this by identify those who habitually used reader review websites via a preliminary quantitative survey, but this would have been hampered by the short space of time in which to distribute and collect the surveys and contact those identified as habitual users between ethics approval being granted and the interviews. Trying to obtain a sufficient response during the summer holidays may also have proved fruitless.

Of course, there were some participants who did already use one or more of the websites. While not a problem as such, it may be the case that habitual users of one website may judge all other websites by its criteria; in other words, they may condemn other websites for not being the website they normally use. There is some evidence that this may have happened (4.3.2). There is nothing wrong with them feeling this way, and they may well have sound reasons other than mere habit for trusting their favourite website; but it is a factor of which to be aware.

There are problems with letting the participants explore the websites on their own and in their own time. While this does mean they are in a familiar environment and not distracted by the presence of the researcher, and so may display more natural behaviour- in so far as this is possible- it also means that there is no guarantee they will investigate all the features of the website, especially if they are unable to spend that much time on it. There are several instances in which the majority of participants failed to mention a certain feature (3.6, 3.8 and 4.3.2), but it is not possible to say whether they were genuinely uninterested in the features or had merely not found them. And even if they are provided with instructions on how to use a website, there is no guarantees will use them. There were several examples of participants making mistakes or passing over features which were mentioned in the instructions they were given; the researcher does not wish to embarrass them by mentioning who they were and what they did.

As a qualitative study, this project looks in depth at a small group, but without a lot more contextual data from a quantitative study, it will not be possible to say how typical the attitudes and behaviours described in this study are in the population.

Finally, it seems probable that the scale of the study's research questions was too great. As mentioned in 1., some questions originally posed in the dissertation proposal had to be dropped because there was not the time or space to include them. This did mean that certain questions, such as those relating to social activities (A.1, question 12), were rather without purpose in the final dissertation.

2.3: Participants

This section deals with the process of selecting of participants, the sources from which they were drawn, and the potential distortions of the data that might arise from it. It also addresses the make-up of the sample, and the process by which participants were anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

2.3.1: Selection of Participants

Participants were selected from the student body of the University of Sheffield known to the researcher. This does mean that the sample was far from representative of the population at large, although a qualitative study, especially a small-scale one like this, can not hope to cover all variations in the general population; one simply can not record and transcribe that many interviews. In which case, it is sometimes better to focus in depth on a particular group and extract as much information as possible about them.

However, there were good reasons for using such a group. One is that, as has already been stated, the study required quite a lot of its participants in terms of time and effort, and those who know the researcher may be rather more amenable to carrying out such tasks than the general population. In addition, as students, often carrying out their own research projects, the participants could be expected to be sympathetic to the needs of a someone carrying out research and be willing to help out with more demanding research and understand what is involved.

Students also have access to university computing suites, meaning that they could all access the websites necessary for the study in their own time. If participants had taken part who did not have access to computers, then it would have been necessary for the researcher to arrange an appointment for them to use a computer, which would have tied the participant down to a fixed time and place a second time and further inconvenienced them by doing so. They would have also been working in an unfamiliar environment, which may have influenced their actions. Moreover, students are likely to have the necessary computer skills to access the websites in the first place and, if they have reached this level of academic attainment, they are likely to reasonably interested in reading in some form or another.

And, of course, students are conveniently placed for anyone conducting research in a university. Selecting students allows the researcher to quickly and easily assemble a sample to interview and so free up time and energy to work on other aspects of the study, especially as he was a novice in research and literature on the subject was so hard to come by.

The proposal for this dissertation set out to interview between 10 and 20 individuals; in the end 10 participants were interviewed. In part this was because the research took place after the end of the university term, over the summer holidays, so there was a dearth of available students; moreover, the effort and time required to transcribe interviews proved greater than the researcher initially believed, which further limited the number of interviews he could undertake.

2.3.2: Anonymisation of Participants

As soon as a participant agreed to take part in the study, they were assigned a number, based on the order in which they had signed up to the study. Apart from the participant consent forms- which naturally required a signature- and the master-list that listed names against participant number, the participant's real name was not used on any of the written documentation created as part of the study. Instead, participants were identified only by their participant number at all times. The consent forms and master-list remained in the researcher's possession.

Taping the interviews presented some problems to anonymity: while the researcher endeavoured to only ever identify the participant by their number and not to use their personal name, naturally in the course of the interview the participant gave information which could potentially identify them. They could also be identified by the sound of their voice. When transcribing the interviews, the researcher removed all references to people or places that were deemed as potential clues to the participant's identity. If these references were included in one of the quotations used in the research, they were replaced by an invented name. References to authors, newspapers, websites and titles of books were kept, as it was felt that: a) that nature individual item may be important to the study; and b) it was unlikely to be enough to identify the individual. The tapes of the interviews remained in the researcher's possession.

During the writing of this dissertation, it became necessary to single out particular participants who held certain attitudes or beliefs and maintain this recognition across the dissertation. To make this process easier to follow- and to make the participants seem less like experimental subjects and more like human beings- whilst still preserving their anonymity, each participant was assigned an alias instead of their participant number. These aliases , in no particular order, were: Andy, Dawn, Kate, Caroline, Mary, Naomi, Sarah, Jenny, Laura and Liz.

2.3.3: Details of Participants

As an aid to getting a better understanding of whether personal factors influenced a user's preferences and attitudes towards online reader reviews, four variables relating to the participant were measured as part of the interview. These were: gender; age; whether the participant was a member of a library; and whether the participant felt confident using computers.

All participants said that they felt confident using computers, and all of them were members of at least one public library. Moreover, nine of them were students studying librarianship and the remaining participant was studying information science. As students of librarianship, this did mean that they were interested in both the websites and the aims of the study, and that they were sympathetic to those doing academic research. However, while they may make amenable subjects for research, librarianship students can hardly be said to be typical of the general population, whom one would imagine to be far less interested in reading and reading matters. And if all feel proficient in using computers, then matters pertaining to the ease-of-use of websites are less likely to be raised in interview, which might trouble or deter less able users.

As one may realise from the aliases they were given, nine of the ten participants were women. As well as being the only man, Andy was also unique in terms of his age. The age of all the other participants ranged between 23 and 27 years of age, all roughly similar, whereas Andy was 37. That means that the only participant who varied at all from the others did so in two different variables, making it impossible to pin any difference down to any one variable.

2.4: The Websites

This section describes the four websites that were selected for the study. Each subsection will follow a given format, first briefly describing the background of the website and the features it possesses, before going to discuss the number of participants who had heard of or used that website, and finally giving the reasons that website was selected for the study. Please note that details on participants' usage of the websites was often quite sketchy, so if they are recorded as using a website, they may have only used it once or twice. Remarks about the appearance and set-up of the website are sometimes included.

2.4.1: Amazon.co.uk

Amazon.co.uk is the trading name of Amazon.com Int'l Sales, Inc. and Amazon Services Europe SARL, which in turn are subsidiaries of international bookseller Amazon.com. The Amazon.co.uk was based on the book retail website Bookpages, which was founded in 1996, and taken over by Amazon.com in 1998, making it the oldest established website in the study. The chief purpose of the website is selling books, but readers can post their reviews on the website.

Amazon possesses a number of features. Reviewers assign books star-ratings, and selections of books that other readers bought who also bought that book are given. Some books are provided with a professionally-written synopsis as well as the reader reviews and/or possess free extracts to read. Reviewers must sign on with a log-in and password to write a review, and some guidelines on what to write are given. Users can rate reviews on how useful their found them; good reviewers, based on both their user ratings and number of reviews (Gordon, 2003), are assigned a star rating, and are placed most prominently on the page below the book. If there are more than three or so reviews on a page, the excess will be posted on a separate page. The website is searchable, and technically browsable as well, although the sheer scale of it can work against this.

As befits its status as one of the world's most famous websites, all participants had heard of the website, and all but one had bought products from it, although that one woman, Liz, did object to it precisely because it was so big and well-known (4.4.1). However, only four participants had ever used it for reading reviews, although one more participant- Liz, in fact- had used it to check bibliographical details.

The website was selected for the following reasons:

1. Amazon is nothing if not a commercial enterprise, and the website is very clearly trying to sell

products. Does this colour users' trust of the reader reviews on it? Do they see it as just a big marketing ploy?

2. Amazon is very well-known and, as we can see above, very well-used. Do users look more favourably on it because of its familiarity to them?

3. Amazon possesses a lot of features and quality-controls: what will users' reactions and views of them be?

2.4.2: Bookcrossing.com

Bookcrossing.com was set up in 2001 by American software Humankind Systems, Inc., as a community website. The focus of the website is on the bookcrossing hobby, although there are advertisements for booksellers and bookcrossing supplies are available to purchase, although it is not necessary to buy these supplies to take part in the hobby. The website has over three hundred and fifty thousand members from all across the world, although its largest contingent is in its native USA. Two of the participants in the study, Dawn and Naomi, were members, and the researcher joined in the course of the study, after coming across a bookcrossing book in a venue in which he had arranged to hold an interview.

For readers unfamiliar with the concept of bookcrossing, the hobby involves registering a book on the website and marking it with a unique identification number. The book is then left in a public place for those passing by to find and read, although the website also informs members of books that are 'in the wild' in their vicinity to make it easier for them to find them. Once the book has been read, the reader can log their comments on their account on the website and leave the book for someone else to read, starting the process off once more. It does seem, however, that some bookcrossers, such as Naomi, meet up to exchange books, instead of risking the books going missing. The progress of books can be tracked via their identification number.

The website is both searchable and browsable, although as the readers assign genres and categories themselves, browsing can be made more difficult by eccentric classifications. One must be a member and possess a registered book to post comments, although the sign-up process is relatively simple. There is star-rating system for the books.

As mentioned, two participants were members of Bookcrossing.com, and another two had

heard of the website, while a further two were aware of the concept of Bookcrossing if not the website itself. Only the members had ever used the website before. As a rule, most participants found it an awkward and confusing website to use.

The website was selected for the following reasons:

1. It is a website with a commercial origin, but is not overtly try to sell products, at least not on the same scale as Amazon. Will this affect users' perceptions of its trustworthiness in comparison with Amazon?

2. Perhaps more than any of the other websites in this study, Bookcrossing.com emphasises the social aspects of reading. Does combining reading with a(nother) fun activity make the website more appealing to users?

3. Conversely, the focus of the website is as much on the hobby as it is on the books. This means that often the journal entries posted by members are more to do with where the book has been left or found as they are about the experience of reading the book. In addition, because the system of finding books to read has a slightly random element, reviewers may be writing about books they disliked or were indifferent to. Do these factors change the nature of the reviews, and does this matter to users?

4. Finally, Bookcrossing.com possesses virtually no quality controls or professional involvement. Reviewers can write as much or as little as they like, or even leave their journal entries blank. Reviews may be in foreign languages. The genre and category of books are assigned by the readers who registered the books, which can lead to some very strange classifications (3.2). Does this anarchy and amateurism bother users?

2.4.3: Whichbook.net

Originally incarnated as Book Forager in May 2000, Whichbook.net was launched with considerable publicity in October 2002 by Open Libraries Ltd, a joint venture between reading agency Opening the Book and the Society of Chief Librarians' Branching Out scheme, and runs on software designed by Applied Psychology Research, now APR Smartlogik. It won several awards and plaudits after its launch. Opening the Book has gone on to release several other reading websites in

collaboration with various public library partners, such as the young people's websites 4uReader.net and Whatareyouuptotonight.com, and the soon-to-relaunched reader review website Word-of-Mouth.

Whichbook.net is a flagship reader development project, designed to focus on the reader and not the library (Denham, 2003).The website was designed to be usable by those with little or no previous experience of reading, to promote new or undervalued fiction and to cater for minority groups such as the blind, ethnic groups or lesbians, gays and bisexuals. Its unique selling point is that users can choose books by selecting different criteria- for instance happy or sad, long or short, lots or little sex, and so forth- rather than going by genre, author, title, and so on, which would require prior knowledge of reading. It is also possible to search by the location of the story and the characteristics of the main character and plot, although it is not possible to combine the two searches. Of course, these designations must be made manually and so may be subjective and result in a disparity between the opinions of reviewer and reader (Denham, 2003). It has links of one kind or another to virtually all public library authority websites in Great Britain, allowing books to be reserved once found. Alone of all the websites, it contains no non-fiction books.

Whichbook.net is slightly odd in that its reviewers are semi-professional; many of them are drawn from public libraries or the Poetry Society, and must undertake a short training course before being allowed to write reviews. No-one else may write book reviews for it. All reviews possess suggestions for similar books and some reviews possess brief extracts from the book.

(Please note that the information in the preceding paragraphs was collated from several different sources: van Riel (2002 & 2003); Opening the Book (2005); Opening the Book, East Midlands Libraries, & Arts Council East Midlands (200?); Opening the Book, East Ayrshire Council & South Lanarkshire Council (200?); Branching Out (200?); OpenLibraries Ltd (2004); and APR Smartlogik (2003, 2005).

Eight of the participants had heard of the website before, and six of those had used it at least once before. With one vehement exception, Naomi, all of the participants liked the method of selecting books, even if they did not always find the reviews useful.

This website was selected for the following reasons:

1. Ordinary users may not write reviews for Whichbook.net; does this inability to post their opinion affect users' feelings towards the website?

2. Conversely, do the short, standardised format of reviews and professionalism of the reviewers

make the the users' trust the website more? Or do they find it painfully formal and uninformative?

3. Whichbook.net is a public library website; will users trust it more for that reason?

4. Whichbook.net is designed to cut out genre; will users miss genre when looking for books?

2.4.4: Ask Chris

Ask Chris was created by Essex County Council's (2002) library service, and is perhaps the smallest in scale of all of the four websites hear. The website arose out of a wider 'Ask Chris' promotion in September 2002 after it soon became apparent that the website was by far the most successful aspect of the promotion. (Denham, 2003). The name 'Ask Chris' was chosen as 'Chris' was seen to be a nice, neutral, genderless name.

Like Whichbook.net, Ask Chris was designed to promote wider reading, and so a books is often classified in several different genres so that more readers will encounter it. Unlike Whichbook.net, however, it is also designed to promote a sense of community by allowing users to express their own opinions. Ask Chris is by far the easiest of the websites in the study to write reviews upon; one just has to click a button beneath the entry for the book. Books are grouped by genre, and the website is both searchable and browsable.

Only three participants had heard of Ask Chris, although all three of those had used it, if only briefly. A lot of participants commented that the find the website quite garish and were rather bemused by its light bulb lemon logo.

This website was selected for the following reasons:

1. It is incredibly easy to write reviews on Ask Chris. Is this particularly helpful for encouraging users to write book reviews and so fostering a sense of community?

2. However, because it is so easy to write book reviews, does this mean that users feel the reviews on the website are of lower quality, especially given the lack of guidelines and additional features?

3. Ask Chris is the smallest of the four websites; are users concerned with its relatively small selection?

4. Ask Chris is a public library website; will users trust it more for that reason?

2.5: Structure of Presentation of Findings

This section describes the form in which the research findings of the study will be presented in the next four chapters.

Chapter Three looks at the physical features and formats that users find most helpful in a book review. It look principally at synopses, genre and reviewers' personal opinions, and why users find these features particularly useful. It also takes in other features such as the length of reviews, the number of books reviewed and the number of reviews per book, star ratings, links to similar books and excerpts from the books reviewed.

Chapter Four looks at the reviewers and the websites rather than the reviews, and what factors cause a user to trust or distrust their opinion. Trust is taken to mean faith both in reliability and veracity. After describing users' definitions of trust, It looks at whether users best trust those opinions closest to their own and whether users put the most faith in sources with which they are most familiar. It addresses whether the quality of the writing and professionalism of the reviewers influences on trust, and if the commercial or public status of a website affects users' perception of its trustworthiness.

Chapter Five looks at the process of writing book reviews, what motivates those who write reviews and what makes other users not do so. It also looks at the effort and thought needed to write book reviews, and addresses the question of whether users may be put off writing reviews by setting standards too high.

Finally, the ultimate conclusions of the study are presented in Chapter Six, together with suggestions for further research which arise from question brought up by the study or gaps in the data.

Chapter 3: What Makes a Good Book Review

The first topic to be addressed in this dissertation is what physical features users believed made a good book review. Both this chapter and the following chapter deal in different ways with what users believed makes online book reviews effective in their ideal purpose of guiding users to new books. The next chapter looks at what motivated users to feel that a book review was trustworthy and reliable, or suspicious and unsound; in effect, it treats with those that create and publish book reviews, the reviewers and the websites. This section deals with the book reviews themselves, and what information and level of information users found most helpful when selecting books.

The reader reviews four websites selected for this study differed in the number and type of features on offer, in scale, in length and in various other ways. By offering a variety of content and features, the researcher hoped to encourage participants to talk about those qualities they felt were most important to them. The participants were also directly asked what features they found found helpful in a book review for choosing books (A.1).

As library students and library members, the participants may be expected to be keen readers and so their preferences for features in book reviews may differ from less enthusiastic readers. In addition, they were all proficient and confident in using computers, and may have been have happier using advanced online features than less experience users.

3.1: Synopses and Summaries

If there was one feature that all participants agreed was vital for a good review, it was a synopsis of the book:

"I do like them to include a synopsis..." **Naomi**

"I like a synopsis about what characters are in it and what happens to them in a book, or what subject or issues it covers..." **Laura**

"I suppose sort of vague plot details..." **Mary**

"I like to read a general synopsis of the plot..." **Sarah**

"Definitely a short synopsis of what's going to happen in a book, it only has to be three or four lines, but I like to know something..." **Dawn**

"I like them to tell you a bit about plot, characterisation, the sort of general underpinnings of the story..." **Andy**

"I think there needs to be some sort of information about the story and characters, it can be quite brief, but you do need some sort of idea about what is going on in the book..." **Caroline**

"...I like to know a bit about the plot, I mean, not giving away the story, but a basic, this is where it's set, time period..." **Kate**

"...what the thrust of the narrative is, or if it doesn't have a narrative, a sort of Joycean thing, you know, so what it's about, but don't give away the end away, and where it is..." **Jenny**

In every case, a synopsis was the first item they mentioned when asked what they looked for in a book review, except for Jenny, who gave genre as her initial choice. Most of the participants specify that they want the synopsis to take in the plot, but many also mention that they want it to deal with the characters, setting and the themes. The level of detail desired does not seem to be especially deep: the language used- 'a bit', 'quite brief', 'short', 'general', 'vague'- seems to point towards a preference for comparatively concise synopses (3.5).

The last two comments, from Kate and Jenny, highlight one danger that a synopsis must avoid, which is revealing too much information and spoiling the ending . Mary had more to say on the subject:

"...I was looking at crime novels, and one of them gave the ending away [giggles]! No! There are even things that say they have a twist at the end, I don't want to know, then you're looking for it." **Mary**

These spoilers could be avoided by posting clear instructions for reviewers on the website warning them not to give too much away.

Some participants provided details about exactly why they found synopses helpful:

"...I would look to see who the main character is, to see the age range because if, I don't know, it's a fifty year-old woman or an eighty year-old man, I'm not going to relate to it..." **Liz**

"...whether it has a background character, whether there are backgrounds to the characters, whether it's actually looked in depth into the world that's writing and whether it's actually created a world and written around it, so that's especially fiction, I like books where I know that's happened... if the review gives you that detail and that information, I tend to trust it more..." **Andy**

"... a synopsis, maybe something that pulls out the main themes, you know, these are the main themes, these are the main ideas, that can be really useful if you are interested in a particular idea or theme, you wouldn't always know to look at a book or read the blurb on the back that it's anything to do with that..." **Naomi**

In each case, what the participant wants out of the synopsis- character, plot, themes- is different, but the synopses are important because they help the participant find the books that contain particular features that they like and discard others.

Amazon's tactic of providing a professionally-written synopsis for some its titles attracted some specific praise, not least because not all reader reviews contained a synopsis and it allowed the user to come to the reviews with some prior knowledge:

"...it's got a concise synopsis, which is very useful for getting a picture of what it's all about..." **Naomi**

"...having the bit at the start was very useful, because with some of the others, you didn't know what the book was about, well, someone enjoyed reading it, that doesn't help me very much." **Kate**

"...I like that you get the synopsis first, it smacks of the stuff you get on the dust-jacket of a book, and I like reading them because, normally- sometimes they're quite cheesy- but normally, you know, they tell you what the book's about, I like knowing that before I read them." **Laura**

3.2: Genres and Categories

While this factor perhaps lies closer to a search strategy than an actual book review, it is worth saying that a description of a book's literary genre was a factor that several participants looked for in reviews, because it helped to quickly narrow down which books they may or may not like. This was not a strategy that was always used on every website but it did seem to be especially popular with participants when exploring Ask Chris, and commented upon favourably, although other users also used it on Amazon and, less successfully, on Bookcrossing.

"...I think also if there's categories, I think on Ask Chris, that was really helpful... A few key words to look for, like 'Crime'..." **Mary**

"Where there were options to explore different categories... Ask Chris and the Whichbook, I found the categories quite good, just looking through comedy, horror..." **Kate**

"And also I looked at it to see how many books I could find on a particular heading, so sometimes I was particularly interested in what it was about under a particular heading." **Jenny**

"...when I was going in, I was going in through genre anyway, so in some ways I was getting cheesy books I thought I might like, you know, a genre I might be interested in..." **Caroline**

"...I actually fell in love with it [Amazon] because they have a little thing called 'Twentieth Century Classics' and you can click on it and it brings up a list of a twentieth-century writers... I really enjoyed it- 'Ooh, I've read that, ooh, I've read that.'- that kind of thing, but it was good to see what they considered twentieth-century classics." **Naomi**

In most of these cases, and many of others that follow in this section, it does seem that genre is important to the searchers because they like a particular genre and knowing the genre of the books on the website helps them find the books they are more likely to enjoy. Naomi seems a little unusual in this respect; she does use what is effectively a genre classification to find books of a type she enjoys, but also enjoys the feature because it allows her to 'tick off' titles she believes she should have read. it may be that she uses the 'classics' tag to justify her choice of reading.

As we have seen (2.4.3), Whichbook.net was specifically designed not to work by genre, as other websites worked in that way, and Whichbook.net encourages users to broaden their reading tastes, although there is a *de facto* science fiction/fantasy selector in a button that allows users to choose imaginary places for the location setting. Kate's comment about categories on Whichbook.net may refer to the closeness with with the books the website selected matched the settings on the selector. However, despite generally liking Whichbook.net, Jenny found the absence of this search method an annoyance:

"And Whichbook.net doesn't have a historical book section, it doesn't, it really doesn't, which annoys me, 'cos I like that... you can't search books by genre, either, if you could have a separate page on genre, that would be such a great addition..." **Jenny**

Of course, genres are often poorly-defined things, and if the book is not in the category the user believes that it fits, then the user will have trouble finding it. Given that Bookcrossing reviewers assign the genre of their book themselves, one is surprised that Jenny, Liz and Kate were the only ones to complain about its choice of categorisation.

"...you don't always agree with them, one book I love was described as a romance, and I thought, it's not, it's fiction..." **Mary**

"...people have a strange idea of which categories are appropriate, like *Remains of the Day*, a graphic novel!" **Jenny**

"And I found the categories on Bookcrossing just a bit strange, they didn't seem very comprehensive..." **Kate**

"And Bookcrossing, because I found it hard to browse, because I clicked on 'Women's Fiction' and there was nothing there, I was, like, I didn't know which category to look into..." **Liz**

In addition, a genre can be so broad that in itself it is not that great an assistance in narrowing down what a book is like, which is why additional information such as synopses or reviewers' opinions are needed.

"...the title of the book, even the genre, doesn't always give you the impression of what's happening, but a quick synopsis that says 'A man is found murdered and some

people investigate.', you're like 'Actually, that's my sort of thing'..." **Caroline**

"...'fiction' is really vague, there are problems with that." **Mary**

This problem of vagueness is worsened if the category or genre is an unusual one, whose title does not easily describe its criteria:

"...I wondered how they chose things like the 'Buzz Books' on Ask Chris, I would like a bit of explanation, you know, were these the most borrowed, or the ones librarians recommended... I couldn't really find that, I had a look about, and it really wasn't clear." **Kate**

Kate was the only one to comment on this: however, given the limited time available when exploring the websites, the other participants may not have encountered that particular section or paid it any attention.

There are other issues to do with coverage of genres on a website, but those are covered in subsection 3.4.1.

3.3: Reviewer's Personal Opinions

As we shall see in the following section, the majority of participants regarded the opinion of the reviewer as a crucial part of the review. Being so very subjective and variable between different reviewers, they could be seen as a potential problem, but there was a strong feeling that they had an important role in choosing books, so long as certain conditions were observed; opinion could not come at the expense of other feature of the review.

3.3.1: Reviewer's Personal Opinions as an Aid to Choice

One reason why a review may require the reviewer to interject a personal opinion is that this does help the user get a clearer picture of what the book is like to read, a more holistic approach to the reading experience than simply stating the outlines of the plot and characters.

"And so then you get all the different customer opinions, and that was nice, because people who read it got to say why they liked it, and if they didn't like it, and you got a sense of what you'd get out of it if you read it..." **Laura**

"...they need to give their opinions and why, which makes it different from just the blurb on the back of the book." **Naomi**

It is worth highlighting that both participants talk of the need for reviewers to explain why they hold their views; this topic will be discussed in the next subsection, 3.3.2.It is also worth qualifying both these statements by saying that both participants had only just said that they found synopses crucial to a book review, so opinions can not stand alone; we have already seen the universality of a desire for the synopsis in a book review . Indeed, Naomi had only just said:

"People often dive in too quickly with "I thought this was good because...' or 'I thought this was bad because...'..." **Naomi**

Liz and Dawn made similar comments about the problems of opinions not backed up by synopses, where the information is either too vague or unfocused:

"Some of them were really sort of cryptic, you know, that's what I've written, they would say 'It's a dark book, and the atmosphere's really great" but they wouldn't say what

the plot was in any way or who the characters were or anything..." **Liz**

"...they obviously get, on other sites, quite introverted into what the book made them feel, actually telling you details you didn't need to know..." **Dawn**

Having said this, one of the few criticisms Whichbook.net attracted from some participants was that it did not give the reviewers' personal opinions about a book. The reasons for doing this are understandable; it could spoil the common format and descriptive system the website is trying to achieve, and any negative comments about a book could be disastrous on a website trying to promote reading. Who wants to search for their ideal book only to be told that it is a pile of tripe? However, three participants did take against this unbiased approach, finding that it made it harder to use the reviews to get an idea of what the book might be like to read.

"And so, Whichbook, the reviews all seemed positive, it was like they'd been written by the people who wrote the book... it gives you a rough idea of what the book is like, but doesn't give you much explanation of why." **Andy**

"...on Whichbook, you get the opposite, a quick synopsis of what the book is about but very little general opinion... And I supposed in some ways that's less useful if you're trying to choose a book to read, out of all the books out there, you can just pick it up and read the back if you want to know what it's about. If you want to choose something, perhaps you do it more subjectively, what looks interesting." **Caroline**

"They're all really positive. And I felt that lost a bit of credibility for me, really, 'cos not everybody's going to like every book... you want people's honest opinions, and I think that was the main problem with that one." **Mary**

It is worth noting that Caroline, like Naomi, talks of a review without opinion as being no better than the advertising blurb on the book itself. Of course, one must bear in mind that there are other factors at work here, such as the need for concise, easy-to-read reviews, and to create an non-judgemental website that gives a positive view of reading. Many Whichbook.net reviews do contain short extracts, which may help to get a flavour of the reading experience. Still, one must be aware a personal opinion is a big factor in choosing books. It also helps foster a feeling of trust- which will be discussed in its various forms in Chapter 4- and some of the comments above suggest that some users may lose faith with a website that suggests they will like every book on it, as this clearly can not be the case. While not malicious, the website is lying to them. This distrust can be exacerbated by suspicions about commercial motives, as Sarah says when talking about Amazon (4.4.1):

"...I suppose it's nice to see some genuine emotion in a book review, which I felt you occasionally didn't get on Amazon, and that's what made me think , is this just someone from Amazon writing something here..." **Sarah**

This may have worked the other way around; Sarah might have been suspicious of Amazon to begin with, and so saw the reviews on it as being emotionless and biased. However, opinions are the human face of reviews, and, in the eyes of some users at least, they distinguish a useful tool for choosing books from a marketing machine.

However, although opinions do have an important role in helping to judge what a book is like to read and making the website seem more human, they can occasionally be a nuisance and diminish the helpfulness of the review, as the next examples shows.

"...there were some good reviews, but, interestingly, as ever, they were both good reviews and both disagreed with each other entirely, whether it was good or bad [laughs], so I'm not sure whether I want to get it, but I'll probably get it out of the library..." **Andy**

Andy was intrigued enough to look for the books despite the conflicting reviews and does not seem overly bothered, but the situation was obviously irritating. It is impossible for all reviewers to agree with one another, so the situation can not be avoided.

3.3.2: The Need to Explain Opinions

As mentioned the the previous subsection, 3.3.1, an opinion is of little use unless accompanied by an explanation of why the reviewer feels that way. This was a very common feeling indeed amongst participants:

"...sometimes you get people not saying enough, a lot of them are a bit vague, they'll say 'Oh, this book was interesting, or riveting', and you want to know more..." **Mary**

"...I think a lot of people had been anxious to say, you know, 'I think everyone should read this, I really enjoyed it', which is fair enough, but it doesn't give you a clue to what it's like... I do like reading what other people think about it, especially when they talk about it in a way which says how it makes them feel or what it was like to read..." **Laura**

"'It was wonderful' and that's all you get, which doesn't tell you anything about the book." **Andy**

"A lot of these were like 'We read this in our book group and thought it was really good.', and you were like, okay, cheers for that, without actually saying what it was about or why they liked it, you know, or who it is for." **Naomi**

Some of these complaints may be being made of reviews which sacrifice synopsis for opinion, as was discussed above (3.3.1), but it is clear that there is a feeling in some participants that a breakdown of why the reviewer feels that way is important.

Moreover, if the reviewer explains why they feel as they do about it, it can reveal important information about the book to the user, as the next two examples show; the object of opinion is not to guide the user by the reviewer's taste, but to explain what the book is like to read. If the user knows this, information then they can make their own mind up.

"...because sometimes they may say 'I really hate this in it.', and it might be the sort of thing I like." **Dawn**

"...they tend to say why, 'Why I hate this book.', tell me why, so I so can decide whether I might agree with you or not, 'cos they might go 'It's a dreadful book!', and you're like, 'why?', 'Because it's science fiction!', and it's like, 'Well!' [laughs]...if it's fifty-fifty and half the people are going 'This is the best book I ever read, all the characters are very neatly drawn' and that sort of stuff, and the others are going 'It's so tedious with all that character description', then you can decide which one you might agree with'." **Caroline**

In addition, an explanation for opinions can provide warnings about the book's content; 'enjoy' is a vague word- one can enjoy a book for many reasons- and Dawn described its dangers:

"...sometimes a book can be horrific but you really enjoy it, but that needs explaining, so if it disturbed you but was a really good book, I think that needs to be said, rather than 'I really enjoyed it', then you realise there's terrible atrocities going on and you go 'Ugh!'" **Dawn**

3.3.3: The Need to Focus on the Book

Finally in this section, one complaint that came up occasionally was when the book review moved off the topic of the book and on to the reviewer's life. This is obviously a danger when letting the public write what, and as much as, they want, but it does make getting to the information to select a book harder- or displaces that information altogether- and so the review is less helpful. There may also be some feeling that the reviewer is showing off.

"I think, really, 'cos you can write as much as you want as well, you sometimes get people's life histories, which isn't particularly relevant, there was one woman who was 'Ooh, I grew up in America and this and this', and what did you think of the book?" **Mary**

"...it wasn't very helpful because it recounted when the reviewer read it, and the first line was 'Reading this in Switzerland and driving near Moutier...' and I was like, that doesn't help me in any way whatsoever to understand what it's about..." **Liz**

This clearly irritated some participants, and it may be possible to put up guidelines on a website to avoid this problem; equally such guidelines could act as a deterrent to those writing reviews even if they made what reviews there were more helpful (5.2.2).

A common complaint about Bookcrossing- from those who were not Bookcrossers, at least- was that the journal entries often concentrated on where the book was, rather than what it was about. However, as the location of the book is very important in the hobby of bookcrossing, one must not condemn the site for it, since the main focus of the site is, after all, on the hobby rather than the reviews.

3.4: Coverage

One factor any book review website must deal with is the number of books it contains and the number of reviews each book has. One of the reasons this study did not include any book review websites created by individuals was that the researcher was unable to find any that compared in scope with any of the public or commercial websites. More information should logically be more useful, but management and physical data storage become issues that limit the size of websites. Are users concerned with limited coverage of material, or can too much coverage be overwhelming?

3.4.1: The Number of Books Reviewed

Obviously, one can not get an idea of what a book is like without a review, which would rather undo the point of a book review website. Few participants mentioned a lack of reviews or books as a problem on the websites they visited, with two exceptions:

"...but sometimes there wasn't always reviews on the books, they had *Girl with Pearl Earring*, there was no description, nothing at the end of the pages, so obviously no-one had reviewed it, which was quite annoying, especially if you wanted to solely use it for reviews." **Liz**

"...new books don't tend to have any reviews, so you tend to have rather a biased view of it." **Andy**

There is nothing one can do about new books being placed on the site without reviewers except to wait for the reviewers to find it and write a review. Indeed, it appears an absence of a review may encourage some users to write one themselves , and the presence of too many deter them from writing (5.3.2). However, *Girl with Pearl Earring* is an older title and a popular one, making it surprising that it did not have a review appended. Amazon does sometimes have a policy of attaching reviews to each edition of a book, rather than to the title, so it may be that reviews had been attached to other editions available on the website.

The only two complaints about the selection or number of books, rather than reviews, both came from Andy:

"Though its [Whichbook.net's] selection does seem to be limited, if you want science fiction it does seem to be limited, if you want fiction there seems to be a lot of

choice." **Andy**

"The children's 'Buzz', I noticed, was very out-of-date, the books it had, most of the books that it gave were 2003 winners, so I was really surprised that they're supposedly up-to-date children's books were really out of date." **Andy**

Both comments refer to genres or categories rather than the site as a whole; all other complaints about genre tended to focus on difficulty in finding it, rather than an actually lack of availability of genre material (6.2). It may be that Andy was unable to find the science fiction material on Whichbook.net, which is not set up to search by genre, rather than that there was none present, although it is the researcher's personal experience, too, that this genre does seem to be poorly-represented on that website. Nevertheless, despite the fact that only one participant mentioned it- of course, it may be that Andy was the only participant who happened to visit it- the out-datedness of the Ask Chris children's 'Buzz' page should be a source of shame, simply as an instance of bad website housekeeping.

Going in the opposite direction, Andy also talked of enjoying the large choice of books available on Amazon:

"...the other thing I like about Amazon is the simple case that they have a large quantity of books to look at, and a large number of reviews for each book..." **Andy**

The researcher was intrigued that no other participants commented on the number of books on offer; the two commercial sites, Amazon and Bookcrossing, are substantially larger than the public ones, Ask Chris and Whichbook.net; after all, they draw on a much wider supply of reviewers. However, none of the participants complained that the public sites offered less choice of titles than the commercial ones or that they had been unable to find titles they had been specifically searching for; possibly they had insufficient time in the exercise to reach the limits of the sites, or possibly they either found any books they did search for or did not report it if they did not.

3.4.2: The Number of Reviews per Book

We have seen that Andy liked Amazon for having multiple reviews for each book, and he was not alone in this:

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"I was impressed by the number of reviews there [on Ask Chris], every book I looked at seemed to have one review, most of them had more..." **Sarah**

"I liked the fact that it had more than one person's reviews available... the fact that it only gives you a few but you've got the option to go and get loads more is quite good..." **Kate**

So why does it matter to users if there is a large selection of reviews or not? Those participants who elaborated seemed to find it useful because differing reviews could be compared and contrasted, enabling the user to build up a wider, less biased view of the book. In many ways this begins to move onto to being a matter of trust, aspects of which are discussed in Chapter 4; the broader picture can be seen as eradicating personal bias.

"I've put taken together it was a good range, it's true, you got a reasonably good insight into the books..." **Naomi**

"...if I read a selection of reviews for one book and they all said it was excellent, I would certainly look out for that book... if you read ten reviews of the same book and you, you know, nine out of ten people say 'This is really tediously written and it's really slow-moving"...then that's sort of giving you an impression of what, how the book is, and whether you'd enjoy it or not..." **Caroline**

"...you could read a lot of them and get quite a good overview. I think my only problem with that is that there was a book group, and every member of a book group had written a review, and they were all really similar. Maybe that was the general consensus on the book, and that would make it quite accurate, but it was quite bland, really, it was pretty much the same." **Mary**

It does seem relatively clear that these participants use multiple reviews to get a consensus view of the book through differing opinions. Quite what might be done about Mary's problem of the book group all essentially writing the same review is unclear; it seems the difficulty is not so much that the reviewers have the same opinion, but that all provided the same information as well and each review adds nothing new. It is possible that book groups affiliated to a library might be encouraged to post a single, group review on a library's website.

Having said that, a wide selection of reviews does not always help a user to accurately grasp what a book is really like:

"...because there are so many different people reviewing, it's hard to judge..." **Liz**

Although most support does seem to be in favour of a greater number of reviews per item, there may be some users who, like Liz, find the mass of information overwhelming; it is worth comparing this situation with users' varying preferences for the length and detail of book reviews (3.5). We also have an example from 3.3.1 of Andy, who found good but conflicting reviews confused him as to whether he wanted to read a book or not.

In addition, just because a large number of reviews are available, users will not necessarily go out of their way to use them:

"...I don't know if I ever click on the 'More Reviews' bit..." **Caroline**

It may be there is some limit beyond which the number of reviews stops being helpful, which may be why Amazon chooses to have only a few reviews on a books main page and store the rest elsewhere. Of course, one must bear in mind that any limits on the number of reviews will impact on the use of websites as a chance for readers to express their views by writing reviews (5.2.2).

3.5: Length and Detail

The length of book reviews proved to be a surprisingly divisive issue, one on which all participants but one had something to say. To give an idea of how opinions as to what was a good length differed amongst participants, here are four different views of the reviews on Amazon:

"I think sometimes it's very much a mixed bag on Amazon, sometimes you get too much detail and sometimes you get people not saying enough..." **Mary**

"The Amazon ones are the best ones... most of them are of medium length, you know, they're not too long to bother reading, but equally most of them contain quite a bit of information..." **Caroline**

"Some of reviews [on Amazon] were very lengthy, so that you couldn't- didn't want to read them, one of them gave you pretty much the whole plot description, he mentioned all the characters, and it was just a bit annoying..." **Liz**

"The reviews on Amazon? I thought they were really good... most people have written a lot, actually... they gave a really good, concise synopsis, and then they went through saying, 'I liked that, you might find this, you might find that'..." **Naomi**

All four participants were on the same website, but each holds a different view of it. For Mary the length and detail fluctuated between too long and too short; for Caroline the reviews are 'medium length' but packed with information; for Liz the reviews are too long; and for Naomi the reviews are long, but she relishes all the information they contain, although at the same time she praises the synopses for being concise. These examples do reveal some of the problems inherent in trying to understand preferences for length.

For one, how length is described differs. When Caroline talks of 'medium length', for example, does she mean they were merely of medium length, which is a neutral quality, or did she mean that they were neither too long and not too short, which is a positive quality? So one must beware of how users rate the length of reviews.

More importantly, there is the question of detail- the amount of information a review contains- as opposed to physical length, and how it may be possible to sometimes confuse the two. For instance, when Naomi talks reviewers having 'written a lot', it seems that she is referring to the amount

of information in the review, rather than its simple length. Likewise, Mary seems to be referring to detail rather than length. But when Liz says that the reviews are 'very lengthy', it is not so clear whether she complaining about the physical length of the review or an excess of information. This does mean that some participants' comments on length and detail can be a little obscure in their meaning:

"... but in terms of detail, they would give you lots of detail..." **Sarah**

"Some of the reviews [on Ask Chris] were better than others, and I liked the longer ones better. I like longer ones" **Jenny**

It is probable that Sarah's comment is positive- she has just said she does not trust the commercial aspects of Amazon (4.4.1), and the 'but' seems to suggest a change of a view- but it is not entirely possible to be certain. Judging the value being applied in phrases such as 'It was brief' or 'It was very detailed', unless the context makes it very clear, can be awkward. Likewise, does Jenny like the longer reviews because they are long, or because they contain more information? Unfortunately, during the interview, the researcher was unable to pick up on the phrase to clarify it. As a consequence, the results of this particular study are rather ambiguous as concerning detail and length; any follow-up study should work to clearly demarcate the two differing qualities in its questions.

The amount of information that users require to decide whether they like a book or not varied. Some of the participants liked to have as much information as possible before committing to a book:

"I wasn't so sure about the reviews [on Ask Chris], they were very, very short, which is good for speed, but... I would, if choosing a book, always read the back cover and usually the start, you know, the first bit of the chapter before I chose it. So having four lines is just- it doesn't give you much of an indication... Whichbook. I'm not sure whether I trusted it or not... it was just so brief, you know, it was hard to know..." **Kate**

"...it's [Bookcrossing.com's] not particularly detailed, you have to ask around or go on other websites to find out more about it..." **Dawn**

However, as we have seen, not all participants preferred the longer reviews, and an information-dense, concise review might be seen as every bit as effective.

"...[the reviews on Whichbook.net] weren't too long, which was nice... there wasn't

too much information, which was good... the reviews themselves were quite short, but they had a lot of information in them, to make you think they had a lot of information in them, to make you think 'I might like to read that' or 'I don't want to read that', which was good." **Laura**

Please note that the criteria by which Laura is judging the detail is how effectively it helps her to decide whether she wants to read the book or not.

The matter of length and detail also links back into the coverage of the website; even if individual reviews were too short or scanty to be of use, at least in aggregate they might contain enough information to be helpful (3.4.2):

"I think I probably liked that one [Ask Chris] the best, because they were quite short and you could read a lot of them..." **Mary**

3.6: Star Ratings

Both Amazon and Bookcrossing used star ratings so that users could judge the quality of a book at a glance, but only a few of the participants commented on this, and those that did so favourably did not go into it in depth.

"...and I liked the star rating..." **Sarah**

"The fact that they've got the ratings is useful..." **Kate**

"...they do have a star rating, which is my favourite thing..." **Andy**

Only Kate elaborated on the reasons for this, when talking about how hard it sometimes was to assess just how reviewers felt about a book on Ask Chris:

Kate: "I would have preferred it if there was some sort of rating... if all of them had a mark at one side that they'd given, so people made comments like 'I enjoyed this', and it was like, well, did you just enjoy it, or did you think it was, you know...[pause]"

Interviewer: "The best thing ever?"

Kate: "Exactly. But on the whole I thought the reviews were pretty nice..."

So a ratings system, as well as providing information quickly, can also help clarify a reviewer's opinions, although the absence of such a system does not seem to have bothered Kate unduly. However, this system can equally cause difficulties if the reviewer's rating does not correspond with the opinions they give in the review; after all, it is a subjective and not always easy task to turn an opinion into a numerical score.

"...the ratings on some of the books seemed very variable, I looked at one rating, that was rated quite highly by the reviewer, but the review was terrible, he didn't seem to think that it was a good book, which was an odd mix." **Andy**

This was on Bookcrossing, and, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, the ratings system was Andy's favourite features on that website, so he was evidentially not overly concerned about this. Again, as star ratings were so rarely mentioned in any detail, it is very hard to build up any sort of picture of just how important star ratings are to people, and how accurate they need to be.

One participant, however, Jenny, was particularly vocal in condemning star ratings. This may be because she said she liked actually reading the book reviews themselves and so does not care for the star ratings as a substitute for the written review, but she said:

"...it's really weird, it's like doing book reviews at school when I was eleven, you know, 'I would give this book eight stars and recommend it for readers of ten or above'... I would regard that as a joke rather than an actual measurement, it's quite lazy, really, if they don't want to write it, I'll just put some stars... I think I didn't trust them because of the starring system, 'cos it was lazy..." **Jenny**

Jenny was a lone example, so it is hard to know how widespread such feelings are, but it is worth knowing that star ratings are not universally tolerated and may put off some users.

Amazon does also use a star rating to rate its reviewers by their ability and output, but this system is covered elsewhere, in 4.3.2.

3.7: Parallels and "Readers Who Like..."

One feature on Amazon and Whichbook.net which was generally appreciated by those participants who did mention it were the respective lists of 'Readers Who Bought This also Bought...' books and 'Parallel' books. The two systems are constructed differently; Amazon's is a statistical, electronic creation, whereas Whichbook.net's is created by its human reviewers- but their purpose is the same, to direct users to new books which share features with the book they are currently looking at.

"Actually, the thing I like about Amazon, and I think Whichbook's got it as well, is the 'authors also write like', so I was looking at books and seeing what else they'd written... because it suggested new stuff more than making a comparison." **Sarah**

"And the parallels, they were good too, they had bits that you could click on which were similar, if you didn't like the sound of that one in particular, you could get a similar one." **Laura**

"I liked the parallel suggestions bit... " **Andy**

"I think one of the good things about Amazon was that it tended to mention other authors, so they'd say 'This is like Virginia Andrews' and I'd think 'No!', whereas, yeah, other ones would say, yeah, 'If you like their other books, then you'll like this.'" **Mary**

"...it [Whichbook.net] was saying... which other books were similar in nature to that book and so you might like them..." **Dawn**

"I do like actually, not necessarily on Amazon, but this is for music and it's on Play.com, and it's 'People who bought this have also bought this', so their music tastes are more similar as well, and I would follow those things, which are more an automatic sort of thing..." **Liz**

The reason for users liking such a feature appears to be that such systems increase choice by providing more titles that may be relevant to the user, although not all participants gave an explicit- or intelligible- answer. It was never explicitly said if participants used a known title as a starting point and followed links from that, or if a less structured search was used. Only Dawn said anything that might imply that she used a less structured, serendipitous search using the links, but it is not possible

to be certain of her meaning:

"...I got quite caught up looking at the links..." **Dawn**

The researcher had wondered before the study if links to other books could aid users understand what a book was like to read through comparisons to other titles, but little anyone said anything that could remotely be seen to support this. Mary's statement might possibly refer to this behaviour, but it is not very clear at all quite what she means. In fact, Andy criticises reviews that do offer comparisons to other titles to describe a book, on the grounds that comparisons only function if user and reviewer share a common reading background:

"...if the review compares it to other books, if I haven't read that book, there's no purpose..." **Andy**

If the user does not know the title to which the book under review is compared, it is meaningless to them, and this may be why there seemed to be no support for such a system. Unless the user is very well-read, it can not function.

Both systems, electronic and human, seem to find favour, but none of the participants directly compared one to the other. However, there are some comments which may possibly be taken to portray less positive views of the Amazon system:

"...I think something popped up, you know, when it says 'This reader also has read'... it leads to other threads and you just end up running all over the place..." **Dawn**

"...I clicked on a couple of the recommended books that it came up with, which are obviously things that Amazon thinks I want to read..." **Caroline**

Now both participants did use the 'Readers Who Bought This also Bought' feature to explore the website, so it is an attractive feature; despite this, both comments could be taken to suggest that the results can be a little haphazard and unfocused, although it is, of course, now impossible to verify this after the interview. '...things that Amazon thinks I want to read...' certainly does imply that Caroline did not always share the website's opinion over what books she would enjoy. But as neither went into any more detail, or explicitly criticised the system, it may be that any randomness that arises from this system it is of little or no concern to them.

Andy also criticises the Whichbook.net Parallels for not containing links to the reviews of the books:

"...they give no reviews of the parallel books, and they give you no links to anywhere these parallel books might exist, so you can't go to the reviews... it would be nice to have, literally, under the parallel books, a hyper-link to that section..." **Andy**

Some of the parallels do in fact contain hyperlinks to reviews of the books they suggest, and it is possible the Andy misread the instructions the researcher provided for the site; no other participant complained about this, and it may be that they passed over the system or were able to find functioning hyperlinks. Equally, not all the parallel titles do have reviews linked to them, and if Andy had clicked on one or two of these parallels which did not have reviews attached, he could have easily been convinced that none of the parallel titles had reviews. This is a flaw in the system, and Whichbook.net needs to either remove the titles or better explain the situation to make it less confusing.

3.8: Excerpts

Two of the websites in the study, Amazon and Whichbook.net, offered their users excerpts from the books they reviewed. However, very few of the participants commented on this; it is entirely possible that they passed over it in the limited time they had on the websites, especially as on both websites the feature is only available for a few of the books. As a result, it is not possible to know whether their failure to mention it is because they did not find it useful as a part of review, or if they were unaware they were available. Laura and Andy both both liked excerpts when they were available, although they only talked of it on one website each- Laura on Whichbook.net, Andy on Amazon- so it is possible that they, too, were unaware of the excerpts available on the other websites.

"I liked the little where you could click on it to read the extract, that was cool, a little taster, that was good" **Laura**

"...another thing I like about Amazon is that for a number of books they let you read the first few pages, which is a lovely little feature, it really is, if I'm bored I will do that, pick up a page and look at it... I especially love review websites where they let you read a couple of pages, they're really nice." **Andy**

It is not wholly clear whether either participant actually finds excerpts and extracts helpful in judging the book, or if they just use them as a source of entertainment, which may be no bad thing in itself if it attracts users to a website. Liz was less opaque in her views:

"...they [Whichbook.net] give you little excerpts from the book, which I suppose helps you know the style of writing for you that you can read, but an excerpt doesn't help you to work out what's going on, or it doesn't doesn't give you a hint of what the book's about... it's a random bit of text but I suppose, if you're talking about the quality, it gives you some idea of the writing." **Liz**

Two things we can take from this is that, for Liz at least, an excerpt can function as a guide to the written style of a book (3.9) and that an excerpt needs to be backed up by a synopsis and the other machinery of a review. Admittedly the reviews of Whichbook.net are very much shorter than those on Amazon, so it may be that a longer extract gives a better idea of a book's content, but an excerpt can still not function on its own.

3.9: Writing Style

A few of the participants mentioned a description as something the written style of the book as something they wanted to see in a book. However, this was often just a single item listed as part of a longer list of requirements for a review: the two examples that follow are typical:

"...I do like... something on the writing style..." **Caroline**

"I like to read... the style that it's written in..." **Sarah**

Neither woman dwells on the matter at length, and they may not be that heavily concerned about it. Liz mentions excerpts might act as a guide to style (3.8), but her comments are not explicit as to whether she uses them as such. It may be, of course, that they take it as a given that a review will discuss the writing style of its subject, and that is why they do not say any more. Indeed, an assumption that a reviewer will always deal with the written style may be a reason that so few participants singled writing style out; they believed that it would automatically be included in any review whatever happened. Only Dawn dwelt at length on the need to discuss style, and then because she only likes a very particular written style:

"...I also want to know about the writing style, because I'm very particular about that, I think *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is wonderful, and I really like that mythical style, the pseudo-religious myth thing, Or Ben Okri's writing and African style, so I do like to know that, because if I'm being lead blind into a book by Marion Keynes, which is written in a completely, utterly different style, I would be quite upset if I hadn't been told that..." **Dawn**

The only other participant who might been seen to talk about style in depth was Laura, but in the context of forewarning the user to challenging books, rather than helping them find a particular style they enjoy:

"...I think I read one review where someone said 'I'm fourteen, I didn't understand all the words in it, but it was still very good to read it', and I think that's quite nice...I'd like to know, if I was going to read it, if I'd need a dictionary beside me or something like that..." **Laura**

Style is important to Laura for a different reason than for Dawn, so users' requirements as

regards style may not be uniform or straightforward. Unfortunately, because so few participants said anything about it, it is hard to get a broader picture of if and why it does matter.

3.10: Discussion and Conclusions

There are some difficulties in drawing conclusions about what users' feel makes a good book review, because some features, such as star ratings (3.6) or excerpts (3.8), attracted little or no comment, although what comment they did attracted tended to be positive, if regrettably brief. Unfortunately, this does not necessarily mean such features are unappreciated, but could also mean that the participants simply did not encounter them or mentally register them when exploring the website. Participants were left to explore the website in their own fashion and they may have felt time constraints which prevented them taking in the full range of facilities available on the website. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Future investigations could come back and address these particular features in more depth to understand whether the participants' silence about them are a product of this study or a genuine reflection of users' views.

However, what is undeniable is that a synopsis is crucial to any book review (3.1); this was universally regarded as a key feature by all participants. Knowing the basic outlines of plot, characters and themes helps a user to identify if the book is of a sort that they will enjoy, and to discard those books which they will not like. Different users look for different subjects in a synopsis, and so a good synopsis needs to cover all three areas, plot, characters and themes.

A majority of users were also using genre to search for books on occasions, and this helps to narrow down searches by focusing on books of a type that the user knows that they enjoy (3.2), and if books are not already organised into genres, it might be prudent to include information on genre in the synopsis, as this will help users in quickly narrowing their searches. However, some users experienced difficulties with books whose genres they felt were misclassified and those managing the websites may need to exercise some guidance and thought when assigning genres to books.

There was a also a group of participants, and one in particular, to who the writing style of a book was of importance, and it may be that other participants also felt this to be important, but did not mention it because they assumed any review would automatically discuss it (3.9). Appreciation of written style can be highly subjective and so might belong in the opinion section of a book review, but the synopsis would be the most logical place to include any information; once again, this is a structural element of the book, like plot or characters, and some users look specifically for it in the same way, so such information should be bound together.

Ideally, the website should offer some guidance to users on what to include in a synopsis to make sure reviewers include all these requirements. Of course, the more control that the website exerts and the more effort needed to write the review, so the less appealing writing a review may seem to be. And there is no guarantee that reviewers will even read the guidance provided Those participants who did discuss this dilemma did come down in favour of quality over ease of use (5.2.2),

but there were only two of them and we should be wary of letting their views stand for the views of all users. In addition, the language the participants used seemed to imply that they prefer concise synopsis over longer ones; writing a brief synopsis that contains all this information requires a skill which might possibly be beyond some reviewers; it's little wonder that Whichbook.net trains those who write its reviews. A compromise which did draw some favourable comment was Amazon's policy of posting a professionally-written synopsis for some titles, ensuring that all the information was available despite any variation in the contents of the reader reviews. This may be a tactic worth employing.

Interestingly, the way the participants use synopses seems to be to look for books of a type that they already enjoy. As such, they may not be an ideal method of introducing users to new genres or types of book; if a book, no matter how good it is, does not match the user's criteria, they will discard it. A synopsis alone may not sell an unfamiliar book to a user; indeed, Whichbook.net, was criticised by some participants because they did not find its synopses sufficient to help them gauge whether or not they would enjoy the book (3.3.1). Likewise, if a user is new to read, they may not have as good an idea of what exactly they will appreciate in a book.

This brings us to the second feature that the participants felt was crucial in a book review, the personal opinion of the reviewer (3.3); whereas the information in the synopsis tells the user whether it the type of book they will like, the reviewer's opinions help them to see what the experience of reading the book is and whether they will enjoy that specific book. Of course, opinions are highly subjective, but many participants were balancing this out by reading multiple reviews for the same book to help them gain a broader overview (3.4.2). What was especially important was for the reviewer to give reasons for their opinions; participants did not seem to be interested in whether a reviewer liked a book or not, but what sort of experience the reviewer went through in reading the book (3.3.2). Indeed, some participants said that even if a reviewer disliked the book, if they explained why, they might give information that would reveal that the book was something the user would enjoy reading. While there is insufficient data to say so for certain, if users use the reviewers' opinions to judge what a book is like to read rather than simply to see whether the reviewer thought it was good or bad, this might account for the lack of comment on star ratings; they may be providing information that the majority of users are not interested in, although they may allow users to home in on the most popular books.

But, as with synopses, reviewers' opinions can not stand alone; the participants indicated that what they wanted was both, both a synopsis and personal opinions. It may be useful to provide guidelines for giving and explaining opinions in the same way as for writing synopses, although with the same proviso that this may deter those writing reviews by making it more difficult.

One further feature which a majority of participants found helpful was the use of further related reading, such as Whichbook.net's 'Parallel Books' or Amazon's 'Readers Who Bought This also Bought...' features (3.7). This seems to function in much the same way as the synopsis, by helping the user find books of a type they like. If they can find one such book, this feature aids them in locating more like it, widening their choice and making their searches faster. of course, much as with assigning genre, linking books together is not a precise and objective exercise, but when they work they are appreciated. There is not enough data to judge whether users prefer humans to select these related titles, or automated systems.

The question of the ideal length and level of detail for an online review must unfortunately go unresolved (3.5). As it was, this study did not sufficiently distinguish between detail-the quantity of information- and physical length in its questions, and it is not always possible to separate the two in the transcripts. There are suggestions that there are substantial differences in preferences between participants, but without a more precise and focused study it is not possible to be certain. However, users do prefer their reviewers to stick to the book when writing; reviewers who strayed from the topic, especially to talk about themselves, were not appreciated (3.3.3).

So to conclude, the ideal format for a review seems to be as follows: a concise synopsis that takes in plot, characters, themes, genre and writing style; the reviewer's personal opinions, with an explanation of why they feel that way; and a selection of related titles. To reduce the onus on the reviewer, it is suggested that the website provides the synopsis; after all, they can not provide the opinions! More research is needed to assess the importance of length, detail, star ratings and excerpts.

Chapter 4: Factors in Users' Trust of Online Reviews

As the previous chapter dealt with the reviews, so this chapter deals with the reviewers and the websites tha publish their work. An online reader review can be written by anyone who has access to a computer and can read at some level; users are unlikely to know them personally, especially as many reviewers use pseudonyms, even assuming that the website actually posts the names of reviewers. In which case, why should users put any faith whatsoever in what these people say, given that they know nothing about them? Do users trust professional reviewers more, and do the quality-control measures some websites some websites apply to their reviews make any difference to users' perceptions?

A separate but related matter is that of commercial bias. Some review websites, such as Amazon, are set up primarily to sell books and other media; others, such as Whichbook.net and Ask Chris, were set up by public libraries with the altruistic aim of helping people find books to read. Are users concerned about that the commercial aspects of website might distort the reliability of the reader reviews they carry? And do users favour or avoid websites expressly because of their public/commercial status?

Participants were directly asked whose opinions they trusted about books and reading, and what made them feel that way (A.1).

4.1: What is Trust? Participants' Views

Before we go much deeper into this topic, it may be worth establishing some greater idea of what trust actually means. It was perhaps rather a vague term to use in questions, but this ambiguity does have its uses, as it covers two separate concepts which are both crucial to users' acceptance of a website. One is trust in the sense of reliability in performing a purpose; does the review help the user to accurately and consistently decide which books they will or will not like? Partly this is down to the format and features of the review, as we saw in Chapter 3, but is also influenced by factors such as the familiarity of the source (4.2) and the thought and expertise that has gone into the writing of the review (4.3). This section deals with the second concept, which is trust in the sense of believing that what the reviewer says is an honest opinion. This topic is also dealt with in respect to commercial firms in 4.4.

4.1.1: Opinion is Just Opinion

"Whose opinions do you trust about book reading?" **Interviewer**

"Oh, mine! [giggles]...Which is why it's difficult to trust reviews... because someone else's opinion may be very different from mine... I'll still take it with a pinch of salt because it's somebody's opinion, and while it may make me want to read it, I may not agree with them." **Naomi**

Naomi certainly was not alone in this conception of the reliability of book reviews, and seven of the ten participants expressed views that can be taken as being similar. The issue here is not that reviews may be mendacious, or poorly constructed, or a commercial gambit, but simply that even the best-written, most honest of reviews is not helpful unless the reviewer's tastes and criteria for excellence co-incide with one's own. This does create not only a view in which a trustworthy review can simply be one that co-incides with one's own views- which will be explored in subsections 4.1.2 and 4.2.2- but also an acceptance that book reviews are simply expression of personal opinion rather than a miraculous oracle. As a result, there were few accusations that reviewers were outright lying in their reviews, although there were some suspicions voiced about reviews that were supposedly written solely to show off (4.1.3) or planted by booksellers (4.4.1). As a result, there was sometimes an attitude of wariness to all sources of information about books, no matter how good:

"I would never say I ever actually one hundred per cent trust, because you both may enjoy one book, but another book touches a different part of their personality, and that doesn't with you." **Dawn**

"I'd treat everyone's opinion with a certain amount of ' Well, they think that, it doesn't necessarily mean that I think that'." **Laura**

"It's nice to know what others think, but I'm capable of making up my own mind and like to apply my own judgement, and I'd like to say that I apply that to all of them." **Naomi**

Equally, this lead to a feeling that even if the review was not a reliable guide to selecting a book , that the reviewer was expressing a genuine personal preference, and so was trustworthy in that respect.

"I trusted them in the sense that they were what that person thought..." **Caroline**

"I don't think anyone would be lying on it..." **Kate**

"...it's not so much that you doubt what they're saying..." **Jenny**

A particularly interesting example was Mary, who, after being fired up to write a review on Amazon after disagreeing with a previous review, decided not to on the grounds that:

"I didn't want to put that I disagreed with their review, that was a bit mean... they're entitled to their own opinion." **Mary**

So there is a general feeling that the majority of reviews, not matter how useful in actually finding books, are genuine opinions being voiced; this does does not seem to be a particular concern to the participants as to whether or not the reviews are reliable. However, what was a concern was that, because different people share different tastes, opinions expressed in a review may not be wholly reliable method of selecting books. One criterion for trustworthiness we shall go on to explore in the next chapter is how greatly the reviewers' opinions matched those of the users.

4.1.2: Is Trust Simply Sharing the Same Taste?

One tactic that most of the participants indulged in at some point in the exploration of the websites was to look for books they had already read to gauge whether the opinions of the reviewers

matched their own; see subsection 4.1.3 for further details. One of the interesting features of this was the language some of the participants used to describe the reliable reviews; in both of the following examples, the underlings are the researcher's.

"I think I tried to do that on each site, something particular, look at something I'd read and see whether I thought the reviews were <u>accurate</u>." **Naomi**

"In most cases I think the reviews were <u>spot on</u>, apart from *On the Road*, which was a review was a book I chose as I book I actually didn't like, too see what the reviews were like, and they were all very positive..." **Dawn**

From the context and language, it does seem that both participants are referring positively to reviews that supported their own opinions about the book; 'accurate' and 'spot on' would seem to indicate they matched closely some pre-existing set of criteria or beliefs, rather than, say, dealing in depth with the book or being particularly well-written. Liz was even clearer in stating her tactics:

"...so I saw what people thought of *Girl with Pearl Earring* to compare it with my own and if they disagreed then- [corrects self]-if they agreed then that would mean I'd trust them more" **Liz**

"Amazon Reviewers if they agree with me, then I'll trust them." **Liz**

As we shall see (4.1.3), seeing if the reviewers' opinions matched their own was not the sole reason users consulted books that they had already read when exploring the websites. It does seem clear, however, to some users at least, that an important factor in judging the reliability of a review is knowing how closely the writer's views mirror their own. This makes sense; someone with tastes close to the user's own may well be more likely to recommend or disregard books for the same reason as the user, and so the selections of books may be that much more applicable. Sometimes a user will explicitly select a particular source for this very reason:

"I tend to concentrate more on things like *The Independent* and *Guardian,* because they're more my sort of level, that's the sort of book I like." **Andy**

Having said all that, in some cases users may not be particularly bothered about how closely a reviewer matches their own tastes, especially if they have very broad tastes:

"I'm a fairly standard person, I don't think I have very zany interests, so what the majority of people enjoy, I probably enjoy." **Kate**

It is worth mentioning, however, that Kate indulged in the search strategy of searching for books she had already read just like the others, and for apparently the same reason (4.1.3).

4.1.3: Searching Strategy and Establishing Trust

As mentioned above in 4.1.2, an exceptionally common tactic used by a majority of participants on at least some of the websites they explored was to look at reviews of books the user had already read to get a feel for a site. Of course, the study took place under artificial conditions, so it is not possible to say whether this is normal behaviour amongst users- especially as participants' time on websites was often limited, which would work against extended browsing of unfamiliar titles. And, of course, this tactic was practically impossible on Whichbook.net, which does not allow users to specify a particular title or author when searching. Nevertheless, the incidence of this strategy was very high.

"I looked at a few that I'd read already, to see if I thought I agreed with them" **Mary**

"...so I looked at books that I'd read to see what they said so I see if I could trust the reviewers..." **Liz**

"I basically included non-fiction that I knew, so that I could compare the reviews to what I thought." **Andy**

"I had a quick look at some books I'd already read, 'cos one of my ways to see whether you agree with a site is to look at books you've already read and so see what you think." **Caroline**

"On all of them I looked for a book that I had read, just to see if they matched up with what I thought." **Kate**

"I used this strategy of reading books I knew I liked, reading I knew I didn't like, and then going onto random books I'd never heard of before." **Dawn**

"I found it particularly useful to look at fiction I'd already read, then you can judge what you think of the reviews, so that you can judge it for yourself... look at something I hadn't read and see if the review made me want to read it" **Naomi**

It would seem that the bulk of these statements indicate that the participants did this primarily to see if reviewers' opinions match their own, indicating that this particular factor in establishing trust may be especially important to them (4.1.2). However, it is worth mentioning that both Dawn and Naomi go on to say that they looked at books they had not read as part of the same search strategy, which presumably was to examine the other qualities of the reviews. Indeed, Dawn elaborated:

"I wanted some idea of what I was dealing with... and I was going to run into this blind and, yes, believe these reviews or completely discard them... if the first one I picked was a really poor review, it might put you off completely, so I had to have some kind of idea what I was letting myself in for, so to speak." **Dawn**

So for some participants, at least, while examining whether the opinions of reviewers matched up with their own was an important consideration, it was part of a more structured and holistic exploration of the website. This behaviour also co-existed with searches for unfamiliar material; after all, the purpose of reading book reviews is to discover new books.

"I'm happy to go to Oxfam, pick up a book and go out and read it, so I was looking at books I didn't know..." **Andy**

Indeed, there was a small minority of participants who did not specifically set out to find previously read books at all, so this is not a universal behaviour:

"...of course, there were some books there that I'd read and some books that I hadn't, but I didn't specifically set out to find either category." **Jenny**

"I looked at a few reviews of books that I'd read, but mostly I looked at books I hadn't read and browsing, rather than searching for a specific book." **Sarah**

There is also a possibility that in some cases participants may search known titles for other reasons than judging whether tastes match, as in the following cases, so one mustn't be too quick to suppose that assume that it is the default strategy for establishing trust:

"I don't know about the vast majority of books... there's just so much I wouldn't know where to go or what to look for, so I'm more likely to go for the kind of stuff I've already heard of..." **Laura**

"And Bookcrossing, because I found it hard to browse... I didn't know which category to look into, so once again I looked for Tracy Chevalier, because I've read two of hers..." **Liz**

4.1.4: Honesty and Pretention

Having established that in most cases participants found matters of reliability- that the opinions of reviewers synchronised with their own- more important that matters of honesty- whether or not the opinions expressed were true- we are now going to move on to a few select instances when the veracity of reviewers was in fact doubted.

One instance in which participant's often doubted the truthfulness of reviewers was when they suspected the reviewers of pretentiousness and showing off their literary skill. None of the reviews on the websites surveyed was accused of this; in fact, some participants praised some websites for a lack of pretention.

"...I'd trust the fact that they actually liked it and not just because it was a good book to like, or it was very critically acclaimed and they were just saying they liked it because it was the thing to do..." **Laura**

"...I quite liked them, there weren't any NME [New Musical Express] style reviews, you know the NME have reviews that are stupid, 'I'm going to make myself look really clever'..." **Jenny**

"...with certain friends who recommend a book and you think, 'You're recommending that book because you're a bit pretentious, you think that by me reading it and you saying you've managed to read it, you're one up on me'..." **Kate**

A variation of this, brought up by Dawn, was the feeling that, for whatever reason, some reviewers shied away from writing negative reviews of books, thus skewing their reviews in favour of books and making the review less useful for selecting books.

"...do people chose not to make negative comments on books or what... the thing I like about *The Guardian* is that it's not scared to say if something is atrocious..." **Dawn**

One sin of which certain reviewers on Bookcrossing were accused in a couple of cases, however, was recycling Amazon synopses or back cover blurb as their review.

"...they gave an Amazon review first of all, and then the people's opinions, again, it was nice to get both, I suppose it was a bit of a cop out to use someone else's review..." **Laura**

"...I think there was one , it just had the back of the book, I dunno, it was quite useful, but if you were in a bookshop, you could just pick it up and read it, there wasn't anything new or any of their comments." **Caroline**

Neither participant seemed particularly indignant at this recycling, merely that it is not quite sporting, but there is a feeling that by not adding anything new to pre-existing information, the review does not help the user in selecting new books, which defeats the purpose of the review.

4.2: "Jack Random"-Knowledge and Experience

"If I know them, the word of mouth thing, a friend or a family member, that makes me trust their opinion more. But not much apart from that. You don't know someone, just reading Jack Random's book review on the Internet, I think you've got to take it with a pinch of salt." **Laura**

"But if it was just some Joe Bloggs in the street saying 'You should read this', then I wouldn't pay attention..." **Liz**

The factor that influenced trust that came up again and again from all the participants was the matter of familiarity with the source providing the information. Most often the source was an individual, although websites and other media were occasionally mentioned. The question that must be asked is why: does this trust simply stem from long use and habit, or is there a more complex reason for it?

Nevertheless, reviews and recommendations were also often valued because they provided access to unfamiliar material, or because they allowed the user to select books for people other than themselves. These factors are not incompatible: one can have a trusted familiar source that provides information about new material; indeed, several participants cited that as one of the reasons they used a particular source (4.2.2).

4.2.1: Knowing the Source and Knowing the Material

So why is it that users prefer to make use of a known source? To begin with in this subsection, we shall look at individuals, before moving onto websites and other media.

Looking at the interview transcripts, it quite quickly becomes clear that for most of the participants simply knowing an individual is not necessarily enough to rely on their recommendations:

"And I have sometimes got books that other friends have suggested, but invariably when they suggest a book, I won't like it. I have a friend called Lisa who I always thought had a very similar taste to me... she suggested about twenty books, and I've only liked one." **Andy**

"...I'd just read *A Life of Pi* and enjoyed it, and a friend said 'Oh, you'll probably enjoy *The Rotter's Club*' and I couldn't stand it." **Dawn**

"...I wouldn't go to certain people, you know, and ask what they're reading, because I know I wouldn't like the book." **Jenny**

What does seem to be crucial is that the participant knows the reading tastes of the friend or family member and vice versa.

"I would trust friends and family who recommend books to me, especially if Know their taste in reading and I think it's similar to my own... if someone's got similar interests or a similar sense of humour, even, that's the main reason for trusting word of mouth." **Sarah**

"So just people who know me, and know what sort of books I like, and roughly similar tastes too, I suppose." **Jenny**

"...there are some friends... if they said 'This is a great book, you'll like it, then I'd take it, because a) we've had enough conversations to know that we've got quite a lot of taste in common; and b), they know me well enough to say 'You should read this book' and the chances are it's something I like." **Caroline**

"...if people know what I kind of like reading, then I'll go with what they think... If it's from a friend, someone I know, I don't need much description at all, I'll trust it on what they've said and it's not been wrong so far..." **Liz**

"...there is one person who we kind of do often on... we both like very similar things, or we can find something, so that even if we don't like the whole book, we can find something in it that we like." **Dawn**

"I think I would trust friends most of all, friends I know quite well... because you know why they've said what they've said." **Kate**

"My Mum's opinions I really trust and she knows my tastes very well, she'll say 'Ah, I really enjoyed this. You'll hate it.'. And I'll probably read it and go 'Yeah, I do.'. So my

parents are very good, their tastes are quite different, I'm more like my Dad..." **Naomi**

It is interesting to note that while some of the participants, such as Sarah, Caroline and Dawn, say that the trusted source must have the same tastes as them, Naomi at least trusts a source, her mother, who clearly has different tastes, but whom she knows well enough to understand why she likes a particular book, even if Naomi does not like that book herself. So this is not always a case of simply seeking out sources that share a common opinion with the user (4.1.2). It is also a two-way process; because the source knows the user, they understand why the user likes the books they do and so the user can trust they will not recommend books the user will not enjoy. This mutual understanding may be something that no online or newspaper book reviewer could ever hope to achieve.

It does seem that this trust must be earned; it takes time and experience to build up an effective idea of someone's tastes and to develop a rapport, and some of the participants mention this process as being important:

"...[I trust them] after I've read a number of books that they've recommended to me or had a lot of conversations about books and stuff..." **Caroline**

"With the friend it's built up over a number of successful hits with books and vice versa, them liking books that I've recommended..." **Dawn**

Interviewer: "Well, what makes you trust someone?"

Andy: "Practice. Practice makes perfect."

As in the case of Naomi above, a number of the participants cited their parents- generally both of them, and in Andy's case including a step-parent- as a trusted source of recommendations about books. This may be a mark of the relatively young age of most of the participants, but it also seems to tally with the fact that parents were a group that the participants discussed books with more often than most.

"...I chat to people about books that I've enjoyed, especially to my Dad, because I think we both have quite similar tastes, so we'll recommend books to each other..." **Sarah**

"The nearest thing I got was my step-father and my mother, I lived with them a while and we talked about books a lot... I can trust my step-father's opinion very much, he

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has very similar tastes to me... And I found my Mum was very similar... that's one reason I would trust her, is because she knows me." **Andy**

"...I know that if my Dad were to recommend a book, it would be quite historically detailed, and quite complex and challenging, but if my Mum recommends a book, I know it's going to have a really, really good story.... So I would trust both of their opinions, but in different ways..." **Kate**

Once again, with the parents, we seem to have a division between participants who trust them because they share a reading taste and those who trust them because they understand the parents' taste and so can judge why they like a given book.

Reviewers on websites- and indeed newspapers- are at something of a disadvantage here, compared to friends and family. Although they do often have an identity by which they can be searched out and recognised, this is not always so prominent as to make them easy to find again or to remember between editions or visits, and websites do not seem to make use of a 'search for reviewer' facility. It may even be the case that users do not register the fact of the reviewer's name, and instead think of the review as belonging to the website, newspaper or other publishing body instead. Certainly there was only one participants who said that they had identified and actively sought out specific reviewers.

"...you begin to find there are certain individuals that you trust [on Amazon]...*The Guardian* does this quite a bit, it has section where it writes reviewers' lists of top ten books, and that is lovely because if you like a reviewer and trust a reviewer... you can go down and read their reviews..." **Andy**

Andy was probably the heaviest user of Amazon, and it may well have taken him time to build up his knowledge of the reviewers on it. More common were participants who acknowledged that being unable to keep track of individual reviewers in the media:

"...if you're looking at these sites and it's not the same people, it's very hard to find the same reviewer again..." **Liz**

"...on Amazon, I think, I've never gone to the extent of identifying the users, you know, comparing them between books..." **Caroline**

"When I read the Sunday Newspapers, I don't remember the names of the individual reviewers..." **Jenny**

Cases where participants said that they trusted a particular website or other media source because of long experience of it were somewhat rarer. Considering that many of the participants had not used many or all of these websites expressly for reviews before, however, this is not wholly surprising, and prior good experiences- or even just long use- were cited by some participants as a reason why they made use that particular website, in both cases the well-known Amazon.

"I like Amazon because I know Amazon, I've probably spent more time on Amazon than any of the other ones." **Kate**

"I have to say that I find Amazon a very good site... it is very, very often my first port of call to find information about a book, because I know my way around a site as much as anything else..." **Caroline**

Of course, it may be that trust did not enter into the situation, and it was merely that the participants were using the website out of habit and because prior experience enabled them to achieve what they wanted from the site more quickly and easily. In which case, it may be necessary to separate out familiarity with the reviewers from familiarity with the website that publishes their work. However, from a comment Kate made later about Whichbook, it could that they were referring the way successful hits and good experience help to build up trust:

"But again, if I did actually follow through and get one of the books that was recommended and found it useful, then I would probably trust it more. It's just that I haven't read a book as a result of it, probably." **Kate**

In this case at least, she is acknowledging that one reason she is trusting the reliability of this website less is because she had not yet gained the experience of whether Whichbook.net's reviews provide her with books she wants to read.

4.2.2: Book Reviews as a Way to New Knowledge and Experience

One thing a book review can do is provide a user with knowledge of a book or resource they were hitherto unfamiliar with. This can be one reason users make use of a known and trusted source as described in the previous subsection, 4.2.1; because the source knows the user well, they can

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suggest new material that they can be confident the user will enjoy. This bond of trust can bring the user on to new material.

"..my boyfriend's quite good, he's suggested lots of things like *Preacher,* things I wouldn't have read before..." **Jenny**

"...he has very similar tastes to me, a similar level of reading ability, and yet he has a totally different idea of the genres and types that he likes, so that he brought me into a whole new world, which was interesting." **Andy**

However, given that the idea of book reviews is to recommend a new book to a user, surprisingly few participants said that they used book reviews specifically to find new and unfamiliar material. Those that did tended to be those participants- Dawn, Naomi, and Andy- who made the greatest use of book reviews, either online or in newspapers and magazines. Presumably, the other participants are learning about new books by other means.

"I do like to find new titles... say you go into a library or Waterstone's, it's not that easy, the sort of books that I like, to find new titles... if I hadn't been looking at book reviews I would never have found that..." **Dawn**

"...one is for fiction, to find new things I hadn't thought of..." **Naomi**

"General awareness... I do like to get an idea out of what's going on out there." **Andy**

Having said this, other participants were aware that book reviews could be useful for finding new material, even if they did not use them for that purpose themselves:

"Yes, but at least it [Whichbook.net] was a good way to find things you would never have heard of in the right sort of area of what you like to read... I don't use book reviews to choose my books at the moment" **Liz**

"So I don't normally look for reviews for stuff that I'm going to read, but I might force myself to look at reviews to get myself interested, to try to look at something different-

doesn't always work." **Laura**

There was one instance of a participant mentioning that opposite was helpful, that a new, unfamiliar reviewer helped shed light on a book of which they were already aware; the review was useful precisely because it was unlike the user's, and sheds entirely new light on the book:

"I looked at a [review of] popular science book, it was written by... someone who was obviously not a scientist... I've got a science background, but they looked at it almost as a story, which was fascinating... because it made me realise that it was probably quite a readable book, which was a help..." **Andy**

However, this was a lone example, and as we have previously seen (4.1.2 & 4.1.3), participants generally sought out opinions and viewpoints that matched their own. However, we have also seen the participants often liked a wide selection of reviews to read (3.4.2), so it may be that these odd views can be useful in the context of other, closer opinions in the fresh aspects of the book they reveal.

4.2.3: Book Reviews and Books for Others

A phenomena worth noting is that two participants, Kate and Mary, said that they used book review more to select books for others than for themselves.

"I quite often think of them as presents... I'm more likely to read a review and think 'I know someone who'd like that book' and buy it for them, than go out and get it for myself... if it's not me reading it, I'm quite happy to trust someone else." **Kate**

"...if getting a book as a gift I might be more likely to look at reviews because your own opinion is so subjective, and it might be quite good to see what other people have, like, said and try- I mean, with some of the longer reviews you get a sense of the person, so you can think 'Is this similar to the person I'm buying the book for?'. I guess for me, as well, if I'm buying a book I'll be more careful..." **Mary**

In the case of Mary, she does seem to be using the reviews partly as a second opinion, to balance out her own personal feelings about the book and get a more accurate view. However, what

we see in both instances is that each of them, because they know their friends and their tastes, can recognise those qualities in the book that the friend will like when they read the review (4.2.1). Why they trust the reviews more for gifts than for books for themselves is not clear; possibly it is the thought that counts, so the occasional mismatch of book and recipient can be permitted. However, Laura said she found this matching of books to other people a difficult process

"I don't normally look for reviews for books for other people; I don't normally buy books for other people unless they expressly say they want one. I find it quite difficult to buy books for other people." **Laura**

Please note that Laura finds it hard to choose books for others and that stops her looking at reviews, rather than that she does try to use reviews for that purpose but does not find them useful. Without additional assistance or encouragement, book reviews will not make the process easier for her.

The only other participant who said that they used book reviews for others was Andy, who used them to look for books as gifts for his nephew:

"...if I'm going to buy him a children's book, I do try to make sure that I'm going to buy a children's book that's meant to be good for children and help them learn and help them educate, but also be funny and make them laugh... so I do use book reviews for children's books..." **Andy**

Here Andy is using the reviews to select a type of books of which he is unlikely to have had much personal experience.

4.3: Quality of Reviews and Reviewers

Reader reviews can be written by practically anyone, which means that their can be a broad variety of writing ability (4.3.1) and insight on offer (4.3.2). We saw in Chapter 3 how users like reviews to contain certain features, but also that reviewers did not always include those features, leading to less helpful reviews. It would seem logical that a more able, experienced and thoughtful reviewer would produce a better review, and some websites do include features that do encourage better review-writing: do users believe that this is needed (4.3.3)? Of course, if users do not care that greatly about the issue, then making the review-writing process more complex may be counter-productive in that it discourages users from posting reviews in the first place. This section will first look at written quality of the reviews themselves, before going on to look at the literary knowledge and insight of the reviewers themselves, and how much time and effort the reviewers are prepared to put in.

4.3.1: Quality of Reviews: The Need for Good Spelling and Grammar

One feature that participants mentioned as being important in establishing trust was the review itself, and the need for it to possess good grammar, spelling and vocabulary, although this was usually expressed the other way around, as poor grammar, spelling and vocabulary repelling users.

"When they misspell things and bad grammar... it puts you off reading any more of the review." **Liz**

"Quite cliched as well, you get a lot of 'Oh, I couldn't put it down' or 'The new Dan Brown', or something like that, because people aren't very imaginative in book reviews" **Jenny**

"...ones that are all spelt correctly, you know, with good grammar and well-constructed sentences, and you think 'Someone's put time and effort into this', whereas some of them are written hastily, and full of typos and things like that...I would put a bit less store in what those people were saying, rather than the ones who have obviously sort of sat down and thought about it." **Caroline**

Caroline links the quality of the writing directly to the thought and effort that has gone into the review, so it is possible that the writing is taken as an indicator of the quality of the writer (4.3.3), rather than an end in itself. Equally, the use of cliches that Jenny mentions may make a review less helpful because it makes the opinions less individualistic and explicit, although it is worth saying that

Jenny does enjoy reading reviews for entertainment, so it may simply be that cliches make for dull reading:

> "I just like reading book reviews, because I think they're literature in themselves..." **Jenny**

4.3.2: Quality of Reviewers: Professionalism and Quality Control

Having looked at the quality of the writing in a review, we shall now look at the quality of the reviewers themselves, in the sense of the intelligence and expertise of the reviewer and the systems in place on the website that highlight or favour reviews by the reviewers who are perceived as being higher quality. One of the initial research questions that drove this project was an interest to see whether users accepted lay reviewers in the same way as professional reviewers, and whether the quality-control measures some websites used were found to be helpful. Six of the ten participants did indeed talk about matters of professionalism and quality-control, but their comments fail almost entirely to tally about what is important in the matter.

Only one participant, Naomi, specifically mentioned favouring professional reviewers over reader reviews, although she does seem a little embarrassed at the fact:

> "...this is probably really snooty of me and quite snobby, and I hadn't realised it until you asked me, but I do tend to take the reviews in newspapers and magazines more seriously, probably because if they're in a newspaper or magazine, they've gone through an editorial process and may have written it and re-written it several times..." **Naomi**

From this we can see that the presence of editorial quality-control is of great importance to Naomi in raising her trust of professional reviews above reader reviews, although the effort that put in is clearly also an issue (4.3.3) as well as, as we shall see later in this subsection, the professional reviewers' literary knowledge and expertise. This was the only time a participant expressed a preference for the printed press, although comments from two other participants did suggest that they might put a greater value on the word of expert reviewers:

> "Also, if they're a novelist I like, saying a book is good, I do try it. Sometimes I'm disappointed, sometimes I'm not." **Andy**

"...on that site [Ask Chris], the thing I really liked was the bit where you could go and look at what Raghi Omar said about reading, and Will Self, specifically...the fact that you could go and read the professionals', so to speak, reviews..." **Dawn**

From this it is not entirely clear what exactly it is Andy and Dawn valued about these 'professional' sources.

Equally, it is clear that the obverse is true; users may but less faith in reviews produced by the general public because there is no guarantee of the reviewer's ability; Bookcrossing was often criticised in this respect.

"...nobody is trained to do it, they're not an authority in any way whatsoever, they're just someone who, like you did earlier, might have picked something up off a bench..." **Naomi**

"...so there could be a problem with the reviewers that you get, it could be a simple case that you get on a bus, you pick up a book and start reading it, you have no idea what the quality of that person is..." **Andy**

Now both participants seem concerned at the fact that anyone could write a review- rather surprising in light of the fact that Naomi is a Bookcrosser herself- the fact that a Bookcrossing book could be picked up by anyone and so encourage them to write a review does seem to be a particular bother. This attitude was not just confined to Bookcrossing, however: Andy criticises Ask Chris for being so easy to write reviews on (5.2.2).

"I tried writing a review on Ask Chris, which was incredibly easy... that does mean that pretty much anyone could write a review, which could give rather a wide cross-section of public views, and not give you a better-[corrects self] a good idea of what you're reading..." **Andy**

Andy is a heavy user of Amazon reviews, and so may have simply found the unfamiliarity of a different system a problematic when he applied his normal behaviour to it. However, Andy's comments about the lack of quality of control on Ask Chris is interesting in the light of Jenny's surprise that Ask Chris had so little quality-control, so impressed was she by the standards of reviews.

"Ask Chris seems to have a lot of quality control... I'm surprised, then, that it's just members of the general public. I think they must certainly have some form of quality control." **Jenny**

Now, of course, it may be that the two participants are looking for different things in a review and this is what is causing them to disagree, but an interesting thought is that the perception of quality and quality control of a website may well be subjective and coloured by their prejudices. As we shall see, Jenny is suspicious of commercial websites and favours public ones (4.4); Andy is very much attached to the Amazon format of review. It may be that both project their prejudices on the websites, seeing them as lower or higher quality because they want them too. We might also have the example of Sarah, who disliked Amazon and suspected some of its reviews to have been planted there, citing their lack of emotion as a cause (3.3.1), the only participant to do so: did the lack of emotion cause her to suspect the website, or did her suspicions of the website cause her to see a lack of emotions? If users' prejudices do flavour their view of the quality of reviews, this may make the job of those designing or running a book review website that much harder, because it will be more difficult to get an idea of how credible their reviews genuinely are. Set against this, of course, is the fact that some participants found they liked and trusted websites they explored in the study of which they had previously been suspicious, as Dawn and Naomi did with Amazon (4.4.1), so prior prejudices do not decide everything.

Returning to the subject of professionalism and quality of the writers, why did the participants find it important? What did they mean exactly when they talked about it? Naomi discussed this, a topic she was clearly passionate about, at length:

"[I trust]...this sounds a bit snooty, it's not meant to be-I was going to say someone well-educated, but I wouldn't quite say that, someone who is involved with writing about books and thinking about books. So a journalist, a professional reviewer, I would trust them, or an academic, because I just know that they've read a lot and they'll have thought a lot about what they read, and they know what to think about when doing a review... they have to be intelligent, thinking a lot and reading a lot, and with these anonymous online reviews, there's no guarantee of that." **Naomi**

Once again, the question of who much effort and thought is raised (4.3.3), but it is also clear that she values the knowledge and experience that these professionals bring to reviewing, both of books and of writing about them. As she was the only participant to speak about this, it is hard to gauge whether other participants felt the same ideas but did not voice them. However, Jenny mentioned that she did value the opinions of two of her friends because the had read more books than her and had a better knowledge of what was available, but she appears to value this because she feels

it would reduce bias, rather than leading to a more informative review:

> "...I would go for someone who had really wide tastes, that would be my best friend Suzanne and my boyfriend Mike, they in reading groups and they're both better read than me... because they read so widely, I know they won't have any bias..." **Jenny**

Another reason which other participants mentioned was professional reviews, or at least professional involvement, gave the website a less chaotic and more standardised feel to the website, and made it more effective and easier to use:

> "I felt I trusted the Ask Chris one, because it said it was done by librarians and sort of professional people... I prefer it when it had been organised a bit more by somebody external..." **Kate**

> "[Whichbook] was by far and away the best... a good review, and structured, exactly what I want from a review, it wasn't like 'I like it, it was good, I enjoyed the bit where such-and-such.', and it wasn't just somebody's subjective thing... I would say that it was a more subjective way of doing it..." **Dawn**

Having seen that the quality of the reviewer does matter to some users at least, did any of the participants notice the quality-control measures the websites put in place, and did they increase their trust in the reviews? Some measures were indeed noted:

> "...you saw little disclaimers there, like 'Inappropriate stuff will be removed, and that, I quite liked that." **Kate**

> "...I did try to submit one, and they do give a little thing that gives you guidelines, and they do tell you what you should do, which is a really good way of standardising it..." **Naomi**

There were comparatively few comments about quality-control measures, however, so it may not have weighed heavily on the minds of many of the participants. Naomi's comment about the guidelines is interesting, because later she and Andy talk about making reviews harder to write

improves their quality (5.2.2); the only two participants who suggest that quality-controls would make a website more intimidating and more difficult to use are in favour of them for that very reason; they prefer quality to ease-of-use. No-one else addressed this matter.

The quality-control measure that was mentioned most often was Amazon's star-rating for reviewers, although even this passed most participants by. As can be expected, Andy, as a heavy Amazon user, was in particular favour of this and missed its absence on other websites:

"...I find the reviews by the four or five star people can be quite good, they tend to give you a lot of detail, they tend to give you plot and characters, development through the story, whether it's well-written... with Ask Chris, it doesn't seem to have a star rating, it's difficult to distinguish whether you've got a good reviewer or a bad reviewer... they were literally date-ordered, which doesn't really help, you don't know what you're reading..." **Andy**

"I mean, especially if you've got one of the main reviewer things there, they were really very good..." **Caroline**

However, they were the only participants who believed that the star-rating of reviews makes it easier to find a good review. Like Andy, Caroline was another regular user of Amazon, and it may be that, unlike other participants who were not so familiar with, or enthusiastic about, Amazon, they had enough experience of success with the starred reviews to place more trust in them. If it is necessary to spend time building up trust of such a system, website-designers must be aware that such a system will not have an immediate effect on users and may not secure new users in itself.

4.3.3: Quality of Reviewers: Thought, Time and Effort

Sometimes the quality of the reviewer was expressed as the amount of time and thought the participant believed they had put into writing a review. We have already seen Caroline express a preference for reviewers who appear to have put effort into their work (4.3.1), and she is not alone in this, although as in the previous subsection (4.3.2), only about half the participants expressed any feelings on this, and once again those who did express an opinion often did so at length.

"But I think with the websites, the ones I would trust would be the ones who appear

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to have really read the book and thought about it a bit as well." **Mary**

"I was really astonished with the good quality of these Amazon reviews... they gave the impression of having given it a lot of thought, put it that way, and not just hammering any old thing out..." **Naomi**

What Andy and Naomi both mention is Amazon's more complex system for writing reviews as an inducement to putting more thought into reviews, simply on the grounds that because it was that much more difficult, only those who really wanted to write a book review would be bothered to do so:

"...but I suppose what that tends to mean is that you tend to mean is that you get reviews where people have to sit down and think about the book, rather than someone who just says 'It was great.'..." **Andy**

"Amazon, like I said, were of a much better quality, and I do trust them, because you do have to go to quite a lot of trouble to submit a review..." **Naomi**

However, Andy does find the complexity of the Amazon review-writing process quite irritating when he is writing, as opposed to reading, reviews (5.2.2), so boosting the difficulty of the writing process may prove to be a two-edged sword.

4.4: Commercial and Public

One of the key research questions considered when this dissertation was first conceived was whether or not users' trust of online reviews was influenced by the nature of the organisation that produced it. Would users feel that websites produced by private companies somehow tainted with commerce? Equally, would they feel that websites produced by libraries and other public bodies were more altruistic in their objectives and therefore more likely to be favoured? As listed in the introduction (1.1.2), there have been many co-operative promotions and ventures between libraries and private companies, whether in the book trade or not, so that in practice there is little or no conflict between the two groups and their aims are not opposed. In addition, most of the actual reviews posted on the selected websites are posted by independent individuals who have chosen to affiliate themselves with the website, rather than by employees of the organisation who created it. However, this does not mean that users will not have prejudices towards both bodies which cause them to place more or less trust in the information they provide, despite the information coming from the common source of individual readers.

However, attitudes to the issue of commercially- and publicly-created websites proved to be complex and sometimes contradictory; distrust does not always mean reviews were never used, nor does trust mean that a website would be seriously used. The opinions of individual participants often differed widely from each other.

Of course, it must be noted that the sample used in this study consisted wholly of library and information study students, all of whom were members of at least one public library, so there is a distinct possibility that they may be more biased than is typical in the general population towards the websites produced by public libraries. There is also a possibility that having studied libraries and information issues in depth, these students may have a more considered and less dogmatic view of the role of public and private bodies than is usual.

4.4.1: Distrust and Commercial Sources

Interestingly, several of the participants did indeed voice suspicions towards Amazon. While Bookcrossing did attract numerous complaints, these all focused on its structure and reviewing policy and no-one commented on its origins in a commercial software company, although there is a possibility that not all the participants may have fully taken in the information on the Instruction Sheet and so may not have realised. Evidentially it was the overtly retail nature of the Amazon website that attracted comment.

Hostile attitudes towards Amazon seemed to follow several different themes. One suspicion was that some users held was that Amazon may have planted favourable reviews by its employees to

boost the appeal of books.

"What if it's a big ploy to make us buy books?... .I always think, what if they've been planted there, which I know isn't likely, but sometimes I worry about that." **Jenny**

"It's not always clear who's writing the review, and because they've obviously trying to make money, I do sometimes think is this someone from Amazon, writing this rave review, I'm sure that's just me being cynical..." **Sarah**

Two common factors in both these statements is that distrust is directly linked to the retail aspects of the websites, and that both women are conscious that their suspicions are most likely unfounded and due to prejudice. Sarah may also have been influenced by a perceived lack of emotion in the reviews (4.1.3). However, both of them had used Amazon in the past to look up information on books and browsed the reviews for entertainment, although Jenny specifically mentioned not writing a book review partly because:

"For Amazon, I didn't fancy it because of the commercial aspect." **Jenny**

So while such prejudices do not necessarily prevent a user making use of a website, they may confine them from making full use of all its facilities, perhaps because they feel they are actively collaborating in helping it sell items. It may be that making more passive use of the website as a source of information does not raise such feelings, but that may require further study to make certain.

Of course, such suspicions are not merely confined to websites. For example:

"[I use]...newspapers a bit, I suppose, but then you never really know whether it's the publisher's comments or something, it's not very accurate" **Mary**

"Occasionally I'll go into the the dreaded Waterstone's and read their book reviews, I think they're quite interesting, even though I'm sure some people, like Jenny, would say 'Total fool'! " **Sarah**

"I don't pay attention to billboards when they're advertising books... it won't register in any way and I'll forget it, and they'll always say "Brilliant Read!'." **Liz**

However, these were the only such comments made about an information source other than a website, possibly because, as Sarah said above, it is much harder to verify the identity of writers online, or because there are so fewer hurdles that must be passed to write a review. It is also worth noting that despite voicing some apprehensions, Mary and Sarah still make use of the resources they criticised.

Even more interestingly, some comments focused on the policy the Amazon used to select which reviews were pasted on the front page: in other words, the trustworthiness of the reviews and the identity of the reviewers themselves was not questioned , but there were suspicions that Amazon may have manipulated the selection of reviews to produce a more favourable view of the books and so make them more attractive to potential buyers.

"You don't know which ones they've chosen to put on the front page." **Caroline**

"I suppose there are really questions about what they give you first of all, because you read three good ones initially and think 'Oh good, I'll get that', you really don't know what else is there." **Kate**

However, such suspicions do not necessarily mean that a user will be hostile to a website. Having commented about wondering if the selection of reviews on Amazon had been tampered with to produce a favourable bias towards the books in an effort to sell them, Kate goes on to say:

"I trusted the Amazon one, it's only just now that I've thought about them trying to sell things to use... I think it's people who've genuinely read the book, and are saying, you're on Amazon, you're probably going to buy something, here's one." **Kate**

Kate has become aware that Amazon is designed to sell books and other media products to her, but can accept the validity of the reviews in that context and differentiates between the website and the reviewers. It may be a factor that she has used reviews from Amazon before and been satisfied with the results:

"...I've bought pop music [from Amazon] I've not heard before but trusted the reviews and it's worked out." **Kate**

Likewise, Caroline was a keen user of Amazon, as was mentioned above (4.2.1). Familiarity and good experiences with a website may well work to reduce hostility and mistrust of commercial websites, although possibly only in these cases where the users believe the company has merely manipulated the reviews, rather than actually written them. In this case it may be worth noting that Jenny also makes this distinction, but remained distrustful:

"...People are doing the book reviews because they want to, but reviews on a commercial website will always be slightly sort of iffy" **Jenny**

But in a similar vein, distrust of a commercial website can be mitigated by a high standard of reviews. Naomi and Dawn had both only used Amazon to a small extent for shopping before, but were both deeply impressed by the website because the high standards of the reviews; Dawn, in particular, mentioned that this high quality overcame distrust of commercial aspects.

"I thought they [the reviews] were really good, I remember being really surprised by the sheer quality of them... so I think I rated it highly and I'll use it again for reviews" **Naomi**

"In most cases the reviews I think were spot on... I would have taken into account the actual reviews, in future I will do ...it's more the fact that it is primarily trying to sell books, as opposed to just reviews for reviews' sake, so I think probably that's why I've shied away from it a bit...[but] I've started to change my opinion of it.." **Dawn**

Finally, some participants distinguished between different commercial organisations, and objected specifically to Amazon, rather than book retailers in general.

"I buy books in bookstores, if I were to buy them. I've only used Amazon to check details... because it's so big, and it's this huge Internet thing that everyone talks about, 'Oh, Amazon', and I don't like that way of buying books anyway, and I wouldn't use it for reviews." **Liz**

Liz went on to say that she made use of Play.com, another Internet media retailer, so it is obviously not simply Internet shopping to which she objects. It is interesting to bear in mind that the reviews posted in-store by employees of Waterstone's- hardly a small, local retailer, although only a national one, as opposed to the international Amazon- were a popular source of information about books, even with those who distrusted Amazon, as we have seen with Sarah.

"I like the way books are laid out, primarily in bookshops... when they give you a little 'staff in the store enjoyed'. I've several times bought books as a result of that and always found them enjoyable." **Kate**

"I quite like the new system at Waterstone's where... the people who work there recommend... you've got books recommended that you wouldn't necessarily know were there." **Dawn**

"When I go into Waterstone's, I tend to head straight for the ones with little labels underneath, I like them, I tend to trust them, I know they work in a bookshop... but they have at least read books, haven't they? So they roughly know what they're talking about, and I quite often buy books based on their reviews, which obviously does work for me." **Andy**

Andy's comments do reveal some small misgivings about the commercial aspects, but both he and Dawn mention mitigating factors- introducing new titles (4.2.3) and professional knowledge (4.3.2)- that might been seen as outweighing any distrust. Once more, potential distrust of commercial activity is far from being the sole motivating factor in users' trust of websites.

4.4.2: Trust and Public Sources

Having established that, however ambivalent and intricate it might be, there is some prejudice against overtly commercial online book reviews, is there any corresponding prejudice for those websites created by public libraries? The participant sample, composed as it was of library students, might well be expected to have such a bias. As it was, only two of the participants mentioned liking websites- both cases Whichbook.net- expressly because they originated in public libraries:

"...Whichbook, which had the librarians in, which being a librarian, I would trust anyway [laughs]..." **Sarah**

" Whichbook... the fact that it was linking up to libraries thing seemed very

trustworthy." **Kate**

It must be said here that Kate had just said she had misgivings about the reliability of Whichbook's reviews because they were so short (3.5), so her trust of the website was not total or without qualms; a public origin will not excuse faults elsewhere. Sarah's statement could also be taken to mean that she trusted the website because it was written by professionals (4.3.2), rather than that it was publicly-funded. This was as far as any overt bias towards the public library websites went; it is conceivable that the reason that there was more feeling the opposite way, against commercial websites, might be that those users' who distrusted it often felt the commercial aspects subverted the aim of the book reviews in helping them choose new books (4.4.1). If an online book review website is plainly doing its job, then presumably there is no need to be distrustful, whatever its origins.

One cause for concern, however, is that the public library websites may have been used less as reference tools for locating fresh books to read as an enjoyable but frivolous way to pass the time.

"It was, to be honest, a bit of a play around for both of them, because I think they're so much fun to use. But, yeah, more fun than actually seriously looking for books to buy or borrow." **Sarah**

"Amazon I use most often... whereas the other websites I thought looked interesting but I don't really use, they're more for fun, really." **Caroline**

"Whichbook I'd played with for quite a few hours... it was more just playing around with silly combinations... just whiling away time." **Susan**

Unfortunately, in the form it possessed, the study was not ideally designed for precisely measuring website use; participants can not be expected to remember in any great detail for what purpose and for how long they used a given website after what may well be weeks or months from the event. In addition, the participants who said that they used a website did not always quantify their use of their website and the researcher was not aware of this factor until the interviews were already well underway, so not all the participants were asked about it. Participants may not even be terribly precise as to how they define fun or frivolous use: even if using a website purely for entertainment, suggestions for possible books to read may be being planted in users' minds and so it may be fulfilling a useful purpose. And, of course, Amazon does have an additional purpose to providing reviews- it also sells books- and all but one of the participants had used it to purchase books or other media. If using it to buy things, participants may well feel their use of it is more purposeful and less frivolous as compared to a website that purely provides book reviews. The situation is potentially worrying, but needs much more clarification.

4.5: Discussion and Conclusion

Participants in this study all trusted the opinions of reviewers in the sense that they were the genuine opinions of the reviewers (4.1.1); in other words, all they distinguished between trust in the sense of reliability in providing useful information, and trust in the sense of veracity and mendacity.

Some participants did voice suspicions about possible commercial influence leading to a bias in favour of the books (4.4.1), but this did not seem to be sufficient to actually make them stop using the websites in question. Some participants also noted that some reviewers might express an untrue opinion to look clever, but this was not something of which they believed any of the reviewers they found on the websites in the study was guilty (4.1.4); it was merely a potential problem of which to be aware. A couple of participants also commented on some reviewers' habits of importing other people's reviews into their own, but these participants seemed more bemused than concerned about this.

Because they generally believed they had no cause to doubt the veracity of reviewers, the participants tended to focus on trust in the sense of being reliable as a guide to new books. This meant that there seems to be a general feeling that a trustworthy reviewer was one whose opinions closely matched the participant's (4.1.2), who might be seen to enjoy similar qualities in a book and so be a reliable guide. Indeed, a common tactic deployed on many websites was to look for reviews about books that the participant had already read, thereby providing a gauge as to how closely the reviewers' opinions matched those of the user (4.1.3). However, there were two participants who did not deliberately set out to do this, and others only did so because they found difficulties in browsing certain websites or as part of a more general and holistic exploration of a new website, so it is not a universal behaviour.

The participants did seem to put a lot of trust in sources of information they knew well (4.2.1); this tended to be friends and family rather than websites and other media sources, as there were several participants who said that they found it difficult to track individual reviewers across websites and newspapers. Moreover, this tended to be particular individuals- often parents- rather than family and friends in general, and this trust was built up through experience of successful recommendations. by that person. Interestingly, while some participants said that they trusted these known sources because they shared a common taste with them, others said that for some known sources, although their tastes differed, their mutual knowledge of each other's likes and dislikes was sufficient to make accurate recommendations. This intimate knowledge is something no reviewer, amateur or professional, could hope to match, and may well be one reason that friends and family proved to be such a popular source of information on reading. However, intimate knowledge of friends' reading preferences allowed some participants to select books for those friends from book reviews because they could recognise those qualities which their friends enjoyed from the review (4.2.3).

Only a handful of participants explicitly said that they used books reviews to find new books (4.2.2), although others recognised that reviews could be used for this. These three individuals-Naomi, Andy and Dawn- also tended to those with the most to say about the quality of reviewers (4.3.2 & 4.3.3). Other participants did comment on these issues, but it was these specific individuals who explained their feelings in the greatest depth. Naomi and Andy in particular were willing to make reviews harder to write if it would boost the quality of the resultant reviews by excluding casual or lazy reviewers (4.3.3 & 5.2.2). This issue was not addressed by other participants, so it is impossible to know how widespread such feelings were, or if they only felt that way because they relied more heavily on book reviews to select books than other participants. If online book reviews do provide an outlet for user's views on books (5.1), then making them harder to write may be counter-productive.

However, other participants did also express views on the quality of reviews and reviewers. Three participants mentioned that they automatically distrusted poorly-written or cliched reviews (4.3.1), possibly because it was a sign that little time and thought had gone into writing the review, although few reasons were given. Only Naomi said that she preferred professional reviews to reader reviews, because of their superior expertise in writing and knowledge of books and the editorial process increased her trust, although other participants seemed to appreciate professional involvement in a website because it made the website better organised and easier to use (4.3.2). A minority of participants commented on measures to improve the quality of reader reviews, always favourably, although it may be that other participants did not mention them because they were not aware of them whilst taking part in the study, so it is currently not possible to say whether these remaining participants were indifferent to, or ignorant of, such quality-control measures. However, opinions as to what made a quality reviewer seemed to differ considerably between participants, and the issue seems to have been influenced by participants' personal preferences and prejudices towards websites. If this was the case, getting an accurate or objective view of the quality of the reviewers submitting to a website may prove to be impossible.

There was some prejudice both against commercial websites (4.4.1)- but only against the explicitly retail website Amazon- and, to a lesser extent, for the public library websites (4.4.2). Such distrust as there was of Amazon seemed to lie with a suspicion that reviews were either being manipulated or even planted by the company to sell their products; the reasons for favouring public library websites seem to be much more opaque. What is clear in both cases that such suspicions were often not very strong; participants often expressed some embarrassment or self-deprecation about expressing these views, and there was only one instance of a participant saying that they did not use a feature of Amazon expressly because of its commercial aspects. Even that participant, Jenny, had made use of Amazon's other features before. Most of those who criticised Amazon for its commercial nature still used the website for some purpose or another, or used other book retailers' reviews ,such as the employee reviews posted instore by Waterstone's. The only participant who never used Amazon, Liz, happily used other online retail websites such as Play.com: it was Amazon's size and

power she objected to, not its commercial status. Likewise, liking a website for its public origins was not enough to stop some participants criticising its other features. There is some evidence that such prejudices may influence some user's perceptions of the quality of other features of the website (4.3.2), but even so, the influence of this prejudice seems relatively negliable, compared with other factors. However, Amazon does have a colossal advantage here in that it is incredibly well-known and heavily advertised, so it may be that participants had grown to trust it more through prior experience. But few participants cited prior knowledge of websites, as opposed to individuals, as a great influence on their levels of trust (4.2.1), and there were two examples of participants who had previously avoided Amazon who were converted to its use simply by using it in the course of the study (4.4.1).

One final point that is worth mentioning, although it does not strictly fit into this chapter's remit, is that it appears that those participants who had used the public library websites, Whichbook.net and Ask Chris, before, may have been using them more as means of entertainment and less as a serious tool to find new books (4.4.2). Unfortunately, a qualitative study based on participants' recollections is ill-designed to accurate collect data on usage, and this question must be left to later studies to answer.

Chapter 5: Writing Reviews

One of the objectives of this study was to discover users' motivations in writing online book reviews. A site that depends on readers' reviews is clearly of no use if the readers are not submitting reviews, so the study was interested in what motivated review writers to post reviews and what features on a website encouraged or discouraged them.

Of all the objectives, this was perhaps the least successful; after all, being asked to write a book review as part of a study is a very different matter from being inspired to write one of one's own accord, so people's behaviour in this study may hardly be typical; indeed, some participants cited a lack of time as the reason they did not write a review, which is an artificial restraint imposed by the study. There were three participants who did write book reviews, all of whom, and one other participant, said they also wrote reviews outside the confines of the study, but this is a very small group of people from which to draw conclusion. The fact that two of these participants were the two members of Bookcrossing in the study may indicate that they already had a greater than average desire and willingness to talk about their reading; in fact, as all three were training to be librarians and were members of libraries, their interest in books may well be much higher than is usual and the incidence of review-writing may be even lower in the general population However, even those who did not choose to write reviews often gave reasons why, which may be some help in understanding what an online book review site can usefully do to encourage participation. We have already witnessed participants who decided not to write reviews because they wanted to respect the opinions of other reviews (4.1.1) or did not want to participate in a commercial website (4.4.1).

Those participants that did write outside the study were: Andy, who wrote reviews on Amazon, but who had "only got eight, so not lots"; Sarah, who had posted threads on an online book discussion group created by the librarian at her workplace; Naomi, who posted reviews on Bookcrossing; and Dawn, who posted book blogs on a friend's website and reviews on Bookcrossing.

Participants were asked if they wrote book reviews on any of the websites on the study or on any other sites, but were not asked why they did so (A.1).

The study may have been improved by a wider, quantitative survey, which could have allowed the researcher to identify users who wrote reviews and target them with interviews to gain a better picture of their behaviour in its natural context, or at least given a better idea of their incidence in the population. However, there would have been time constraints in retrieving sufficient data in the period between receiving ethics approval and conducting the necessary interviews, and as the study was focusing on students and taking part over the summer vacation, there is no guarantee that any more of the review-writers would have been available to interview.

5.1: Airing Views and Community Spirit

One reason for writing reviews can be the user having particularly enjoyed a book, although whether this is because they want to share it with others or simply state all the thoughts and feelings the book has brought out in them is not clear.

"I also do reviews myself, I'll add a review if I really enjoy a book..." **Andy**

This can be more than a desire to speak one's own mind, and feelings of community can spring up from sharing views on books online:

"And I, for example, really enjoy it, it's an aspect I enjoy, saying what I thought of it and reading what other people thought of it." **Naomi**

"...I did one for Amazon... A book called *Saddlebag*, which I thought no-one else in the world had read, and then I went, oh, quite a few people have read it. [laughs] So it's nice in someways to be part of a community." **Dawn**

In a world where comparatively few people talk about their reading and it is often hard to meet someone who reads the same books as you, large online forums offer an excellent chance to discuss favourite books with others who have read them, and this does seem to be one reason that these specific users like them. Of course, less harmoniously, a desire to write a review may also be stirred up by previous reviews, whose opinions the user disagrees with and wants to correct:

"The one where they had written a bad review, I did think it would be better to set the record straight." **Liz**

"...I could have happily spent an hour e-mailing everyone who said *On the Road* was good, telling them actually it wasn't... And sometimes I really like book reviews, because I really want to disagree with people. And it's my slightly argumentative personality..." **Dawn**

Neither participant actually wrote a review in this case- net etiquette or respecting the opinions of others (4.1.1) may be at work here- but both were clearly stimulated by the discussion.

Finally, one point was made by Sarah in favour of discussing books online, who contrasted the discussion board at her workplace with her bad experiences of a book group:

"I went to a reading group with someone from work, but to be honest, I didn't find it that enjoyable, it seemed slightly competitive of who had read what... I enjoyed the discussion threads on the [workplace discussion board], I think, because it's online, you haven't got everyone trying to throw in their opinion all at once, you can digest what other people are saying and then add to that." **Sarah**

This does stand in contrast with those participants who felt irritated into writing because of disagreements with previous reviewers, but it does make clear the point that face-to-face discussion of books is not always harmonious, and that the time-delay and ability to stand aside that online discussion introduces can remedy this. In some ways, an online system may be gentler and more welcoming than a face-to-face book group, although, as we shall see, some participants still found it intimidating (5.3.1). Nevertheless, it should be recognised that users do recognise and appreciate the community feeling that online reader review sites provide, and that this may be a strong influence in their use.

5.2: The Effort Needed to Write Reviews

This is a comparatively brief section, because the topic was not heavily discussed by the participants. However, just as some participants said they put more trust in reviews that had had more thought and effort put in them, so some participants mentioned the need for thought and effort when they were writing reviews. In fact, these tended to be the very same people, Andy and Naomi, to whom it seems to be a particular concern.

5.2.1: The Need to Think about What is Written

Of these two participants, only Naomi explicitly mentioned that she worked on putting thought and effort into her reviews. As he appreciated the more thoughtful reviews, it is probable that Andy also tried to be thoughtful in his review-writing, but he did not say anything about his writing process in the interview. As the two were writing on different websites, with different house styles- Bookcrossing reviews tend to be much more concise, and more often about books the writer did not enjoy, than the more detailed Amazon reviews- it is possible that their writing processes do differ.

However, from what she did say, it is clear that Naomi does take pride in making a good job of her review writing, and wants to work hard to do so:

"I think I'm a good reviewer, I think about it quite hard... I'm going to take evening classes in writing, and I'm going to take evening classes in literature, so that I can study books properly." **Naomi**

Writing reviews is clearly a serious business to her, and one that requires skills and dedication. Equally, she admits that it also takes time and willpower, and this is not always something she possesses, forcing her to compromise:

"But it also depends on your mood, but I've had to log some on really quickly, and I'll find myself thinking I've got just two minutes to log this one on before I pass to someone else, and I'll say 'Yes, it's really good because blah, blah, blah.', before I have to go, whereas if I had much more time I'd have made a much better job." **Naomi**

These compromises may be brought about because of the nature of Bookcrossing, which asks users to say something about all the books they read through it, possibly putting on pressure to write reviews before a book is passed on that a user may not have written unless they felt so obliged. On

other websites, such as Amazon, where is no compulsion to write a review, users pressed for time may opt not to write a review rather than write a lower quality one.

5.2.2: The Technical Difficulty of Posting Reviews

As was demonstrated in 4.3.3, both Andy and Naomi believed that their were virtues in making writing in reviews harder, because this discouraged the less thoughtful, casual reviewer. Here Andy elaborates on his view, first mentioning the irritation that the Amazon system caused him:

"...the thing I do like-[corrects self] I don't like about Amazon is that you have to have a password and a log on to actually do a review, so a passing reviewer can't just think 'Ooh, I'll write this small thing... you have to log on, you have to have a password, you have to have a log-in password, you have to go to your e-mail address to pick up the log-in password first time, and most people tend to forget their passwords anyway, so you're always having to pick it up off your e-mail, I do tend find that's an annoying feature..." **Andy**

He also says, in favour of Ask Chris:

"I did try writing a review on Ask Chris, which was incredibly easy... I do enjoy writing reviews, and Ask Chris is a very easy one to write reviews on..." **Andy**

Naomi makes similar comments about the Amazon, although her focus was more on the guidelines they ask of reviewers, and seemed to be more about the intimidating effect they produced, rather than any physical difficulty, although as it was the first time she had written reviews on Amazon, she had had limited chances to forget her password:

"I did try Amazon. I actually got quite scared, because they demand a lot of you..." **Naomi**

However, although the barriers to something he enjoys caused by the log-in clearly have caused some frustration, Andy then goes on to say of this system:

"...it does tend to mean the quality of reviews is slightly better. Slightly more thoughtful, anyway...[On Ask Chris] you literally click on 'I want to write a review', you put your name, and you write a review. As I've said, that does mean that pretty much anyone

could write a review, which could give a rather wide cross-section of reviews of what you're reading..." **Andy**

There is clearly a tension between the frustration the log-in causes, and a desire for the more dedicated reviewers he believes it produces. He is willing to go through a more difficult personal writing process in order to enjoy a higher quality resource to reference from, as was Naomi (4.3.3). However, these were the only two who mentioned this factor, so this feeling may not be that common and one should be wary of implementing a more complex writing procedure for this reading. Both participants made more use than other participants of professionally-produced book resources such as *The Guardian, The Times Literary Supplement, Asimov's* and *The London Review of Books*, so they may have higher than usual standards for book reviews and look more favourably on measures designed to promote quality.

However, there was only one instance of a participant actually being deterred from using online resources due to their complexity, and this was more to do with a lack of skills than any design feature, so it is hard to say how widely applicable this issue may be:

"I don't think I'd go for electronic discussion boards, because I can't type fast enough and get distracted." **Jenny**

A slightly different complaint about the log-in process, more to do with suspicion about commercial purposes (4.4.1) was voiced by Kate:

"...[on Ask Chris] it was nice that you could add your reviews very easily without feeling you were giving away information about yourself..." **Kate**

We have already seen in 4.4.1 that Jenny was put off writing a review on Amazon because of the commercial aspect, so the use of the data collected in log-in's may be an issue worth addressing, on commercial websites at least, possibly with clear and easily visible privacy information. The issue of log-ins is a fraught one.

5.3: Barriers to Writing Reviews

While few of the participants talked about why they did write reviews, rather more of them discussed why they chose not to. Many of the reasons they gave are practical, in that in one way or another they feel they would be unable to produce an effective review, for example, because they can not remember enough about the book or have nothing new to say about it, but there were several cases in which participants expressed a lack of confidence or embarrassment in writing reviews, which is a trifle worrying considering that these users were all studying librarianship and were presumably indoctrinated in reader development.

5.3.1: Shame and Embarrassment

One reason that users may not want to write reviews is shame about themselves in one form or another; writing a review would expose something they do not wish to reveal. One example may be that they feel that they would not make a very good job of writing a useful review:

"I never know what to say [laughs] I'd be, like, one of the people who say 'It's great, yeah, I loved it!', not, you know, be really helpful... I'm not very good at explaining why I like things and why I don't like things." **Laura**

There is also the possibility that the user does not feel there opinion would be valued, although we have seen that many of the users find opinions useful in choosing books (3.3.1)- as indeed Caroline said later on- so it may be possible to encourages the writing of reviews by explaining this.

"I didn't really feel confident... I always assume there's a certain arrogance in assuming that other people are interested in your opinions..." **Caroline**

In a similar way, users may feel that their opinion may come across as foolish, rather than that it would not be valued:

"I'm a bit funny about that , I don't want people reading my reviews, and thinking I'm stupid or something... I've written here I have a heavy dollop of pretentiousness that I try not to spread too widely, I just think people will read it and think it's stupid." **Jenny**

This fear of looking foolish can also extend to the type of books the user likes:

"And so I think I might be a bit self-conscious about the type of book I like to read, and so someone else might read it and say 'Pah! that's a terrible book!', and completely disregard what I said..." **Laura**

Broadly, it seems shames works in two separate ways, both of which express a lack of confidence in the user. The user either feels that they would not produce a useful review that had anything helpful to say, or that their tastes and opinions would be derided. It may be that reader development tactics may encourage these less confident users to either expand their skills in describing books, or make them feel less self-conscious about themselves, although there may be difficulties in this if the book review website is the only available reader development tool.

However, there may be cases in which a feeling of embarrassment- or at least obligation- may compel a user to write a review:

"Bookcrossing: I'd probably write a review if I had one of the books and had read it, for the simple reason that someone had given me a book for free and I feel like I should [chuckles]." **Andy**

Of course, this was a hypothetical case, so it may be the case that this would not be what occurred if this genuinely happened.

5.3.2: Having Nothing New to Add

One factor that deterred some participants from writing a review was the presence of previous reviews. We have already talked about the absence of any reviews for books being a problem (3.4.2), and some participants did feel that if a book they had read and enjoyed did not have a review, they would add one:

"I was going to put one in for *Atonement*, because no-one else had reviewed that, and it's a book I like very much..." **Naomi**

"...it certainly does help me when I'm browsing through Amazon to see what reviews people have added, so I would consider adding a review if there weren't many

there..." **Caroline**

Caroline's reasoning is very clear; reviews help users to select books, and if there are no reviews, then this will make it harder for the user to judge whether they like a book. Therefore, in such situations, it is helpful to add a review. But as Caroline went on to, if there are already reviews, there is less need for this:

"...but when there are loads of reviews there, a) why is anybody going to read mine, and why is mine going to be any better than anything anyone else has written [there was never a 'b)']" **Caroline**

The matters here appears to be a question of quality and visibility of the review; why is their review going to be any more useful to users than any existing ones? There are also alternate reasons for feeling the same way; anything the reviewer wished to say had already been said:

"So *The Red Tent* was a book I enjoyed using, and I looked for it on all of them, and I thought I might post comment, but by the time I got to it, it was a book a lot of other people had enjoyed too, the comments I would have made were all there anyway. And I couldn't think of a book I'd read that wasn't commented on, and I didn't find that I'd read that I thought there needs to be one added, yeah, so I didn't add any comments." **Kate**

In both cases, this seems to generally be a practical issues; if a previous review exists that already fulfills the purpose or expresses the user's view, there is no need to add a new one. This stands in conflict with the fact that many users prefer to have multiple reviews to read (3.4.2) to get a better idea of a book; obviously, it is impossible to keep down the number of reviews to encourage reviewing, as encouraging reviewing boosts the number of reviews... In addition, some books receive many reviews, so clearly the existence of previous reviews does not deter all users, possibly because they have strong feelings about the book they wish to express.

5.3.3: Not Remembering the Details of the Book

One important factor to bear in mind is that unless the user has just read a book, and has come to a website with the specific intention of writing a review with that book, they may well not be able to recall enough about a book to write a review. This is particular relevant to this study, where the participants were asked to write reviews in a situation where they may well not have had a book in

mind, and the participants were sometimes browsing around until they found a book they had read:

"I must have just been looking and something that I'd read, and thought I'd put that down." **Naomi**

Naturally, even if one encountered a book that one had previously read, one had not necessarily read it recently and may not always remember it terribly well: two participants explicitly mentioned this as one of the reasons they did not submit reviews.

" ...I did think maybe it would be better to set the record straight. But it was a while since I'd read the book, and it was a bit, I don't know, maybe I was wrong [laughs]." **Mary**

"...unless I have just read the book, I can not remember a thing about it, unless, only the fact I enjoyed reading it... I didn't think I could do a good enough thing about it because I couldn't remember, that was why I didn't write any." **Liz**

5.4: Discussion and Conclusions

Unfortunately, because of the relative lack of comment on the topic from the participants, the conclusions of this chapter must be regarded as less authoritative than the other chapters. Future studies need to work with a larger sample of participants who actually write book reviews to get a firmer image. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn.

It seems reasonably clear that, for the participants sampled at least, a primary reason for writing reviews is the sense of community it engenders (5.1), although it would be good to have firm confirmation of this. Participants definitely reacted to the opinions of existing reviews, and it seems that the chance to read the reviews of others and give your own in response is one of the appeals of online book reviews. It may be instructive to extend a future study to include discussion boards on books to see whether this is the case. It is possibly telling that two of the websites on which participants said they used to post reviews were based on existing social groups, in these cases a workplace and a friendship group.

In the previous two chapters, it has been noted that there is a tension between the desire for high-quality reviews and not making posting reviews so difficult as to deter potential reviewers (5.2). No participant said that they did not write a review because the process was too hard; but then only two participants addressed the question at all, and both of them, although they both found barriers and

constraints on writing reviews irritating, they also believed them to be worthwhile because they resulted in better reviews (5.2.2). However, it may be that they only raised the matter because they alone had strong feelings about it, so we should be wary of applying their views to all users.

One cause for concern is that several participants did not write reviews out of shame, either because they feared their review would be substandard or useless, or worried that their taste or opinions would be mocked if they revealed it. This is especially worrying as the participants were all librarians, who might be expected to be delivering reader development more than requiring it, so it is possible that such feelings are even more prevalent amongst the general public. In which case, raising the standards required may deter some users by making them feel even more inadequate, although no participant explicitly said that they were put off by the demands of the website itself, as opposed to the demand of meeting the quality of previous reviews. If these online book review websites do promote a feeling of community, it is a pity that some people feel excluded because they do not feel sufficiently able to join in.

It is worth noting that there were two instances of participants who had qualms about their reviews being used to sell books (4.4.1) or the personal details given when writing a review being used for commercial purposes (5.2.2). Again, these were isolated examples, so once again we need to be aware that these might not majority views, but a commercial aspect to a website may deter some users specifically from posting reviews on it.

Those participants who did not post reviews often did so for practical reasons. They either felt that because there were existing reviews, there was no need for them to submit reviews as the necessary information already existed (5.3.2), or they simply could not remember enough about the book to make a good job of a review(5.3.3). The latter case is quite likely an artefact of the study; participants did not have a book in mind for which they especially want to write a review, and if they did encounter a book they had read, they would not have read it with the intention of writing a review on it.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1: Conclusions

To begin with a failure, this study was unable to shed much light on the reasons why users chose to write online book reviews. Only four of the ten participants had ever done so, and they generally had little to say to say on the subject. From what they did say, it seems that they enjoyed the chance to express their views and read other's opinions, which helped engender a sense of community, but the data to back this up is slight and more would be welcome.

Despite this, the topic does follow through to a key concern that crops up throughout the study, and that is the balance between making reviews harder to write to improve their quality, and making them so hard that they deter potential reviewers. As we will discuss later, all participants preferred book reviews to possess certain features, and some of the participants preferred them to deliver certain levels of written competence and of insight, effort and expertise. Forcing up standards for reviewers would increase the satisfaction of those using the website to read book reviews. However, these websites are designed for those who wish to write book reviews as well as read them, and it is not clear how this would impact on them. The two participants who did comment on this dilemma, although admitting they find existing quality-control measures a chore and slightly intimidating, were both in favour of them for the improvement they brought in the quality of reviews. However, both of these participants wrote book reviews and seemed to use book reviews as a guide to their reading far more heavily than other participants and so might be especially likely to be concerned with the standards of book reviews. Other participants generally had little to say about quality-control measures and the balance between difficulty and quality, but if they were not writing reviews but only reading them, then they may well have not been thinking about the issues involved. They may have seen their use of the websites of a wholly passive endeavour and not thought that it could be active. More work is needed specifically with those who write online book reviews to discover not only why they enjoy doing it, but what the wider opinion on the trade-off between ease-of-use and quality is.

What users seemed to look for in an online book review was primarily two-fold; a concise synopsis and the reviewers' opinions. All participants said that synopses were crucial. Exactly what they wanted to the synopsis to contain varied from person to person, but it should cover the plot, characters, themes, genre and writing style. Condensing all these details into a single brief synopsis may be difficult for many ordinary reviewers, so it may be helpful to follow a path which Amazon took and which some participants commented favourably on, which is where the website provides a review written to professional standards, and let the reviewers append their personal opinions.

Synopses seemed to be important because they allowed participants to quickly gauge whether a book was of the type they enjoyed, and thereby quickly pick or discard likely titles based on previous knowledge. For similar reasons, a majority of participants said that they appreciated links to related titles, because it allowed them to quickly find books of a given type; one good find would quickly lead to another. However, synopses might not be so helpful for inexperienced readers, who might not have that strong an idea of the criteria they look for in a book.

The participants also found the reviewer's opinion a vital part of the book review. Participants were not interested in whether the reviewer liked or disliked the book- which may account for the lack of interest in star ratings in most participants- but instead found the opinions a guide to what the book would be like to read, as opposed to the contents of the book given by the synopsis. Many participants expressed a feeling that opinions were vital for helping them decide which book to read, and some found Whichbook.net, the reviews on which are mostly pure synopses, awkward to use for this very reason. It was often helpful to have several reviewers give their opinion for the same book, allowing the user to compare and contrast views and gain a better overview. However, reviews were also criticised for providing opinions without synopses, so the two features must stand together.

Participants all accepted reviewers' opinions as the reviewer's own, genuine opinions, and so distinguished between trusting the veracity of reviews and trusting the reliability of reviews as a guide to reading. Participants generally seemed to look for reviewers whose views matched their own, presumably as they were more likely to suggest books that the user would enjoy. Like synopses, this may be a mechanism for quickly finding a certain type of book. Most participants indulged in a tactic of searching for books they had already read to compare their opinions with those of the reviewers for precisely for this reason, although they did not do this for all websites and a few participants did not do so or did do so for other reasons, such as finding a website difficult to browse. Most participants also cited a shared literary taste this as one reason they trusted a particular friend or family member; certain family and friends were often given as a favourite source for information about books, and this was the reason cited, rather than simple familiarity with the individual. But a minority of participants said they trusted some of these individuals not because they shared a taste in reading, but because they and this individual knew each other so well that they knew what sort of book the other would like, even if they didn't like it themselves, and some used book reviews to identify books to buy as presents for friends and family in this way. In both cases, trust was built up over time and experience of successful recommendations; as only one participant said that they looked for specific trusted reviewers on websites and newspapers, and rather more participants said that they could not track reviewers in this way, this is not something online book reviewers can hope to do.

This may account for the odd fact that only three participants expressly said that they used

book reviews to find new books to read, although some other participants said that they were aware that book reviews could be used for this even if they did not do so themselves.

Participants rarely said that they ever believed reviewers were not giving their true opinions. There were a few concerns that some reviewers might occasionally give a false opinion through being pretentious, but none of the websites in this study were accused of this. There were more concerns about possible commercial influences biasing reviews to make them more positive to sell books, either by planting reviews or manipulating the position of reviews on the website. This only applied to a retail sites such as Amazon, rather than websites that were simply created by a commercial organisation, such as Bookcrossing.com. Likewise, there was some support for Whichbook.net expressly because it was a public library website, although this was to a lesser extent. However, while there are some indications that such beliefs affected how participants perceived the quality of the website, nevertheless such prejudices did not stop participants who held them making use of Amazon or book reviews from other retailers, such as Waterstone's, or criticising Whichbook.net for other faults. There was only one instance of a participant not using a feature on Amazon- in this case, writing a review- because of distrust of its commercial aspects. Such opinions were often expressed self-depreciatingly, and so may not be very strongly held.

6.2: Areas for Further Research

This study has brought up several avenues of enquiry that could be profitably be explored by future studies, some of which are new questions that have been raised in the course of the study and some of which are gaps in knowledge produced by the design or design-flaws of the study:

1. This study was wholly qualitative, and as such proved very ineffective at collecting some forms of data. A quantitative is the only way of addressing some of the gaps, such as broader overviews of the incidence of review-reading and review-writing amongst a population. Such a quantitative study could also be used to focus qualitative interviews on particular groups that were unrepresented in this study, such as non-users or those who write book reviews.

2. This study focused on a very narrow population, partly from necessity but also because the researcher wanted to concentrate on confident computer users with an interest in books. and reading Future studies could study a broader balance of ages, sexes and backgrounds, as well as investigating the opinions of users who had less confidence and experience of computers and/or reading about these websites.

3. This study relied on user's recollections about their online behaviour well after the event; because memory is fallible, this makes it hard to give definite conclusions about factors such as differing usage of different websites, especially the possibly more frivolous use of the public library websites. If users of websites were identified through a quantitative survey, it may be possible to more accurately record their behaviour, possibly through a system of logs or observations.

4. For similar reasons, this study had trouble connecting participants broader reading habits and information behaviour with their use of the websites in the study. This makes it hard to say if there is a particular 'type' of reader who likes a particular feature and standard in their book reviews. For example, those who favoured tighter quality controls appeared to be those who made the heaviest use of book reviews in their normal life, but this was not quantified and is based solely on the researcher's impression from their interviews. A study which links participants' reading habits with their preferences in book reviews may be worthwhile.

5. Participants were left to explore websites on their own and in their own time, although instructions were provided, if not necessarily read. This does mean that their behaviour was

more 'natural' than if directed by the researcher- in so far as it is possible when doing something they would not normally do- and it acknowledges that the participants may well have limited time and opportunity to explore the websites. However, it also means that it is sometimes impossible to know whether participants' failure to mention some features, such as star ratings, excerpts or quality-control measures, was because they were genuinely uninterested in these features or merely that they failed to discover or register the features on the website.

6. One case in which this is particularly important is the balance between making writing reviews harder to boost quality and deterring potential reviewers because the process is so difficult. While those who did comment on this had strong opinions, they were very much in a minority and it would be worth discovering what other users feel about the issue.

7. This study failed to clearly define between the length of a review and the level of detail it contains, thus leaving users' preferences rather murky. Future studies need to be aware of this distinction, and press interviewees to distinguish between the two in their answers.

8. This study only contained four participants who wrote online book reviews in any form, a very small sample and one from which that it is very hard to draw any firm conclusions, especially as they generally had little to say on the topic. If those users who wrote book reviews were identified by a quantitative survey, then a larger sample could be interviewed.

9. This study did not cover those online book review websites produced by individuals as opposed to organisations. It would be interesting to compare users' views of these with their views of websites produced by commercial and public bodies.

10. This study was unable to probe far into the origins of the reader review. Tracing its history might make for an interesting future study.

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<u>Appendices</u>

<u>A.1: Questions Asked in the Interviews</u>

<u>Key:</u>

- *Plain text represents those parts of the interview which are not direct questioning, such as introductions, explanations and thank you's.*

- *Bold text represents the questions that were asked during the interview.*

- *Bold italic text represents further clarification in case the participant does not understand the question the first time.*

- *The questions marked with an asterisk (*) changed slightly during the study. Rather foolishly, the questions in the interview did not exactly match those in the questionnaire, and after an interview in which this caused some confusion, the questions were amended. The order in which the questions were asked was altered to match the questionnaire, and a separate question was asked as to whether or not the participant trusted the website.*

Good Morning (Afternoon). I'm Sandy Buchanan: I'll be carrying out this interview. I would like to start by thanking you for taking part in my project, which is much appreciated.

1a) Just to check, before we start, did you have any difficulties with the tasks or the website?

1b) Do you have any other questions before we begin?

    I'll begin by asking you a few quick questions about yourself, and then I'll ask you about your experiences with the websites I asked you to look at, which will form the bulk of the interview . I will then finish by asking you a few more general questions about book reviews.

    I would like to emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Whatever you have to say on the topics will be of value. If there are any questions which you do not want to answer, you do not have to answer them and can ask to move on to the next question.

2a) [Sex- this should hopefully be obvious, so no need to ask]

2b) May I ask how old you are?

2c) Are you a member of a library?

2d) Do you feel confident using computers?

3a) Had you heard of any of these websites before?

3b) Have you used any of these websites before?

4a) What was your opinion of the reviews on Amazon?*

4b) What was your opinion of the reviews on Book Crossing.com?*

4c) What was your opinion of the reviews on Whichbook?*

4d) What was your opinion of the reviews on Ask Chris?*

5) How long did you approximately spend looking at each website?

6) Did you look exclusively at reviews of fiction, or did you look at non-fiction reviews as well?

7) Did you use the websites to look for new books you hadn't know about before or to look for more information about books which you had already heard of?

8) Did you try writing a review on any of the websites?

9) Do you use any other websites to read or write book reviews?

That is all the questions about the websites I asked you to look at. I will now ask you a few more general questions about book reviews. Just to clarify, in the next section, I will occasionally use the phrase "information about books" as well as "book review" to designate a description of what a book is like, as sometimes there is no fixed or formal review, such as when you ask a friend for their opinion on a book. Are you okay to continue?

10a) What information do you find helpful in a book review for understanding what a book is like?

10b) What makes (would make) you look for book reviews or any other information about books? *For example, would you read reviews to find a new book for yourself or someone else to read, for a general awareness of what books are available, simply as a way of passing the time, or is there some other reason?... .*

10c) Where do (would) you go to find out information about books? *For example: bookstores, libraries, newspapers, magazines, friends and family, the Internet, television, or radio.*

11a) Whose opinions do you trust about books and reading?

11b) What makes you trust someone's opinion about books and reading?

12) Finally, do you take part in any book-related social activities, such as reading or writing groups, Internet discussion boards or simply chatting about books with friends?

That was my last question. Thank you once more for your time and for agreeing to help me in my project; the information you've provided me will be very useful. Thank you.

Project information Sheet

A Qualitative Study to Investigate the Perceptions and Attitudes of Users towards Book Review Websites on the World-Wide Web.

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether to take part or not, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. You may discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask us if there is anything which is not clear or about which you would like more information. Take time to decide whether to take part or not. Thank you for reading this.

This project is looking at user's perceptions and attitudes towards the different book review websites that are available on the World Wide Web. These can be an useful tool for libraries in helping their readers to choose books to read, and so it is important to understand how they are perceived. It aims to discover whether there is any difference in perceptions between websites produced by commercial organisations and libraries, and whether users prefer reviews prepared by professional reviewers or by ordinary readers. It will also aim to examine if there is particular format of review that users particularly like or dislike and whether users like to contribute reviews themselves.

The project requires people who have both an interest in reading and basic Internet skills. You have been asked to participate because you are believed to be such a person. If you do not feel you are, please say so. The study will eventually comprise somewhere between ten and twenty participants.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part; there is no obligation to do so. Should you decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep. You will also be asked to sign a consent form, to indicate that you have understood this information sheet. If you take part, you are wholly free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason. If for any reason it is necessary to prematurely end the project, you will be informed and given the reason why.

Your part in the study will consist of two parts. In the first part, you will be given a small selection of websites containing book reviews to investigate and play with. Ideally, you are asked to spend somewhere between half an hour and an hour viewing them all, but feel free to spend as little or as much time as you like on them, as it will be equally interesting to the project if you find one or more of the websites particularly appealing or off-putting. In the second part, you will interviewed as to your opinions and feelings towards the websites you viewed, as well as some wider contextual information about your reading and Internet use. If it more convenient for

you, you may view the websites and be interviewed on separate occasions. Hopefully you will enjoy the experience and possibly find some fun websites that you did not know about before.

Your permission is necessary before any information about you can be used in the project. All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. All information about you will have your name and personal details removed so you can not be recognised from it, and you will not be identified in the finished piece of work. The results of the research will be published as an MA dissertation, available at the University of Sheffield's library.

This project is being carried out as part of a MA dissertation at the University of Sheffield, and has been reviewed by the University ethics committee.

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact either myself or my dissertation supervisor, Professor Nigel Ford.

Once more, whether you decide to take part or not, I thank you for reading this information sheet. If you do decide to take part, I look forwards to working with you.

Should you wish to contact me, I can be reached at:

Mr Alexander James Buchanan,   Telephone: *********
*****************,   Mobile: ************
******,   E-Mail: ************
******,
****

Nigel Ford can be reached at:

Professor Nigel Ford,   Telephone: 0114 2222637
Dept of Information Studies,   E-mail: N.Ford@sheffield.ac.uk
University of Sheffield,
Regent Court,
211 Portobello Street,
Sheffield,
S1 4DP

17/05/2005

Instructions for Participants

I would like you to spend a little time looking at book reviews on four websites, details of which are at the bottom of the page, as well as instructions as to how to find the book reviews on them. Although some of the sites have other features, I would like you to concentrate on the book reviews, although I will be interested to learn if the other features makes a website more or less appealing to users. Other than that, do whatever you feel on the website. Look at whatever books you want to, read or write reviews as you see fit.

Spend as much or as little time as you like exploring the sample websites. I had envisaged the task taking roughly thirty minutes to an hour in total, which means spending about five to fifteen minutes on each website, but there is no obligation to stick to these times or to spend equal time on each website. I will be just as interested to know what makes a user give up on a website after a couple of minutes or spend hours browsing it.

A short questionnaire accompanies these instructions. There is no obligation to fill it in: its purpose is to help you remember any particular points you want to make about a website in the interview.

The details of the four websites I would like you to look at are as follows:

Ask Chris

URL: http://askchris.essexcc.gov.uk
Ask Chris was created by Essex County Council's library service as a dedicated website for information about books.
When you enter the URL, you will be greeted by the Ask Chris homepage, which features a picture of a lemon ('Adults enter here') and a cartoon lemon/light bulb('Children enter here'). Clicking on an image will take you to the relevant booklist, that for adults or for children.
If you click on the adult section, you will next come to a page giving information about the website. The pink button ('What should I read next')on the navigation bar at the top of the screen leads to the What Should I Read Next section, which contains all lists of books reviewed. There are several ways to select a booklist. There is a bright pink box at the foot of the screen containing a list of genres and prize shortlists. On the right of the screen is a drop-down menu ('select a theme'), which has a different selection of booklists, such as authors from ethnic minorities, first time writers and other prize shortlists. On the right are three other coloured buttons- 'Something Different', 'The Buzz' and 'Quick Reads'- each of which leads you to a further booklist. Finally, at the foot of the page, just to the left of the pink box, is a small advanced search button, which will let you search for a given book by title and/or author, and select whether you want titles in large print or audio.
If you click on the children's section, there is a white box in top right-hand corner of the screen marked 'categories', which contains all the categories of books

reviewed. On the left of the screen, there is a button for 'What's the Buzz' booklist, plus a 'pick and mix' button, which fulfills the role of the advanced search button on the adult section, as well as allowing you to select books that are on multiple book lists.

Click on a list to enter it. You will be presented with a page of titles and their authors. Click on the title to get reviews and a photograph of the cover. Some books have been reviewed by multiple reviewers: to change the reviewer, click on the drop-down menu just above the review text, and select a new reviewer. There are forward/back arrows at the left-hand side of the screen to move between pages of reviews in the booklist, as well as skip to the end/ skip to the beginning arrows.

All the books have a 'review this book' button under the main review. Click on this and you will presented with a text box to write your review in. Simply type in your name and enter your review, then click 'submit'. Reviews are vetted for content before being posted, so it may be a day or so before it goes up.

Amazon.co.uk
URL: http://www.amazon.co.uk

Amazon.co.uk is the UK website for international book retailer Amazon.

There are several ways of looking for books. You can use the search function('search our shops') just below the top navigation bar to look for particular authors or titles. If you select 'books' from drop-down menu in the second box, that will limit your search to books only. You can also browse, via the 'books' tab on the top navigation bar or the 'Browse' menu on the left side of the screen. The 'Browse' menu in the books section then lists further sub-categories : you can delve deeper in sub-categories until you reach a list books in the particular sub-genre or topic you want. Be warned, some of these lists can be very long indeed!

To read a review of a book, click on the highlighted title of the book which you want. Customer reviews are towards the bottom of the page, after the product details and 'readers who bought this also bought...' section. In some cases an review from professional sources or synopsis may precede the customer reviews. Reviews have a five-star rating at the head; a star rating averaged from all reviews is presented at the head of the review section. Each review has the line 'Was this review helpful to you?' after it: click on the 'yes' or 'no' button as appropriate to rate the review. The most highly rated reviews are presented first.

To write a review, click on the 'Write an online review' link at the top of the customer review section. You will be asked to submit your e-mail address and your Amazon password. If you have used Amazon before, this is the same password you enter for your online account. If you do not already have a password, click on the 'I am a new customer' button to create one. You will also need to create an online identity. Your review can be up to 1,000 words in length: you will also be asked to submit a star rating and a title for the review. Before the review is submitted, you will be given a preview of how it will appear on screen.

Whichbook.net

URL: http://www.whichbook.net

Whichbook.net is managed by Openlibraries Ltd, created through a collaboration between reading agency Opening the Book Ltd and the Society of Chief Librarian's Branching Out project. Whichbook.net's reviewers are trained in

writing reviews before they write them for the website, and many of them work for libraries. It is not possible for others to write reviews for the website.

Whichbook.net uses a special selector to choose books by mood and plot rather than genre, title or author. There is a list of opposed descriptors on the left-hand side of the screen ('Happy/Sad', 'Funny/Serious', etc). Click on the category you want, and a pointer will pop up between the two descriptors. Use the mouse to slide the pointer towards the descriptor you want. So if you want a sad book, slide the pointer towards the 'Sad' descriptor. You can have up to four descriptors (eg, a sad, serious, beautiful and short book). Press the 'go' button beneath the list of descriptors, and a selection of book reviews will pop up on the right-hand side of the screen, listed according to how well the book matches the criteria. If you want to change your selections, simply click on the 'reset' button opposite the 'go' button. There are also options to select only audio or large print books at the left-hand foot of the page.

Also at the left-hand foot of the page is a button marked 'Changes to character, plot and setting'. Clicking on this will bring up a new menu. 'Character' is a drop-down menu that allows you to select the ethnicity, sexuality, age and gender of the main character. 'Plot' is a drop-down menu that allows you to select the type of storyline you want (eg, 'Quest', 'Success against the odds', etc). 'Setting' brings up a globe that spins when you move the mouse over it; click on the area you want to select it. This will bring up a secondary map, allowing to select a smaller geographical area. Alternatively, there is a drop-down menu just to the upper right of the globe with the same information: this also contains the 'imaginary' setting for Science Fiction and Fantasy fans. These settings can not be combined with the descriptors from the main menu

Reviews have a reader comment and a selection of similar books, and most have an extract from the book.

BookCrossing.com

URL: http://www.bookcrossing.com

Book-crossing is a hobby where a book is tagged with a serial number, then passed on to other readers. Each time it is the read, the reader logs the book's serial number and their details on to the website, so making it possible to track the progress of individual copies of a book. BookCrossing.com was created by the American software company Humankind Systems, Inc. It is not possible to write reviews on the website unless you are a registered reader with a registered book.

To look for reader comments and reviews, click on 'Books' on the navigation bar on the left-hand side of the homepage. Options to find books will appear in the left-hand navigation bar and the centre of the 'Books' page.. You can opt to browse through lists of genres and topics, or search for a book by title, author, genre, or ISBN. Be warned if browsing, however, that some of the categories contain hundreds or even thousands of books. Readers comment and reviews centre on a

single copy, not just a single title, which is why there are multiple sets of comments for a single book.

Most readers comments assign their book a star rating. Please note that there is no obligation for readers to write reviews, so any reviews can vary wildly in length and style, from a few lines to several paragraphs to the blurb from the back of the book to nothing at all. Also note, that as an international website, the reviews will not always be in English. Readers also assign the books to a genre themselves, so the category a book is in will not always be consistent.

Optional Questionnaire

It may be hours, or even days, between looking at the websites and having the interview, and it is not necessarily easy to recall which website was which after that amount of time, especially if you have not used them for very long and so are not familiar with them. Because of this, I have prepared this brief questionnaire. **This questionnaire is in no way obligatory**: you do not have to fill it in if you do not want to, and if you do fill it in, you do not have to answer all the questions. Its chief purpose is to help you remember any particular points you wanted to make about any of the websites when the time comes for interview. You only need fill parts of it in if you feel you might need a reminder about your views and experiences of that website. I will be getting the information I want from you in the interview, and so this questionnaire is only an aid to that.

There are no right or wrong answers; please say whatever you feel. When you are given a blank space to write your opinions, you are not obliged to write anything. If you do, you do not have to use full sentences; just write down whatever will help you remember what you want to say in the interview. The same set of questions are used for each website, although some questions will be omitted in some cases as those websites lack certain features.

Whether you fill in this questionnaire or not, once again I would like to thank you for taking part in this project.

Amazon.co.uk

1) Did you find the reviews on the website helpful in understanding what the books were like?
If so, please write a little about why this was.
If not, please write a little about why this was.

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2) Did you trust the reviewers' opinions about the books?
If so, please write a little about why this was.
If not, please write a little about why this was.

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3) What sort of books did you look at? Circle as many categories as applicable

Fiction you had not heard of before *Non-fiction you had not heard of before*

Fiction you had heard of before, but had not read *Non-fiction you had heard of before, but had not read*

Fiction you had read before *Non-fiction you had read before*

4) Did you try writing a book review?
If so, did you enjoy writing it?
If not, why did you not choose to do so?

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5) Approximately how long did you spend using the website?

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6) Were there any features of the website which particularly appealed to you or put you off using it?
If so, please say a little more about it.

Book Crossing.com

1) Did you find the reviews on the website helpful in understanding what the books were like?
If so, please write a little about why this was.
If not, please write a little about why this was.

2) Did you trust the reviewers' opinions about the books?
If so, please write a little about why this was.
If not, please write a little about why this was.

3) What sort of books did you look at? Circle as many categories as applicable

Fiction you had not heard of before   *Non-fiction you had not heard of before*

Fiction you had heard of before, but had not   *Non-fiction you had heard of before, but had*
read   *not read*

Fiction you had read before   *Non-fiction you had read before*

4) Did you try writing a book review?
If so, did you enjoy writing it?
If not, why did you not choose to do so?

5) Approximately how long did you spend using the website?

6) Were there any features of the website which particularly appealed to you or put you off using it?
If so, please say a little more about it.

Ask Chris

1) Did you find the reviews on the website helpful in understanding what the books were like?
If so, please write a little about why this was.
If not, please write a little about why this was.

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2) Did you trust the reviewers' opinions about the books?
If so, please write a little about why this was.
If not, please write a little about why this was.

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3) What sort of books did you look at? Circle as many categories as applicable

Fiction you had not heard of before   *Non-fiction you had not heard of before*

Fiction you had heard of before, but had not   *Non-fiction you had heard of before, but had*
read   not read

Fiction you had read before   *Non-fiction you had read before*

4) Did you try writing a book review?
If so, did you enjoy writing it?
If not, why did you not choose to do so?

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5) Approximately how long did you spend using the website?

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6) Were there any features of the website which particularly appealed to you or put you off using it?
If so, please say a little more about it.

<div align="center">**Whichbook.net**</div>

1) Did you find the reviews on the website helpful in understanding what the books were like?
If so, please write a little about why this was.
If not, please write a little about why this was.

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2) Did you trust the reviewers' opinions about the books?
If so, please write a little about why this was.
If not, please write a little about why this was.

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3) What sort of books did you look at? Circle as many categories as applicable
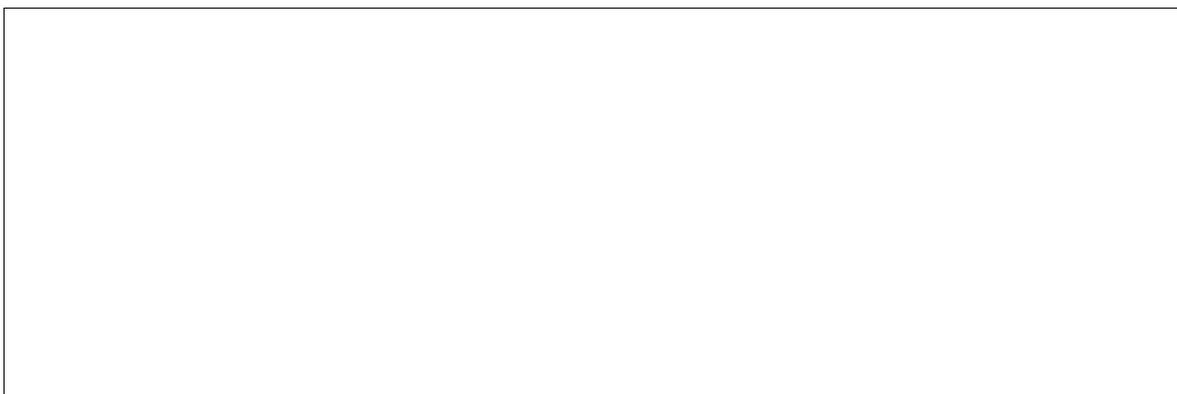
Fiction you had not heard of before

Fiction you had heard of before, but had not

read

Fiction you had read before

4) Approximately how long did you spend using the website?

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5) Were there any features of the website which particularly appealed to you or put you off using it?
If so, please say a little more about it.

A.3: Where to Find Reviews by the Researcher

Should any readers be interested to read online book reviews written by the researcher in the course of this study, examples can be found in the following places:

- The researcher is a member of Bookcrossing.com, and his journal entries may be found on that website under the alias of 'Marsilius'.

- The researcher as posted reviews for the following books on Ask Chris:
    - *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke
    - *Stories of Your Life and Others* by Ted Chiang
    - *Atomised* by Michel Houellebecq
    - *City of Saints and Madmen* by Jeff Vandermeer

- The researcher has posted reviews for the following books on Amazon:
    - *Stories of Your Life and Others* by Ted Chiang
    - *Threshold* by Caitlin R. Kiernan

Both reviews were on the book's main page when last checked and not under the 'More Reviews' section.