Book Reading Choices of University Students in Jordan

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Abstract

It is widely believed that today's university students are so enamoured of social media and other online attractions that book reading is no longer included in their leisure-time activities, particularly in the Arab world where smartphone penetration is high and interest in reading is perceived to be low. As teachers, we have an obligation to ensure our students are reading books of their own choosing. This study investigates the book-reading choices of a convenience sample of 100 male and female students attending a private university in Jordan to determine 1) what those choices are, 2) what patterns we can detect among their choices and 3) what language and format they prefer to read in. Results show that students look West for most of their book choices, at the expense of their own literature and authors, that their gendered choices reflect many of the patterns already established in the literature, that they prefer to read printed rather than digital books and that third-person narrator voice is most commonly used in the novels they read. The study also suggests that book choice may have less to do with book-based appeal factors (such as, author, protagonist, etc.,) and more to do with the overall reading experience, and that the narrator voice used in the novels students read can contribute to the richness and overall value of that reading experience.

Keywords: Leisure reading, Arab college students, Book choices, Reading preferences, Narrator's voice

"We have to read this horrible book for our class. I hate it. [1]Ahmed told me that when you taught the course, students could choose any book they liked. That must be so cool."

1. Introduction

Being an independent reader hinges around having the freedom and ability to choose the books we read. Teachers should play a major role in developing that ability in their students (Broz, 2003), for without choice, reading must be "uncool", to use student vernacular. When students choose their own books to read, they experience increased enjoyment (Collie, 2015, p.23), develop a love of reading and achieve greater academic success (Paulson, 2006, p.51). In contrast, "students who read only what is necessary for class and do not read for choice, usually do not improve as effective and efficient readers." (ibid, p.56). Simply asking students what books they are currently reading and facilitating short book discussions in class enables us to know them better as readers and as students, shows them that their choices matter to us and provides peer recommendations to those who are still searching for an 'interesting book'. This study arose from such discussions with undergraduate students at a private university in Jordan, a country whose culture minister cautioned in 2003, "Jordanians are not readers" (Khalaf, 2018). Students were asked to list book titles they had read in the past year in either Arabic or English, so as to identify patterns of choice, augment the scant literature on reading in the region, and tangentially, show that some young Arabs choose to read.

1.1 Choice

When we investigate students' book reading choices, it is important that we do not reinforce the divide between leisure or pleasure reading and academic or class-related reading as if the two should never meet. Should not an academic book also bring pleasure to a reader? Why not simply call it book-reading choices, where students indicate what they choose to read for whatever purpose they identify. Long-time educator and avid reader Susan Ohanian pointed out in an interview with Rowan (2006), that, while the book she was then reading by Ron Suskind did not fit the label of pleasure reading, his writing style gave her pleasure. Yet, she might enjoy using its content to help her write an article, which, she argued, might make it 'functional' reading. These points reflect the dilemma faced by anyone who is asked to label their reading under discrete headings. If a student reads a book related to a class topic, he should omit it on a questionnaire which asks him to list only the books he reads which are not related to or required for class. What about students who are encouraged to bring their chosen book to read silently in class or to discuss it? How would they classify those books on such a questionnaire?

A more inclusive and productive approach to our investigations into students' reading preferences would be to replace such pigeon-holing with choice which can provide a fuller picture of students' book-reading choices. If a student reads a book for an upcoming exam, he is still choosing to read it rather than do something else. In class, students can then discuss their reasons for their choices or share interesting items from a book they are reading with peers. Such discussions can serve as book recommendations, particularly for those who may not have developed the ability to find an interesting book. In a study of 1,503 adults' reading

habits in Australia, those who had the greatest difficulty choosing books to read were the younger adults under 30s, particularly males (ACNielsen Company et al., 2001). Educators' and researchers' insistence on the use of discrete labels such as academic and non-academic or leisure reading, carries with it the inescapable implication that the latter is more enjoyable than the former. Surely, reinforcing that premise does not serve our students well; we need to direct their attention to the benefits of book reading.

1.2 Book Reading

Reading a good book demands a reader's undivided attention to the words on the page so he can infer, reflect and think critically. When reading about others, particularly in literary fiction, we come to know ourselves better in relation to the characters we read about; the characters speak both to and for us (Bloom, 2011, p.275). We increase our empathy for others (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014; Guarisco & Freeman, 2015; Pino & Mazza, 2016; Guarisco, Brooks & Freeman, 2017), which boosts self-esteem. We enlarge "our knowledge and understanding of the world" (Lodge, 1992, p.10), improve memory function, analytical skills, ability to concentrate (Pettigrew, 2015, p.157) and creativity (Kelly & Kneipp, 2009), and our overall acquisition of language (Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012), particularly vocabulary (Sullivan & Brown, 2013). We find companionship, free from the failings of personal, human friendships (Bloom, 2011, p.19), which can alleviate loneliness. Whatever a reader's purpose for reading, whether "to escape from the intractable problems of everyday life, to enlarge their consciousness of the world, to discover images that have power and meaning for their lives" (Appleyard, 1991, p.163), or for "learning, polemicizing, or cultural enrichment" (Thelwall, 2017, p.3), there are books to match their taste. Not only does book reading offer these and more but it is its own best promoter, "The freedom and happiness experienced in reading are addictive" (Zaid, 2003, p.11); we try to do often what we love to do (Dewan, 2016).

1.3 Trends in Reading

Fiction has long been a mainstay of leisure reading, particularly among females, who are considered to read more than males (Shafi & Loan, 2010; Burgess & Jones, 2010; Rajab & Sadi, 2015). They read a wider range of subgenres, particularly romance, than do males, (Gleed, 2013). Males read more nonfiction, (Gleed, 2013), particularly (auto)biography and history (Thelwall, 2017) and often enjoy reading science fiction and fantasy (Tepper, 2000).

Thanks to global influences, there is a perceptible drift in college students' reading choices, "from national to global", (Herkman & Vainikka, 2014, p.105), so that local or own-nationality authors are increasingly being replaced by Western authors, mainly those writing in English (Shankar et al, 2008; ACNielsen Company et al., 2001). This trend is also visible in the Arab world where Arab book settings, authors and protagonist nationalities have amounted to little over 10% of college students' book choices in some studies (Kamhieh, 2017). Bucking that trend were 80% of 326 undergraduates in two Turkish universities, who either did not differentiate between Turkish and non-Turkish literature or preferred the former (Erdem, 2014).

Modern technology is increasingly influencing reading choices, particularly those of college-age students (ACNielsen Company et al., 2001; Sanders, 2009; Khreisat &Kaur, 2014). In a Malaysian study, aimed at matching course content more closely to students' reading interests, 132 ESL undergraduates rated websites and blogs ahead of fiction, newspapers, magazines, etc., with poetry rated least popular (Nordin & Eng, 2017). Findings from such a study could facilitate a bridging of the academic / leisure reading divide. Elsewhere in Malaysia, 127 male and female university undergraduates also rated newspapers, textbooks, websites and magazines ahead of fiction and novels, with literature, including poetry, last (Abdul Karim & Hasan, 2007). Male students read more of the first, third and last items on that list, than did females. A third Malaysian study of 30 ESL undergraduates' reading preferences also showed that online reading and newspapers were more popular than books, which were followed by magazines (Mansor, 2017).

Similar patterns were found elsewhere. With a sample of 100 undergraduates in India, a purposely designed questionnaire (Chauhan & Lal, 2012) showed that most prefer to read online and few read novels. This questionnaire was adapted and used with 76 English Language and Literature sophomores in Turkey where it showed that when online, students mainly listened to music (93.4%) or chatted with friends (84.2%) and their first stop was usually Facebook (27.6%), followed by news and media (23.7%) (Akarsu & Darıyemez, 2014). They did not read stories or novels online, although they read an average of almost ten (presumably print) magazines and novels, combined, per year – while some read up to 30, others read none. A further adaptation of these two questionnaires was used with 320 students at Borneo University and showed that when online, students mostly chatted with friends, looked at photos and listened to music and their main reason for reading online was to get general information (Tanjung, Ridwan & Gultom, 2017). While 44% read 1 to 4 novels in the past year almost 14% read none.

In a large public university in Bangladesh, questionnaires completed by 250 Arts and Social Sciences postgraduates indicated that almost 95% read daily on the Internet, prompting the authors to state that, "the World Wide Web has become a major source of information and entertainment" (Akanda, Hoq & Hasan, 2013, p.64), particularly among the younger generation. When they read books, students mostly read textbooks, followed by fiction and then nonfiction and their main reasons for reading were self-development, to get a job, be well-informed, and to pass examinations or to have fun. They chose their books by author (47%), summary, recommendation and lastly book cover. All students read newspapers with just over half reading for one to two hours daily. 61% gave their biggest reason for not reading books as, a "lack of interesting reading materials" (p.67).

In the Arab world, 460 male Saudi EFL teacher-college students rated reading items on a lengthy, 5-section questionnaire where they could also add other items (Al-Nafisah, Abdulgader & Al-Shorman, 2011). Stories ranked first, as they are easy to read, followed by religious books, newspapers, then books and magazines about the Internet, with novels in 14th place. As data was gathered in 2004-5, it is possible that the Internet was more of a subject to be read about than a widespread facility at that time, particularly in rural areas. Students chose their reading materials by interest, teacher's request, the main character,

length, literary quality and cost. Similar results were found among EFL students in state and private universities in the north of Jordan, who also had to choose from a list of 35 items (Al-Shorman & Bataineh, 2004).

More recently, at the University of Jordan, the country's largest and oldest public university, a study of the English reading habits and preferences of 225 male and female 3ʳᵈ and 4ᵗʰ year English major students, found that social media (email, chatrooms, Facebook) was the most popular genre, followed by novels and newspapers, and that nonfiction was the least favourite (Khreisat & Kaur, 2014). Students read on average for just over two hours per week when classes were in session, and those whose fathers had reached a higher level of education read significantly more. The authors found a correlation between novel or "quality reading" (p.26) and students' CGPA, but not between any other type of reading, including social media, which students engaged in most frequently.

1.4 Digital reading

Should Facebook be considered a reading genre? As a living, pulsing form of reading and writing (which cannot be found between the covers of books), there is evidence that both researchers and respondents treat it as such. Students in Khreisat and Kaur's (2014) study above, selected Facebook as among their "preferred type of recreational reading" (p.17), to the extent that the authors suggest that teachers use it in the classroom – no doubt, in an effort to bridge the divide between academic and personal reading and to further encourage students to read. However, skimming and scanning through Facebook and other Internet sites is unlikely to provide the deep, mindful reading experience and associated benefits we require for our students. Thanks to Jordan's very high rates of smartphone penetration (Ghazal, Feb 26ᵗʰ, 2014), students are frequently just an arm's length away from skimming and scanning on social media.

It is all too easy for students to become information *retrievers* - who equate "information access" with "knowledge gained" (Cull, 2011, p.1) - rather than readers. Internet users seldom want to have to think (Krug, 2006), which seems at odds with a major function of reading, namely, "to facilitate a continuous development of the ability to think" (Nitecki, 1986, p.229). To achieve that, we need to "read, listen to and savour the words, and the sense" (Davies, 1996, p.288), all of which take time.

> The power of reading … continues to lie in … [having] time to digest words, time to read between the lines, time to reflect on ideas, and time to think beyond one's self, one's place, and one's time in the pursuit of knowledge (Cull, 2011, p.1).

The problem may also apply to offline digital reading. When 145 North American undergraduate readers read digital texts five to seven pages long, they reported experiencing a sense of dislocation – feeling less sure of their place within the text - and awkwardness in handling their reading devices (Mangen & Kuiken, 2014). The former should not be confused with being 'lost in a book' (Nell, 1988), which may be more elusive in digital reading than in print book reading (Pieper, 2016). Without print books, therefore, reflective reading is at risk (Ulin, 2009; Rose, 2013). Therefore, we may take hope from findings that despite the

prevalence of the Internet and e-books, most readers still prefer to read a print book (Gleed, 2013). In an ongoing investigation of 607 university students' preferences, approximately 80% prefer printed texts because they can write on them, retain contents more easily and enjoy the haptic experience of turning pages (Cull, 2015).

1.5 Importance of This Study

Against the backdrop of such generalities, however, we are reminded that readers' tastes are unique, "as individual as a fingerprint" (Ross, 2010, p.9) and we should strive to get to know them. When we know our students' reading preferences, we can then try to match their reading interests more closely in the texts we choose to use in class (Nordin & Eng, 2017). We want our students to think for themselves, and reading books is the best way to further this ability. The temptation to allow technology to do everything for them is growing daily, from taking a photo of notes on the whiteboard instead of understanding and then writing them, to following a GPS system instead of reading a map. With college-age students (from 18 to 29) forming over half of those using social networking sites in Jordan, in a part of the world where reading is not considered popular (Martin, Martins & Naqvi, 2017; Al-Sayegh, 2007), it is timely to ask what books our university students are reading. This paper does just that.

2. Method

"Reading interests cannot be observed directly" (Ross, 2010, p.2) but we can come close by asking students about the books they have read. Such data was gathered from students attending a private university, situated outside the Jordanian capital, Amman. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has very high literacy rates - particularly among 15- to 24-year olds (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2018) - and for decades, many of its graduates have contributed to the growth and development of neighbouring oil-rich Gulf Arab countries, where their skills and education continue to be highly sought-after (Zughoul, 2000). The demand in Jordan for university degrees among a growing population of close to 10 million (Department of Statistics, 2017), whose median age is 22 years, has spurred the rapid growth of private universities, such as the one where this study was carried out. It was established in 2011 and offers a range of bachelor degree programs from colleges such as, English Language and Literature, Business, Health Sciences, Engineering and Architecture.

While a growing number of its students come from local secondary schools, where classes are taught through Arabic, most have had international exposure through travel and education, and continue to have an international outlook while yet adhering to family values and traditions. Both genders enjoy relatively more freedom than their counterparts in the Gulf countries. Most may go unchaperoned to meet friends at malls or *sheesha* (hookah) cafes, to cinemas or nightclubs, or on weekend excursions to the country's many tourist sites or nature reserves. The country's hot, dry climate lends itself more to outdoor pursuits than to reading, particularly during the relatively cooler months from October to April.

Data was gathered in two ways over two 16-week semesters, from a convenience sample of 50 male and 50 female students who were enrolled in a university-compulsory English skills course and studying for a range of different majors. In the first week of each semester,

ice-breaker activities included students writing an introductory paragraph about themselves, their hobbies and interests, whether or not they liked to read and the names of any books they had read for leisure in the past year. Later, students also completed a survey of their reading habits and interests in Unit 3B of their textbook (Latham-Koenig & Oxenden, 2013). They gave their consent to use both sets of data and a list of book titles was compiled after being cross-checked with their introductory paragraphs (to avoid overlap or duplication). Any inconsistencies were brought to the students for correction.

The compiled list of books was taken to represent students' reading preferences while acknowledging that different approaches to gathering such data can achieve slightly different results. For example, had I asked them to list their favourite books or authors, their answers may have been different to the list they presented to me as books they had read 'in the past year' (See Summers, 2013). Titles were placed on an Excel spreadsheet followed by individual columns for each book's author, author gender, book genre, etc., based on information provided by various websites, such as online booksellers, commentary, reviews and more. A small amount of qualitative data indicated students' overall preferred language and book format for reading. Percentages were calculated on an online calculator and this enabled comparisons to be made and patterns to emerge, while providing a snapshot of students' reading preferences over the past year. My research questions were: 1) What are students' book choices, 2) what patterns can we identify from them and 3) what is their preferred language and format for reading?

3. Results

The aim of this study was to investigate the book reading choices of students attending a private university in Jordan over the past year. Students read books by authors of over 19 different nationalities, covering all populated continents. Two of the Arabic books read were written by an author working at the university where the study was carried out. The main findings are presented in Table 1. Subgenres are not mutually exclusive.

Table 1. Chosen geography, gender and genre.

Geography All students' geographical choices (N=100)			Female students' geographical choices (N=50)			Male students' geographical choices (N=50)		
	Author nationality	Protagonist nationality	Book setting	Author nationality	Protagonist nationality	Book setting	Author nationality	Protagonist nationality	Book setting
American	55%	52%	51%	58%	58%	55%	47%	28%	36%
British	30%	27%	27%	26%	24%	26%	36%	37%	29%
Arab	1.6%	2%	1.8%	1.9%	1%	0.5%	0.9%	5%	2.3%
Gender - All students' gender choices			Female students' gender choices			Male students' gender choices		
	Author Gender	Protagonist Gender		Author Gender	Protagonist Gender		Author gender	Protagonist Gender	
Male	57%	60%		44%	47%		82%	87%	
Female	43%	40%		56%	53%		18%	13%	
Genre - All students' genre and subgenre choices			Female students' (sub)genre choices			Male students' (sub)genre choices		

Fiction 82%	82%	81%
Fantasy 35% (40% fem; 60% male)	Fantasy 21%	Fantasy 52%
Classics 20% (50% f; 50% m)	Classics 10%	Classics 24%
YA novels 22% (98% f; 2% m)	YA novels 32%	YA novels 1%
Poetry 4% (60% f; 40% m)	Poetry 4%	Poetry 4%
	Romance 8%	--------
Nonfiction 16%	18%	20%
Auto/Biography/Memoir 37% (74% f; 26% m)	Biography 45%	Biography 24%
Self-help 22% (82% f; 18% m)	Self-help 30%	Self-help 10%
	Psychology 31%	Politics 14%
Politics 8% (100% m)		

Overall favourite authors and books		Female students' choices	Male students' choices
Most chosen authors	JK Rowling 10%	JK Rowling 10% (3rd person narrator	Tolkien 18% (3rd person narrator)
	JRR Tolkien 6%	J Green 8% (1st person)	R Jordan 13% (3rd person)
	GRR Martin 5%	V Roth 4% (1st person)	GRR Martin 12% (3rd person)
Most chosen books/series	*Harry Potter* 10%	*Harry Potter* 10% (3rd person)	*The Lord of the rings* 10% (3rd person)

3.1 Preferred Genre

50 males read 107 books by 42 different authors, 50 females read 202 books by 84 different authors, and the overall range of books read per person was from one to 14. This gives an overall average of just 0.4 fewer than ACNielsen Company et al's (2001) Australian study. Novels accounted for 94% of male fiction choices and 92% of female fiction choices. They included horror, read mostly by females (including books by Mary Shelley, P. Suskind, L.J. Smith and Stephen King), romance read exclusively by females, and fantasy (including books by E. Morgenstern, Philippa Pearce, Stephanie Meyers, Cornelia Funke, Maggie Steifvater and others). Some fiction authors read by both genders included Mitch Albom, Albert Camus, Paulo Coelho, Joseph Conrad, Harper Lee, GRR Martin, George Orwell, JK Rowling and William Shakespeare. Females read a wider range of subgenres (32) than males (25), which is consistent with findings by ACNielsen Company et al., (2001). No nonfiction authors were common to both genders.

Males exclusively read J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert Jordan, William Golding and Stephen King. Their nonfiction choices included the late King Hussein's book, *My job as a king*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Adel Bashqawi's *Circassia: Born to be free*, Ilan Pappe's and Jimmy Carter's books on Palestine, E. E. Schultz's *Retirement Heist*, Richard Branson's *Losing My Virginity*, Robert Kiyosaki's *Rich dad, poor dad*, G. Watson's book about Henry Ford, A. Hurst's *The purpose economy*, and *The Guinness Book of Records*. Their interest in politics could reflect the greater involvement of males than females in local politics (Shafi & Loan, 2010)

Females exclusively read books by Jane Austen, Rhonda Byrne, E. Chandler, Charles Dickens, Gayle Forman, C. Funke, Veronica Roth, John Green and Nicholas Sparks and others, and

their nonfiction choices included a C. S. Lewis book on Christianity, Kahlil Gibran's, *The Prophet* (prose poetry) and self-help books by male authors, such as, Steve Harvey's books *Straight talk, no chaser* and *Act like a lady, think like a man*, Dale Carnegie's *How to win friends and influence people* and Michael Baisden's *Never satisfied: How/why men cheat*.

3.2 Preferred Author and Protagonist Gender – Counting Single Gender, Only

Male and female students preferred male authors and protagonists when reading nonfiction. Nonfiction titles with a clear protagonist included Sophia Amoruso's *Girl Boss* and Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*, Gregory Watson's *Henry Ford: The inspirational story* and John Corcoran's, *The teacher who couldn't read.* Female students, however, preferred their own-gender authors and protagonists when reading fiction.

3.3 Narrator's Voice

91% of the novels read by males and 58% of those read by females were narrated in the third person, including the one YA novel read by a male student (Nancy H. Wilson's *Mountain Pose*). Three-quarters of females' chosen young adult (YA) novels were narrated in the first person and had American authors, protagonists and settings, which is somewhat consistent with Day's (2013) observation that most contemporary American YA literature uses first-person narration.

3.5 Preferred Language and Book Format

Qualitative data showed that most students read for leisure in English as their reading ability is stronger in that language. For tri-lingual student, [1]Sereen, the language in which she reads depends on her mood. Her mother tongue is French, her father tongue is Arabic and at the age of 15 she started to read more in English to improve her English language. 98% of the students prefer to read printed books for leisure for the following reasons:

"it's easier on the eyes as reading on a screen causes eye strain",

"the physical feel and appeal of a book",

"ease of navigation and a sense of accomplishment because as one reads a physical book, one turns the pages, indicating the growing part in the left hand that is read".

Those who say they prefer to read on-screen cite the convenience and ease of carrying many books in a small item. They are not keen readers, however, so their observations may be moot.

4. Discussion

Although certain elements such as author, character, etc may be of importance, the overall deciding factor in students' choices appears to be the reading experience they expect to have.

4.1 Genre - Fiction and Nonfiction

Knowing whether a text is nonfiction or fiction before reading it helps us to better understand it (Currie, 1990; Friend, 2012) and decide "whether, or in what proportions, to be instructed

or delighted" (Currie 1990, p.1), respectively. Students in this study overwhelmingly chose to be "delighted" rather than instructed, which is consistent with a general dominance of fiction in leisure reading choices (Ross, 2010; Summers, 2013). When reading fiction, "readers feel more at home, textually speaking" (Ryan, 1997, p.171) because fictional worlds are self-contained and complete so the reader does not need to check and verify facts with the real world, as he would if reading nonfiction. The study also supports claims that females read more than men (ACNielsen Company et al., 2001; Thelwall, 2017), particularly romance. However, claims that women read more fiction than men (Tepper, 2000; Ross, 2010) or that men read more nonfiction than women (NEA report 58, 2015) were only marginally supported by this study.

Students' interest in classics suggests that books that were once assigned in high school are often selected for voluntary reading later on and reflects findings elsewhere, including in Estonia, for example (Puksand 2014), the UK (Hodgson & Thomson, 2000) and Finland (Herkman & Vainikka, 2014). *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was read by five students in this study, has been a perennial for decades on schools' required reading lists across the US (Rich, 2009) and beyond (Mackey, 2014). Such classic staples "seem to be eternally relevant: they speak to us in a way that forever changes the way we look at our lives." (Swanson 1994, p.2). Their relevance to many, however, starts only after they have left school (Reynolds, 2004), supporting claims by some of a disconnect between students' and school's reading choices (Jolliffe & Harl, 2008; Ross, 2000).

4.2 Gender

Instead of reverting to purely biological sex as a reason for why certain books appealed exclusively to each gender group, a better explanation is that such choices indicate students' identification with certain gender traits (McGeown, 2015). For example, identification with the female traits of caring and compassion comes to the fore in reading *The Notebook* and *The Fault in our Stars*, while the male traits of competitiveness and aggression are complemented in *The Shining* or the *Wheel of Time* books. This accommodates the cross-over of various book titles within genders.

4.3 Author

4.3.1 Favourite Author

Determining students' favourite author depends on the method of gathering data and the questions asked. Estonian adolescents also listed *Harry Potter* as *their* favourite book, yet placed J.K Rowling eighth in a list of their favourite contemporary authors (Puksand, 2014). Therefore, the role of author in determining book choices in this study, deserves a closer look. While JK Rowling's books were listed 30 times, none were listed by Robert Galbraith, the pseudonym of the same author writing in a different genre. On the other hand, the last three books in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series were written (either entirely or partially) by Brandon Sanderson, but this did not deter male students, who had read many of the earlier titles written by Jordan himself, from also reading two of the three written by Sanderson: *The Gathering Storm* and *Towers of Midnight*.

There is no book without an author but, once a reader starts reading, it seems that the author is replaced with an "implied author" (Booth, 1961), "a construct formed by the reader on the basis of his or her reading of the work" (Schmid, 2014, p.7). The interpretation of a text is in the hands of the reader, so that, "the birth of the reader must be at cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1977, p.148). Reading many books by the same author may indicate a preference for that author's style, storyline and characters rather than a preference for that author per se. While an author's name may initially direct a reader to a particular book, awareness of the actual author often wanes while reading, as a student in an earlier study said, "Don't ask me about the name. I always don't remember!" (Kamhieh, 2012, p.152).

Placing the reader center-stage suggests that Readers Advisory's book-based appeal factors may need to be revised in favour of the reader's overall reading experience, taking into account how she connects with a book, how it feels, etc., (Dali, 2014). This prevents the thinking – often held by educators who wish to recommend books to students - that because a student enjoyed reading *Harry Potter,* they will also enjoy reading other books with wizards in them (Beard & Thi-Beard, 2008).

4.3.2 Author Gender

Female students' greater willingness than males to read opposite-gender authors and characters is consistent with findings from other studies (Summers, 2013; Kamhieh, 2017) and the finding that author gender appeared less important than book genre and content is similar to the study carried out with Finnish adults, aged 18-30 (Herkman & Vainikka, 2014). If author gender is of little or no concern to female readers who outnumber male readers, it seems puzzling that author gender should still matter to many book publishers, to the extent that female writers (including Rowling, for example) often have to disguise their gender.

4.3.3 Foreign Authors and Content

Students' high interest in foreign authors and characters indicates college students who have grown up with the Internet and who are regularly exposed to various foreign media and forms of entertainment (Loan, 2011, p.45; Herkman & Vainikka, 2014). This trend in Australia was described as "a cultural shift … reflecting the fact that younger Australians are 'born global' in their cultural access and expectations" (Throsby, Zwar & Morgan, 2017, p.33). Most college students today were "born global" and this, together with movie tie-ins and related promotional devices, results in various forces pulling readers away from national and local literature. However, the global pull among this group of Arab college students is even greater than the 90% found among Australian book buyers (ACNielsen Company et al., 2001) or among Finnish students who retained a considerable interest in reading local or national authors (Herkman & Vainikka, 2014; Puksand, 2014) while also enjoying foreign content and authors.

An interesting possible explanation for this outward look comes from a study of the reading choices of girls aged 8 to 16 years in the US, in which they expressed their desire to read a good story, defined as one that bore no resemblance to their own lives, "one that they are 'not' living - that actually looks 'nothing' like the life they know" (Blackford, 2004, p.6).

This echoes a comment made in an earlier study of book reading choices of female Emirati university students. When asked if she would like to read *Binat Al Riyadh*, [1]Badira said that she already knew about the girls in Riyad (the meaning of the title), and their problems, "everyone knows about it, so, why do we have to read about it. It's depressing" (Kamhieh, 2012, p.155). Could it be, in the case of many Arab readers, that because they know enough about themselves, they want to get to know more about others when they read? As a girl in Blackford's study said: "I live [being a girl] every day so I know everything like me, so I want to know about something else" (p.1). Blackford's apt description of what happens when these girls do just that could also speak for the students in this study: "In their view, literature is an invitation to move beyond the self, beyond the politics of identity, within which we live our everyday lives" (p.2). They swap one view of the world for multiple views provided by various authors.

5. Narrator Voice

Some discussions about narrator voice in the literature appear to suggest that third-person narrated novels have more benefit for readers, particularly in the areas of empathy (Mar and Oatley, 2008), theory of the mind and perspective taking (Nikolajeva, 2014). Based on that, findings from this study are encouraging. However, the fact that many female readers' novels were narrated in the first person could be cause for concern because this "doesn't allow for enough critical distance" (Gallant, 2017, p.2). First-person narrator may diminish readers' opportunities "to experience the points of view of different characters in the same story" (ibid.) and allows neither "reflection on the past nor anticipation of the future. In other words, it constructs the fictional self as static and stable" (Nikolajeva, 2014, p.88). This may be the first study of college students' book reading choices which looks at narrator voice so there are none to compare its findings with.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

This study provides a snapshot of the book reading choices of a convenience sample of students attending a private university in Jordan. It shows that many of this so-called 'wired generation' of college students are choosing to read, and know how to find the books they want to read, in a part of the world criticized for its lack of reading. They are avid readers who "are likely to keep on reading for the pleasure of it, [and know] how to find something satisfying to read" (Mackey, 2014, p.521). The study also offers food for thought for educators and librarians alike, who are interested in college students' book reading choices, by suggesting that students choose books for the overall reading experience rather than for a particular author or other individual book-appeal factor, per se. The population sample however, was small and although it represents a cross-section of students in a range of degree programs at the university, its findings are not generalizable to the whole student population.

As new technologies such as the Internet and social media appear to be having a seismic effect on literacy practices in general, it is increasingly important to investigate the book reading choices of college students in the Arab world. The mother of one of my students told her that if the teacher recommended the book she was reading, then it was a good book. Many college students are still dependent on teachers to help them find a good book. There is

much work still to be done to ensure that all our students develop their own reading identities, gain willingness and confidence to try out new authors and genres and gain maximum benefit from their time at college.

Further research could investigate some of the concepts presented here such as, the role of narrator voice in students' book choices, for example, and the importance of author. Qualitative research could probe students' reasons for not choosing more Arab authors. As researchers and teachers, "it is our job to try and understand their [students'] tastes, so that we are well informed to build upon them and enhance their understanding of what reading and responding can be" (Bora, 2016, p.98). Reading books makes us think, while reading short text messages makes us react. Which do we want our students to do?

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