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► **To cite this version:**

Amélie Doche. Review of the book 'Reading Habits in the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Applied Linguistic Perspective' by Abigail Boucher, Marcello Giovanelli, Chloe Harrison, Robbie Love, Caroline Godfrey, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. 147 pp., €43.59 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-031-52752-4. English Studies, 2024, pp.1-3. 10.1080/0013838X.2024.2400735 . hal-04730235

HAL Id: hal-04730235

<https://hal.science/hal-04730235v1>

Submitted on 10 Oct 2024

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Reading Habits in the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Applied Linguistic Perspective

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To cite this article: Amélie Doche (09 Oct 2024): Reading Habits in the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Applied Linguistic Perspective, English Studies, DOI: [10.1080/0013838X.2024.2400735](https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2024.2400735)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2024.2400735>



Published online: 09 Oct 2024.



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BOOK REVIEW

Reading Habits in the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Applied Linguistic Perspective, by Abigail Boucher, Marcello Giovanelli, Chloe Harrison, Robbie Love, Caroline Godfrey, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. 147 pp., €43.59 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-031-52752-4

The Covid-19 lockdowns sparked a wealth of new research into reading habits. The Special Issue "Bookshelves, Social Media and Gaming", published in this very journal in 2022, explores the manifold connections between the book as a material artefact, its visual representations through "bookishness"¹, and the pandemic. The pandemic affected both readers' and writers' literary practices. While some readers produced an abundance of epitextual materials such as "to-be-read" piles and "unboxing" pictures², some writers instinctively fathered new sub-genres, such as "Covid poetry"³. Thus far, most the research capturing the impact of the pandemic on reading habits does so through naturalistic observations. *Reading Habits in the Covid-19 Pandemic* is the first scholarly work to use the data drawn from a survey—The Aston Lockdown Reading Survey, circulated in June and July 2020—to answer the following questions: "1) How has the pandemic affected the quantity of books people are reading? 2) How has the pandemic influenced the type/genre of books people are reading? 3) How has the pandemic influenced people to return to previously read books? 4) How has the pandemic made people access and talk about books in new/different ways?" (p. 3). Boucher et al.'s work presents a corpus-driven stylistic analysis of readers' relationships to literary genres (chapter 2), time (chapter 3), coping strategies (chapter 4), re-reading (chapter 5), and social reading (chapter 6) before and during the first lockdown of March-May 2020.

Chapter 2 provides a historically-informed analysis of the literary genres sought out by readers in periods of cultural trauma. Findings from The Aston Lockdown Reading Survey Corpus reveal lockdown readers gravitated towards formulaic genres with well-established tropes, such as romance and crime fiction. These genres evoke feelings of escapism, comfort, and familiarity. A minority of readers opted for books addressing pandemic-related themes, which confirms Weber's observation⁴ pertaining to the increasing popularity of Camus's *The Plague* on Goodreads during the early Covid-19 lockdown period.

Chapter 3 examines readers' perceptions of time during the early lockdown. In line with conventional metaphors in Western culture, survey respondents quantified time and perceived it as a resource to be spent. 60% reported reading more. However, whether participants read less or more, they provided similar reasons for doing so: loss of commute, lack of social activities, caring responsibilities, and compromised mental health. The findings also indicate that reading is seen as a kind of caregiver or friend. The newly-published anthology *Poems as Friends* embodies this therapeutic trend.

Chapter 4—the only inductive chapter of the sequence—delves into the therapeutic value of reading during lockdown by analysing the keywords "comfort" and "comforting". Findings reveal that these terms are linked to enjoyment, familiarity, distraction, relaxation and nostalgia. In the context of the study, nostalgia has a positive connotation interwoven with the

¹See Pressman, "Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First Century Literature".

²Doche, "Lockdown, Literature and Online Culture," 3.

³Giovanelli, "Reading the Lockdown".

⁴Weber, "Online Reading During the Covid-19 Pandemic," 28.

familiarity and memories of childhood. Surveyed participants reported a clear therapeutic benefit in revisiting familiar stories to both escape from and cope with the early lockdown.

Chapter 5 explores how readers returned to familiar books during the first lockdown. People re-read for enjoyment, familiarity, comprehension, emotional resonance, transportation, and aesthetic appreciation. Findings indicate that re-readers conceptualise their experiences metaphorically either as a relationship or as a journey. Indeed, participants view fictional worlds as having a fixed, easily accessible location, akin to a good relationship or a safe place. This insight explains why romance, with its familiar tropes, became the favoured genre among participants.

Chapter 6 investigates the social dimension of reading during the pandemic. Findings show that readers increasingly used the affordances of video-call software (e.g., Zoom) and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) to maintain their social literary practices. Participants also reported discussing their reading more frequently in their “bubbles”, which served as semi-public spaces. The authors note a discrepancy in social media usage: individuals with poor mental health did not use social media, leading to a decline of their social reading habits.

Building a bridge between the inherently related—yet artificially separated—disciplines of language and literature, *Reading Habits in the Covid-19 Pandemic* boasts many strengths. The authors adopt an eclectic approach to methodology whereby corpus linguistics, stylistics, thematic coding, and literary methodologies merge to offer readers a comprehensive comparative analysis of reading habits before vs. during the first lockdown. This eclectic methodology is complemented by an inclusive and generous approach to disciplinary knowledge(s). Indeed, Boucher et al.’s research makes an important step towards breaking the separatist language/literature tradition. The “applied linguistics” approach emphasised in the subtitle does not prevent the authors from engaging with the leading work of Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, Johanne Gormsen Schmidt, Danielle Fuller, DeNel Rehberg Sedo, Janice Radway, and Leah Price within the realm of reception-oriented book culture. Despite sharing similar objects of study, reader-response stylistics and reception-oriented book culture rarely communicate. For instance, the edited collection *Style and Reader Response: Minds, Media, Methods* published in 2021 does not reference any cultural theorists. Its literary equivalent, *Post-Digital Book Cultures: Australian Perspectives*, also published in 2021, does not reference a single stylistician. The findings presented in the present volume would undoubtedly find an interested audience among members of both the Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA) and the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP). Let us hope that this inclusive approach—perhaps first pioneered by Bronwen Thomas—continues.

This volume presents very few, if any, weaknesses. The five content chapters retain a clear scope, but each interweaves with the next one, bringing forth an eminently logical sequence. The volume’s contribution to knowledge and its limitations are clearly stated. On one occasion, the authors’ claim could have been bolder. 80% of the respondents of the Aston Lockdown Reading Survey were women, which the authors consider as a significant limitation. Research by Scholes, Thomas-Corr, Thorpe consistently finds that women buy more books, are more likely to engage in a book-club, are more likely to use Goodreads, make up the majority of audiences at literary festivals and bookshop events, and spend more self-reported time reading. It is quite likely that the sample population of the Aston Lockdown Reading Survey matches current practices, thus turning the stated limitation into a strength. I only found one minor typographical issue on the book’s spine: all the authors’ names are separated by a dot, but one is missing between Chloe Harrison and Robbie Love. Reporting on one missing dot in a 147-page long volume can only substantiate the potency of both content and form in *Reading Habits in the Covid-19 Pandemic*.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2024.2400735>

