Check for updates

BRIEF REPORT

Reading class: Digital evidence about fiction and social class

[version 1; peer review: 2 not approved]

Mathies Aarhus

Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, Department of Literature History of Ideas and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Västra Götaland County, Sweden

v1 **First published:** 13 Aug 2024, **4**:180
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.18136.1
Latest published: 13 Aug 2024, **4**:180
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.18136.1

Abstract

Recent years have seen the return of social class to popular fiction with the success of international authors like Édouard Louis, Annie Ernaux, Sally Rooney and Douglas Stuart. In Scandinavia, working-class authors have topped bestseller lists since 2022 and have drawn attention in mass media. This study looks at readers of "class fiction" by analyzing data from the digital book platform eReolen. Using data for loan time and geographic municipality, I argue that the popularity of class fiction has been fueled by media attention and gain many of its readers from relatively prosperous areas in Denmark – as opposed to the people represented in the books.

Plain language summary

In recent years, literature about social class has topped bestseller lists around the world. But who actually reads class literature? This article analyzes digital loan data to scrutinize social characteristics of readers of class literature. Through geographic data, the article argues that class literature is overwhelmingly consumed in wealthy areas and thus seem to appeal to the higher classes.

Keywords

digital humanities, social class, book data, statistics, class fiction

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ✗ ✗

	1	2
version 1 13 Aug 2024	✗ view	✗ view

1. **Emanuele Castano**, University of Trento, Trento, Italy

2. **Tú Anh Hà**, FPT University, Hanoi, Vietnam
Rovira i Virgili University, Tarragona, Spain

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

This article is included in the Horizon Europe gateway.

This article is included in the Marie-Sklodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) gateway.



This article is included in the Digital Humanities collection.

Corresponding author: Mathies Aarhus (mathies.aarhus@lir.gu.se)

Author roles: Aarhus M: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No [101067665].
The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Copyright: © 2024 Aarhus M. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

How to cite this article: Aarhus M. **Reading class: Digital evidence about fiction and social class [version 1; peer review: 2 not approved]** Open Research Europe 2024, **4**:180 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.18136.1

First published: 13 Aug 2024, **4**:180 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.18136.1

Introduction

One of the most persistent problems within literary studies has been to empirically analyze literary reception at scale.[1] Previously, scholars only had access to book data in the form of Bestseller lists and other sparse data sources. With new digital methods and granular data from libraries and industry agencies, we can approach more sophisticated analyzes of who reads what, where and when. The problem, however, is that very little data is currently available to researchers.[2] The following study is made possible by a partnership with the Danish public libraries and its digital branch Det Digitale Folkebibliotek (The Digital Public Library), which has provided me with access to data on physical and digital loans from eReolen.[3]

Methods

eReolen is a unique service within the international library world, as it is one of the only platforms in the world that gathers an entire nation's digital lending in one app.[4] In recent years, eReolen has continually expanded its user base and in 2023 it had 772,000 unique users or approximately 1/8 of the Danish population as users. Approximately 2/3 of all loans made on eReolen are audiobooks.

The article zooms in on a handful of books that can be described as class fiction: all written by working-class authors depicting working class environments. Interestingly, these books are among the most read in Denmark, and some have even topped the most popular books in recent years as Table 1 attests to.

As illustrated in Table 1, eReolen's loans show two examples of class fiction sitting atop its lists: Thomas Korsgaard's Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi (If a person were to pass by) and Glenn Bech's Jeg anerkender ikke længere jeres autoritet (I no longer recognise your authority). Indeed eReolen's loan data questions previous research in digital literature, which has claimed that book platforms - such as eReolen, Saxo Premium or Mofibo - are principally used to consume genre literature.[5] Digital reading on eReolen is not exclusively an activity that favors genre literature (crime novels, romance, fantasy, etc.) but is increasingly a platform that mediates the literary field in general.

Results

Turning to the loan history of the most popular class novel in Denmark, Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi (If a person were to pass by), the loans of class fiction seem very unevenly distributed over the course of a year. Figure 1 visualizes number of loans in 2022 and 2023 of Thomas Korsgaard's Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi (If a person were to pass by).

The graph shows several remarkable spikes in loan activity. The first spike occurs in February 2022, the second in January 2023, and the third in October 2023. The first spike happened around the time when Korsgaard won The Golden Laurels, which is a very prestigious Danish award given by the country's booksellers. This spike seems to confirm previous research into the significance of literary awards.[6] The second spike appears in January 2023, when the book was again receiving media attention, this time because it was in the background when the Prime Minister gave her New Year's speech. The last spike took place in the autumn of 2023, when Korsgaard's literature was staged as a play at the Royal National Theatre in Copenhagen. The book's popularity thus rose during three important events: The Golden Laurels, the prime minister's New Year's speech and the dramatization at the Royal Theatre. Overall, media coverage and press circulation thus appear to be almost instantly reflected in lending figures on eReolen.

To scrutinize the popularity of class fiction on a regional basis, data from various Danish library municipalities can be compared. In Denmark, there are 98 municipalities, each with its own local library service. These municipalities are very socially unequal with wealthy municipalities centering around Copenhagen, North Zealand and Aarhus. Thus, to understand the social backgrounds of readers of class literature we can look at where in the country loans are coming from.

For this study, I selected a group of authors who can be considered representatives of class fiction: Édouard Louis, Douglas Stuart, Annie Ernaux and popular Danish authors Thomas Korsgaard, Glenn Bech and Morten Pape. These were chosen because they had a certain international spread and included popular and more niche authors. Next, I computed

[1] Studies of reading is an interdisciplinary field which involves many different academic traditions and methods such as reader response theory, book history, neuroscience, sociology of literature, publishing studies, digital humanities, library science and cultural studies. See Radway, Janice. "What's the Matter with Reception Study?." *New directions in American reception study* (2008): 327–352; Price, Leah. "Reading: the state of the discipline." *Book history 7.1* (2004): 303–320; Miall, David S. "Empirical approaches to studying literary readers: The state of the discipline." *Book History 9.1* (2006): 291-311; Escarpit, Robert. "Methods in Reading Research." *Studies on Research in Reading and Libraries: Approaches and Results from Several Countries* (1993): 1-16.

[2] Walsh, Melanie. 'Where Is All the Book Data?", *Public Books* 2022-10-04. https://www.publicbooks.org/where-is-all-the-book-data/. However, see: Berglund, Karl. *Reading Audio Readers: Book Consumption in the Streaming Age. Bloomsbury Publishing*, 2024; So, Richard Jean. *Redlining culture: a data history of racial inequality and postwar fiction.* Columbia University Press, 2021; Sinykin, Dan. *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature*. Columbia University Press, 2023. These studies are groundbreaking within the field of literary studies.

[3] All graphs in this article are made by me, but are based on third party data provided by the libraries. Graphs are made with various libraries in Python. Code DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13134357.

[4] In other countries, regional libraries often have their own apps and systems to register loans, and these electronic resources are rarely as popular as eReolen.

[5] See eg. Berglund, Karl. *Reading Audio Readers: Book Consumption in the Streaming Age. Bloomsbury Publishing*, 2024.

[6] See English, James F. *The economy of prestige: Prizes, awards, and the circulation of cultural value*. Harvard University Press, 2005.

Table 1. Lists of most loaned books addressed to adults on eReolen 2022 and 2023. Class fiction highlighted. Underlying data from The Danish Libraries.

	Most popular books, eReolen 2022	Most popular books, eReolen 2023
1	Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi (If a person were to pass by)	Annas sang (Annas song)
2	Where the Crawdads Sing	Jeg anerkender ikke længere jeres autoritet (I no longer recognise your authority)
3	Ugly Love	Dit selvhelbredende sind (Your selfhealing mind)
4	En dag vil vi grine af det (One day we will laugh about it)	Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi (If a person were to pass by)
5	It Ends with Us	Meter i sekundet (The Land of Short Sentences)
6	The Last Bookshop in London	OXEN – De hængte hunde (OXEN – The hanged dogs)
7	One Summer in Malta	Vi havde en fest på arbejdet, men så kom Preben … (We had a party at work, but then Preben came…)
8	Kvinderne fra Thy (The women from Thy)	Den tavse enke (The Silent Widower)
9	Mysteriet i Genbrugsen (The Mystery in Genbrugsen)	The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck
10	Afsporet (Deranged)	Vølvens vej – Snehild (The path of the wolf – Snowhild)

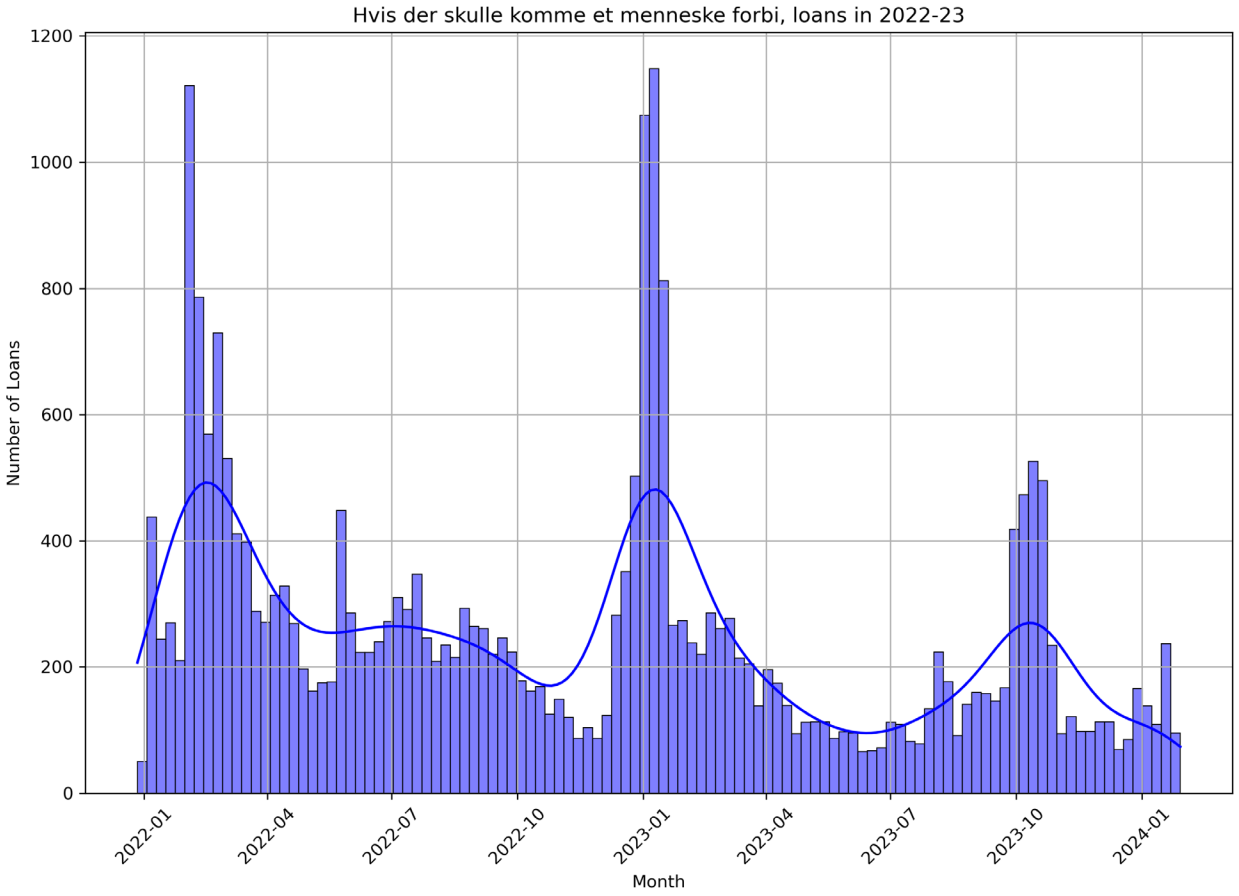

Figure 1. Histogram and KDE of number of loans per week for Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi (If a person were to pass by).

the difference in proportion of loans of these authors from each Danish municipality. Comparing each municipality's loans of class fiction proportionally to the municipality's total loans thus provides an estimate of how popular class fiction is relative to other books in the municipality. This proportional value can be subtracted from the proportional value for the entire country to compare the municipal level to the national average. This method yields 98 values distributed around 0, where municipalities with a negative value are below the national average, while municipalities with a positive value are above.[7] The results can be visualized as a choropleth map, as in Figure 2.

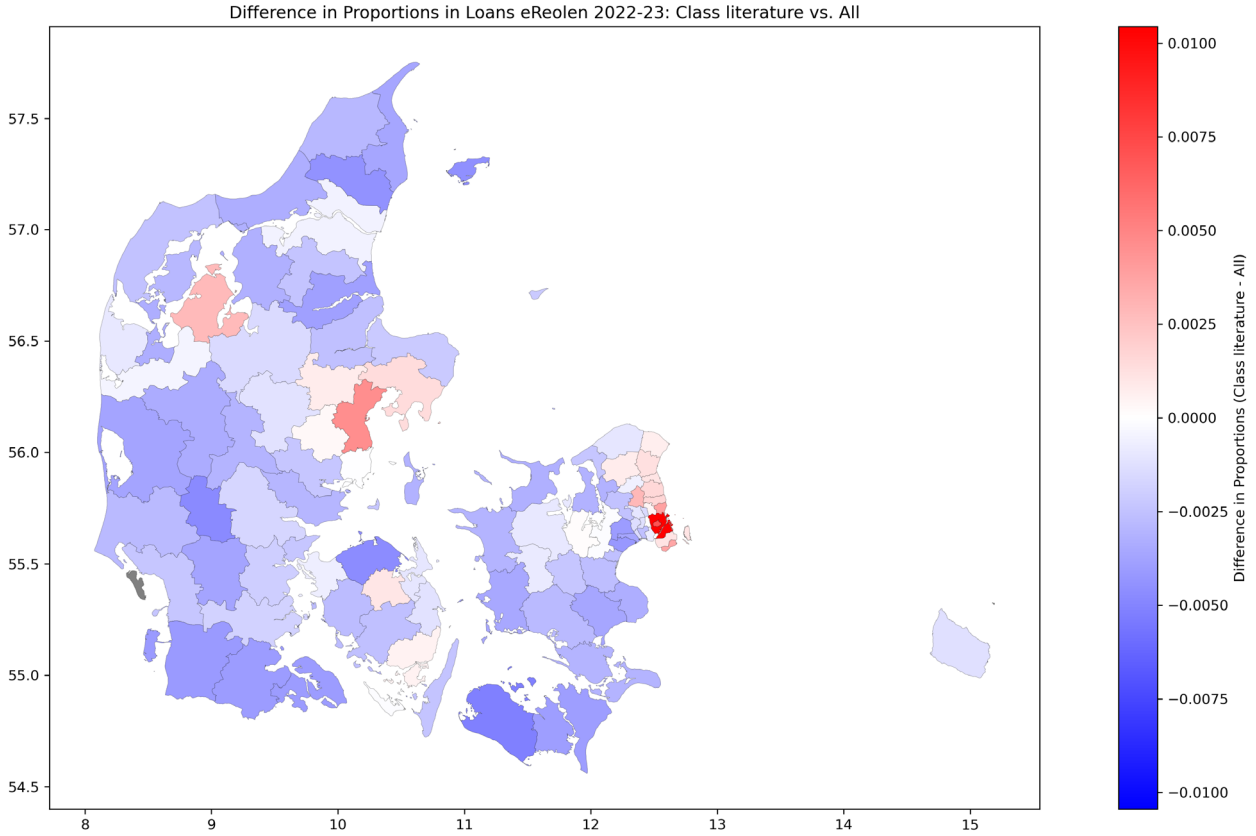

Figure 2. Choropleth map of difference in proportion of loans of class fiction compared to national average.

[7] Aabenraa: -0.004056964266162456, Aalborg: -0.0005241450685048096, Albertslund: -0.001379685263642079, Allerød: -0.0006289597658258456, Assens: -0.0027382034061085433, Ballerup: -0.0010519122887464975, Billund: -0.004806281096863053, Bornholm: -0.0012684160727858673, Brøndby: -0.002585411089291419, Brønderslev-Dronninglund: -0.004453388497349176, Dragør: 0.003611724733308022, Egedal: -0.002481176532992962, Esbjerg: -0.0023304948695597 73, Faaborg-Midtfyn: -0.0025679777066481262, Favrskov: 0.0007970746824068429, Faxe: -0.0036426415814195 62, Fredensborg: 0.0012311729218124103, Fredericia: -0.0022890239154595583, Frederiksberg: 0.007052859857766514, Frederikshavn: -0.003628354996816445, Frederikssund: -0.003137481638372617, Furesø: 0.0028844155923130176, Gentofte: 0.0037934293004053196, Gladsaxe: 0.0004876800619549697, Glostrup: -0.0012409040906162794, Greve: -0.004170867183776122, Gribskov: -0.0010103553666248582, Guldborgsund: -0.003957015094673162, Haderslev: -0.0018124611295104861, Halsnæs: -0.0023524439541264576, Hedensted: -0.0029369345071464355, Helsingør: 0.0006570442098934315, Herlev: -0.0015191149425842912, Herning: -0.0033854751257928186, Hillerød: 0.0007916384270076991, Hjørring: -0.002862051505693076, Holbæk: -0.0009315680488258381, Holstebro: -0.0004537114635981311, Horsens: -0.002318060046561531, Hvidovre: -0.0008056825533472416, Høje-Taastrup: -0.0040406815092847775, Hørsholm: 0.0010782006534895312, Ikast-Brande: -0.00305221034815323, Ishøj: -0.0036165766165345116, Jammerbugt: -0.003287251684033393, Kalundborg: -0.003048912260456095, Kerteminde: -0.001037119175962246, Kolding: -0.001985219686002066, København: 0.010441866215537271, Køge: -0.0026795155654366354, Langeland: -0.0024237878659050032, Lejre: 0.00015230203611758635, Lemvig: -0.0009938614024629262, Lolland: -0.0051651150651375 09, Lyngby-Taarbæk: 0.0017034895226480228, Læsø: -0.0045589154920005 76, Mariagerfjord: -0.0038531955270515216, Middelfart: -0.0007108863977600844, Morsø: -0.002916165339225154, Norddjurs: -0.0021399304665378387, Nordfyns: -0.004681793842338024, Nyborg: -0.001179883635362181, Næstved: -0.0028377653718734738, Odder: -2.9729807687058768e-05, Odense: 0.0010265761900961675, Odsherred: -0.0032432982064029966, Randers: -0.002542778905772052, Rebild: -0.0024030741933492783, Ringkøbing-Skjern: -0.0037154038064032245, Ringsted: -0.0023564449875226106, Roskilde: -0.0001613351548904028 8, Rudersdal: 0.0015555785508991823, Rødovre: 3.716447140926678e-05, Samsø: -0.0031049811835028567, Silkeborg: -0.0011783987891593548, Skanderborg: 0.0002827854573212787 4, Skive: 0.0027847121120524038, Slagelse: -0.0035721692262164276, Solrød: -0.0025410847819532, Sorø: -0.0008912593451763859, Stevns: -0.0032779747762926807, Struer: -0.0032853172685284922, Svendborg: 0.0005438877902139132, Syddjurs: 0.001405491243559388, Sønderborg: -0.004049962295451 37, Thisted: -0.002494549070677884, Tårnby: 0.0010776632252148238, Tønder: -0.004087817075598116, Vallensbæk: -0.0014387982427562177, Varde: -0.002819368078676554, Vejen: -0.0036738136180710246, Vejle: -0.001686261705304429, Vesthimmerland: -0.0032040913391945458, Viborg: -0.0015079742774794253, Vordingborg: -0.003059987708990227, Århus: 0.004640037157701452, Ærø: -0.0001238216009507593.

In this visualization, the blue color represents municipalities that borrow a low proportion of class fiction on eReolen, while red represents municipalities with a high proportion of loans of class literature. Red thus visualizes a high interest in class fiction, blue visualizes a low interest, while white indicates an average interest.

The map shows red spots around the largest Danish cities Aarhus, Odense and Copenhagen that are also the areas with the highest levels of income and education. Copenhagen is the area where class fiction is most popular compared to other books. The more provincial and rural areas, where the Danish working classes tend to live, generally are less interested in class fiction. In fact, some of the poorest municipalities of Denmark (such as Lolland, Tønder, Brønderslev, North Funen and Northwest Zealand) also have the lowest interest in class fiction as visualized by the map.

Conclusion

The analysis thus shows that poor and rural areas read significantly less class fiction than wealthier regions. This is a slightly discouraging conclusion if one harbors social ambitions on behalf of class fiction, or imagines that it can help spread literature to working-class people and reading communities. But it is also a conclusion that asks a number of fundamental questions about the representation of social class and poverty today. Perhaps, first and foremost, this article's analysis hints at a kind of voyeurism in the cultural consumption of class fiction. It is the wealthiest areas of Denmark, consisting primarily of the upper class, the upper middle class, and the middle class, who are especially drawn to narratives of marginalized and underprivileged areas. Some would perhaps use this point to claim that contemporary class fiction depends on a certain degree of "class tourism", as socially prosperous groups explore underprivileged environments. Claims like these, however, are not visible in quantitative data, but must be concluded from more qualitative studies.[8]

This article's analyses of class fiction and regional differences in reading is of course only a fraction of the potential use of large book datasets like eReolens. Others possible venues to explore are: comparing audiobook and digital book loans; comparing consumption of old and new literature; studies of gender and genres; children's books and age differences in reading; user typologies; network analyses (of authors, books, readers and genres) and much more.

Data availability

Underlying data

Data has been provided by a third party: Det Digitale Folkebibliotek. Data has been shared with the author through a partnership agreement and under strict confidentiality rules. To access data, contact Det Digitale Folkebibliotek (kontakt@detdigitalefolkebibliotek.dk) and ask for permission.

Extended data

Analysis code available from: https://github.com/mathiesaarhus/reading_class/

Archived analysis code at time of publication: https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.13134356[9]

License: MIT License

[8] See eg Aarhus, Mathies G. "Anxiety in the precariat: The affects of class in James Kelman's fiction." *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture. Bloomsbury Academic*, 2021. 42-55; Simonsen, Peter, and Mathies G. Aarhus. "Theater of the Precariat: Staging Precarity in Alexander Zeldin's Love." *Contemporary Literature 61.3* (2021): 335-361.

[9] Mathies Aarhus. (2024). mathiesaarhus/reading_class: release (release). Zenodo. [Code]. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13134357

Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✗ ✗

Version 1

Reviewer Report 06 September 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19605.r43157

© **2024 Hà T.** This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

✗ **Tú Anh Hà**
[1] FPT University, Hanoi, Hanoi, Vietnam
[2] Rovira i Virgili University, Tarragona, Spain

In general, the research brief is not well structured with many parts are not in the right section. It lacks the research purpose and the academic rationale to conduct the research in Introduction. Due to the fact that the research purpose is not clearly stated in the Introduction, there is a mismatch between the findings and the plain summary, also the method is not clear as the result of the lack of research purposes.
For example, from the plain summary the research purpose is: This article analyzes digital loan data to scrutinize social characteristics of readers of class literature. However, in the findings, the author presented the time when the books were sold the most: The book's popularity thus rose during three important events: The Golden Laurels, the prime minister's New Year's speech and the dramatization at the Royal Theatre. Overall, media coverage and press circulation thus appear to be almost instantly reflected in lending figures on eReolen.
I do not find the relationship between the time the books were sold the most and the purpose the author presented (to examine the social characteristics of readers of class literature). The findings are not relevant to the research purpose.
There are concepts that the author did not introduce: class literature, the return of social class, class fiction. How are the concepts link to each other? Does class literature mean literature written about the return of social class? What does the author mean by writing 'social class'? There are many social classes in the society.
What is the implication of the research to find which areas that read the most class fictions? (for marketing or business purposes? Or for what?)

1. Introduction

There are some concepts that should be introduced, even briefly in the Introduction so as to make your research reasonable to be conducted and worth reading:

- The concept of 'class fiction'.
- The concept of social class with their return to popular fiction. What do you mean by 'social class'?
- Why it is important to research 'class fiction' and the phenomenon of 'social class' in popular

fiction (except the reason that it is in the top list of bestsellers)? Are there any social-cultural and academic reasons to investigating the reason? If you can link this to the Sustainable development goals, I think they can be meaningful.

- Why do we need to know who reads what, where and when?

The Introduction did not state which problem you wanted to investigate in your research.
The sentence: The following study is made possible by a partnership with the Danish public libraries and its digital branch Det Digitale Folkebibliotek (The Digital Public Library), which has provided me with access to data on physical and digital loans from eReolen.3 should be in the part of method.

1. I understand the research purposes through the abstract and the plain summary as the following:

This article analyzes digital loan data to scrutinize social characteristics of readers of class literature.
And the findings:
Using data for loan time and geographic municipality, I argue that the popularity of class fiction has been fueled by media attention and gain many of its readers from relatively prosperous areas in Denmark – as opposed to the people represented in the books.

However no information about the research purposes was given in the Introduction.

1. The method is not clear how you analyzed the data. In addition, there is some information of the Method that is actually the findings:

As illustrated in Table 1, eReolen's loans show two examples of class fiction sitting atop its lists.
Digital reading on eReolen is not exclusively an activity that favors genre literature (crime novels, romance, fantasy, etc.) but is increasingly a platform that mediates the literary field in general.

1. Results

Some results are not related to the research purpose, such as the time when books were sold the most.
The parts of how the author analyzed the data should be in Method, instead of results:
For this study, I selected a group of authors who can be considered representatives of class fiction: Édouard Louis, Douglas Stuart, Annie Ernaux and popular Danish authors Thomas Korsgaard, Glenn Bech and Morten Pape. These were chosen because they had a certain international spread and
included popular and more niche authors. Next, I computed the difference in proportion of loans of these authors from each Danish municipality. Comparing each municipality's loans of class fiction proportionally to the municipality's total loans thus provides an estimate of how popular class fiction is relative to other books in the municipality. They are in the Method.

Is the method used appropriate to the purpose of your research? You need to identify a clear research purpose and justify that the method fits the research purpose.
What is the implication of your research?

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
No

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Partly

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Reading comprehension, inclusive education, critical literacy

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Reviewer Report 30 August 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19605.r43159

© 2024 Castano E. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Emanuele Castano
Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies, CNR, University of Trento, Trento, Italy

The author sets out to investigate the reasons for what he claims to be a return, in terms of popularity, of what he calls "class fiction".

This is an interesting question, but I see several issues with the data and interpretation.

The first set of issues a concern the definition of class fiction and the lack for evidence for the claim about its "return".

Definition. There is no cogent definition of what class fiction is, or at least how the authors himself operationalize it.
Attempts should be made to, for instance, to:

1. collect data showing agreement in considering these authors as authors of class fictions, and their books as examples as such.
2. analyze the language of these books, in comparison to other "genres". This could be done with tools from computational linguistics, which have now become readily available.
3. Should we think of Class fiction only as a type of fiction depicts the struggle of the underprivileged? Or also fiction that also highlights class differences, but focuses instead on the

life of the wealthy?

Return of class fiction. Returns suggests a spike in readership for this kind of fiction. But the data provided are not enough to make a case that this is indeed the case. Ampler sample should be used, also to make sure that the titles that the authors highlights in Table 1 as class fiction do not also differ from the others on other characteristics that may explain their recent popularity. Let me stress, however, that in any case this is not in my view enough data to make such a claim.

A second set of issues has to do with the evidence of the relationship between relative wealth of the readership of such fiction, and the interpretation of this alleged relation.

1. No actual data is provided, with regard to the average income or other indicators of wealth, of the different municipalities. These could be obtained, and actual multivariate statistics could be used to assess the relation of these indicators with the the frequency of borrowing of different types of fiction. None of this has been done. Sentences such as "where the Danish working classes tend to live" or "consist primarily of" are too vague. If data are used to explore a question, then the data should be solid and properly analyzed.

2. Interpretation. I found the voyeurism interpretation to be problematic. There are so many alternatives: How about the possibility that there might be true interest and concern, among the better-off? Of what about the need to escape from a grim reality, which would result in underprivileged people to avoid reading class fiction.

A few other points:

The borrowing data, given that they provide a representative picture across the country, are a valuable source. Yet, the author should reflect upon what is the meaning of relying solely on this data. Who borrows instead of buying? What are the characteristics of these two groups?

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
No

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
No

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Social psychological approaches to fiction; cognitive science; political

psychology.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.