Simone Murray. *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era.*

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- 1 With Salman Rushdie posting on Facebook, Amitav Ghosh blogging about research, and Teju Cole composing a Twitter novel, postcolonial scholars have seen digital technologies changing contemporary literary interpretation. In *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*, Simone Murray offers a compelling account of how shifts in media forms influence literary culture. As she notes, “There is a weary sense that, as a discipline, we have been around this block before” (1). However, she offers fresh insight on the material realities of contemporary literature across the entire supply chain of the literary market. Situated between book history and print culture studies, media studies, and electronic and digital literary studies, Murray’s book offers an incisive model for the future of literary studies that conceptualizes contemporary developments in relation to their historical precursors. Moving through production, distribution, and consumption of literature in the digital age, Murray effectively manages not to, in her words, “pit book history and media and cultural studies against each other but, rather, to catalyze intellectual exchange between them and to demonstrate cross-pollination across disciplinary, institutional, and departmental boundaries” (166).
- 2 Critically, Murray offers a framework for analyzing developments in 21st century literature, from changes in authorial obligation to innovations in publication models

and formats to digital platforms facilitating reader engagement. She positions them as part of a “digital literary sphere,” echoing Jürgen Habermas’s “public sphere.” Coining the term, as Murray does, is critical, for it brings together a number of distinct but related changes at the interface of literary culture and media ecologies. Putting “traditional” dimensions of literary publication (print-oriented media, author, publisher, retailer, reader, and cultural policy entities) into conversation with processes that play out online (performing authorship, selling literature, curating literature’s public life, consecrating the literary, and entering literary discussion), Murray illustrates the complex interplay of digital media and contemporary literary production. Therefore, *The Digital Literary Sphere* offers keen insight on the sociology of literature as well as how digital media influence literary production, how authorship and readership change online, and how to navigate the expansiveness of “literature” in our contemporary moment.

- 3 Murray breaks down the landscape of the digital literary sphere throughout the book. The first chapter offers insight on how digital media contribute to the changing role of the author in the global Anglophone literary marketplace. Tracing successive waves of new media forms, Murray demonstrates that the author is far from dead in the digital age; rather, authors are held to a performance of identity and intimacy with reading publics online. Taking into account the commercial relationships and materialist conditions that shape literary community, her second chapter discusses the influences of Amazon and concomitant innovations in literary marketing, such as book trailers and blog tours, on the literary market and reading publics. Murray further considers the value of online marketing for independent publishing and identifies the troubling way the literary community has become a commodity. In her third chapter, she examines tension between literary festivals, which rely on spatiotemporality as a mode of audience engagement, and virtual author events. She proposes that digital media have opened up new spaces beyond literary festivals that facilitate connections between authors and readers, democratizing writer-reader engagements and fetishizing literary locales. Surveying book review culture, chapter four addresses tensions between book reviews as forms of establishment cultural criticism and the amateur review culture fostered by Amazon customer reviews, websites like GoodReads, and literary blogs. Murray proposes that the architecture of the internet itself – which is not flat but hierarchical – plays a role in the distribution of critical authority. In chapter five, Murray considers collective digital reading practices, such as online reading groups and virtual reading communities. These collaborative practices, she argues, offer insight on how reading is changing through a communal reading mode facilitated by digital culture. Murray concludes with attention to the “digital paratext.” While there has been recent critical attention to authors’ social media and websites as paratexts from scholars, including Jaclyn Partyka and Tawnya Azar in postcolonial studies, Murray expands the category to include marketing materials (book trailers and blog tours), digitally archived materials from in-person and virtual author appearances, online book reviews and blogs, and websites that facilitate online reading communities. As she notes, these are often dismissed as trivial, commercial, ephemeral, or strange and thus not worthy of critical attention. However, they are essential to understanding the digital literary sphere and the changing nature of authorship, publishing, and audience engagement in the 21st century.
- 4 *The Digital Literary Sphere* offers critics a palatable way of valuing contemporary literary production, even those resistant to or skeptical of digital literary studies. Murray

convincingly makes the case that the “digital literary sphere” is an effective heuristic for understanding the integral contributions of digital environments to literature in the 21st century and how “traditional” and “non-traditional” literature alike have been transformed. For, as she notes, “[r]econceptualizing twenty-first century literary culture as sited at the dynamic overlap of oral, print, and digital domains allows us to examine the real-time workings of the literary system in a now richly multimedia environment” (110).

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