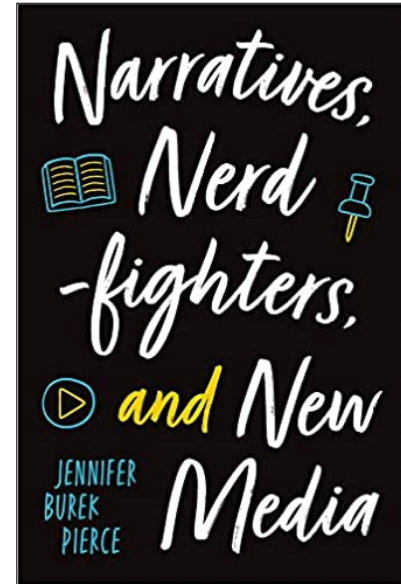


Jennifer Burek Pierce, **Narratives, Nerdfighters, and New Media**, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020, 210 pp., \$39.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Neil William Perry  
American University

Most of us are familiar with stumbling down the YouTube rabbit hole, veering delightfully “off-piste” into seemingly unrelated realms while searching for something else entirely. University of Iowa professor and historian Jennifer Burek Pierce’s hunt for something to read led her to the *Vlogbrothers* channel, longtime home of author/brothers John (*The Fault in Our Stars*) and Hank (*An Absolutely Remarkable Thing*) Green, and the community that gathers around them. Though originally launched in 2007 as a medium through which the brothers could connect with one another, the channel has grown to foster a large and active society that coalesces around expansive relationships with literature and media, shared values, and, often, a deep appreciation for the work of the two founding writers. This discovery prompts the key question that guides the author through ***Narratives, Nerdfighters, and New Media***: “What does it mean to read in the early decade of the twenty-first century?” (p. 4). Leveraging both historical and current content from this unique community, Burek Pierce positions the book at the intersection of “reading, fandom, and intermediation” (p. 3), serving as a springboard for her to explore the evolution of reading—and the formation of reading communities—as they unfold before us.



The central premise of the book is that reading, as with the way we consume other media in the 21st century, has changed with shifts in technology and culture. The *nerdfighter* community, therefore, presents an apt prism through which to view these changes and weigh them against expectations, creating the anticipatory history the author suggests at the outset. Though some studies find recreational reading in decline (p. 91), Burek Pierce finds a more optimistic outlook in this work. The community that has grown up around the *Vlogbrothers* channel, she notes, is an active one of considerable size and power; the group, whose subscriber base numbers in the millions, has launched bestselling books, raised vast sums of money for a variety of charitable causes and philanthropic endeavors, and created tools for learning through reading groups, book clubs, and various other educational efforts. The *nerdfighters* (as the community calls itself) demonstrate that it is no longer enough for readers to experience stories in isolation, alone with their books. Instead, digital platforms and tools create multiple points of contact around which the community can, and does, engage and shapes the contours of, as Benedict Anderson (1983) might term it, their collective imaginary.

It is here that the group identity and ideals are developed, exercised, and advanced. Although much of the work of “nerdfighteria” takes place across digital platforms, the author finds that a great deal of its strength is also located in its real life operations, using readings at bookstores, tours, conventions, and other gatherings to meet in the flesh. Taken together, the characteristics foregrounded by Burek Pierce’s analysis of

today's reading communities differentiate readers from the past with those of the present and future, molded by the technological affordances of digital platforms.

The goal of *Narratives, Nerdfighters, and New Media* is not to define the boundaries of the membership who constitute the community associated with John and Hank Green but to evaluate the activities of the community as a lens to reveal "new modes and models of reading" (p. 144). Here, the author makes inroads, refining and updating research that has long guided thinking on the history of reading and discourse theory. In the Green's reading community, for example, Burek Pierce finds that, in contrast to Gerard Genette's work, which sees "fandom" as a secondary concern, members' attention to the world that *relates to* reading "is essential to the experience of reading," itself, centering interactivity and multi-platform engagement to "rewrite earlier paradigms of literary consumption and engagement" (p. 15). Throughout the book, Burek Pierce also highlights the work of Robert Darnton (1982), with emphasis on his communications circuit model. Her work, here, recalibrates "sites of production and reception" (p. 144), once again bringing new media to bear on the social models reflecting traditional notions of what it is to be a reader. For historians of reading, Burek Pierce's work revises and enhances some of the research that has long driven exploration in this discipline.

Burek Pierce does, however, point to difficulties in collecting complete research data for the study. One of the primary sources of community information the author uses in this research are qualitative census responses resulting from the polling of the community between 2014 and 2017. Initially designed to gain deeper insight into the demographic makeup and intellectual focus of the community, these surveys are notoriously detailed, yet still exhibit problems with revealing the true nature of the group (p. 54). Updated, expanded, and contracted by the Green brothers, the census is not a complete picture of the community, but, as these reports do reveal some of their collective traits, they are called upon to illustrate and illuminate what they can. Finally, some of the writing, posts, and interactive elements are either private or otherwise unavailable. Despite these issues (which pose problems for other research as well) the data the author uses does demonstrate to a large degree the predilections of the community and how it engages and embeds its values in the platform.

In addition to expanding our notions of the way today's readers connect and commune socially, Burek Pierce also spends some time detailing the financial models that make the *Vlogbrothers* world possible. She does this to underscore the way the group's values enter into the calculation, elevating the care with which the Green brothers approach the financial support of the community at large, directing money toward causes that are important to the group and fostering long-term affinity. Running an enterprise of this scale isn't cheap; all manner of creative, administrative, and platform support is required. The Green brothers have, however, found a way to maximize community input to supply a mutually beneficial base of operations that balances support for a range of reader interests with the financing necessary to keep it moving forward. For those looking to link the fiscal successes of nerdfighteria with social goodwill, this focus provides keen insights into how shared social values intermingle with fiscal needs to create a well-functioning, shared platform.

In *Narratives, Nerdfighters, and New Media*, the author's attempt to understand the state of reading in the modern world is largely successful. Despite drawbacks in data collection common to many researchers studying Internet-based phenomena, the use of internal census information coupled with the careful analysis of the words, thoughts and actions that bind this community advance traditional notions of what it is to be a reader. The use of new media to expand interactivity among this community shows the use of platforms to be central

to the contemporary act of reading, promoting and elevating media creation as an important tool in forming communities of readers. This book is a well-researched and readable guide that will be of interest to researchers of the history of reading, book culture and discourse theory, as well as the community of readers it investigates.

### References

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London, UK: Verso.

Darnton, R. (1982). What is the history of books? *Daedalus*, 111(3). 65–83.

Green, H. (2018). *An absolutely remarkable thing: A novel*. New York, NY: Dutton.

Green, J. (2012). *The fault in our stars*. New York, NY: Penguin.