

INTRODUCTION

THE ESTRANGEMENT OF CREATION, PRODUCTION, AND RECEPTION

A NOVEL MUST BE MANY THINGS

Of the thousands of novels that were published in the United States at around the same time, *Jarrettsville* was one of the very few that ended up on the front tables of bookstores around the country, although the novel's publisher, Counterpoint Press, eventually regretted that. Of the thousands of novels released around the same time, *Jarrettsville* was also one of the very few that was reviewed in the *New York Times*, although perhaps Counterpoint eventually regretted that too. Yet *Jarrettsville* sold reasonably well. *Jarrettsville* was, in the words of Counterpoint's CEO Charlie Winton, "a typical publishing story." According to Winton, a typical publishing story ends like this: "Well, that was good, sort of."

For *Jarrettsville*'s author, Cornelia Nixon, the story that would become "good, sort of" to her publisher had first been a family secret. The gist of the once-secret story revealed in Nixon's novel was that following the Civil War, just south of the Mason-Dixon line in Jarrettsville, Maryland, one of Nixon's ancestors, Martha Jane Cairnes, shot and killed her newborn baby's father, Nicholas McComas, in front of about fifty eyewitnesses during a parade celebrating the Confederate surrender. Despite all those witnesses, and even her own admission of guilt, a jury of her peers found Cairnes innocent on the ad hoc grounds of "justifiable homicide." The story had been front-page news in the *New York Times* before it was lost to history.

As a novelist, Cornelia Nixon took this family story and transformed it into a work of historical fiction. Or maybe *Jarrettsville* was better described as a work of popular fiction, or literary fiction, or something in between; while writing the novel Nixon was hoping it might garner a wider audience of readers to match all of her literary awards. Or, perhaps Nixon had transformed her family story into somewhat of a romance novel or, for her publisher, maybe just a bit too much of a romance novel. For Winton, Nixon's

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novel was reminiscent of *Cold Mountain*, an investment in a second chance at catching lightning in a bottle. For Adam Krefman, *Jarrettsville*'s editor at Counterpoint, the novel was an intimate examination of a one-time secondary character's failings, his inability to do the right thing, and the mistakes made by young men that young men like Krefman might understand. For Counterpoint's publicity staff, and for the field reps at Counterpoint's distributor, *Jarrettsville* was a work of literary historical fiction. It was "literary" because both Nixon and Counterpoint were "literary," and it was historical fiction not only because the story was historical and a work of fiction, but also because "historical fiction" existed as a market category. Importantly for Counterpoint, *Jarrettsville* was not just historical fiction, but it was *Civil War* historical fiction, a profitable and perhaps even dependable market category. That none of the novel actually took place during the Civil War was treated by all involved as mostly incidental. If "postbellum fiction" had existed as a recognizable market category, perhaps *Jarrettsville* would have been that, but it didn't, so Civil War fiction it became.

For reviewers, *Jarrettsville* was about the inescapability of racism in the United States, or the lingering tensions of the Civil War, or not really either of those things as it was instead a timeless morality tale about the characters. For one reviewer, *Jarrettsville* was an exquisite story about social conventions, emotional connections, and the human experience, reminiscent of Tolstoy and worth reading for the impressive quality of the writing alone. For a different reviewer, *Jarrettsville* was a failed effort rife with historical inaccuracies, with writing so bad it was "timeless." For a book group of women in Nashville, Tennessee, *Jarrettsville* was compared to what they jokingly referred to as "the sacred text," *Gone with the Wind*. For a book group of men in Massachusetts, the prose was too flowery, but the plot offered an opportunity to discuss if a woman can rape a man. For a group of teachers in Southern California, *Jarrettsville* was an entry point into its readers' own stories about racism in America. For a group of lawyers and their friends in Northern California, it was about whether juries can break from a judge's guidelines in meting out convictions and acquittals. "Is 'justifiable homicide' something that a jury can use? Doesn't that seem crazy?" a poet asked. "It's rare, but juries can do whatever they want," a lawyer replied.

For readers in present-day Jarrettsville, Maryland, the story was about much more than long-dead people from a bygone time. The story was also about them. Over the past hundred thirty years, had Jarrettsville changed, or was it still like *Jarrettsville*? Some things had remained the same. In the new Jarrettsville branch of the Harford County Library, which sits across

the street from a rolling field of sunflowers which is both idyllically pastoral and an investment in bird feed as a cash crop, the first question of the morning book club was a difficult one that set the terms of the discussion: were its members, as residents of Jarrettsville and readers of *Jarrettsville*, Northerners or Southerners?

Although *Jarrettsville* would go on to be many different things for different people, for Cornelia Nixon, at first at least, it was just a family story. For a story to become a novel—for it to be written by an author, make it through a literary agency, get into a publishing house and out the other end, be promoted by publicity staff, be hand-sold in bookstores, be evaluated by reviewers and ultimately connected with by readers—it must be multiple. To ultimately be a novel, *Jarrettsville* had to be many things.

Jarrettsville was a personal story, a work of fiction, a work of Civil War historical fiction, a salable commodity, and a chance to reboot a career. At the same time it was an opportunity to reactivate embedded social ties within an industry around a new product, a text that had to be read before a meeting, a leisure activity, and a break from life that was “perfect cross-country flight” length. It was a story that was really about a relationship between a mother and a daughter, and a story that was, according to two women on opposite sides of the country who had never met and who were both ultimately dissuaded from this interpretation, really about the US occupation of Iraq. *Jarrettsville* was also contract work for a moonlighting copy editor, a chance to flex a different muscle for the cover designer of travel books, and the day job of an editor-in-chief. For a novel to be a novel it must pass through the hands of many people who have many different orientations to novels and who occupy different locations and milieus. In order for it to continue passing through those hands and still be meaningful and worthy of passing on, *Jarrettsville* had to change too. This book is a collection of all of the stories of what *Jarrettsville* was, and how it came to be all of those things at once.

This book is also an academic work of sociology, and hopefully one with some of its more inscrutable edges smoothed off. If you are not a sociologist (amateur, budding, or full-blown), the next three sections of this introduction (before the final one) are about those more inscrutable edges. If you just want the story of how a novel was created, produced, and consumed, feel free to skip them. All you need to know is that they describe how sociologists came to an arrangement about how to study things like *Jarrettsville*, and how this book offers a different and more integrative path. If you don’t care about that sociological theorizing, this book still has a narrative arc built into it, complete with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. For sociologists

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this three-act structure is a story about three interdependent fields, whereas for non-sociologists it's just a three-act structure, a pretty good way to tell a story.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THINGS THAT ARE MANY THINGS

Novels travel, through hands and across place and time, and in and out of different fields occupied by people with different orientations, experiences, needs, constraints, expectations, and preferences. Yet in making sense of cultural objects such as *Jarrettsville*, subjects of analysis have been cordoned off into discrete terrains. While some focus on the value of cultural objects, others study their values. While some study the objects themselves, others consciously avoid the object, and instead focus on either the industries from which they emerge or the communities of consumers into which they pass. When studying cultural objects such as novels, equations have been simplified through the construction of disciplinary-dependent binaries: when talking novels, are we talking about art or commerce, production or reception, creativity or constraint, the making of meaning or the extraction of value?

Because different elements of cultural objects have been split apart across disciplines and subfields, it is not just harder to make sense of their multiplicity, but it is also harder to make sense of them as wholes. Once you have entirely bracketed out the twists and turns of a novel's creation, it's hard, if not impossible, to fully understand what an editor or marketing rep are doing as they balance the text they're working on with the context they're working under. For cultural reception, a novel can be treated as being of infinitely variable meanings only if all the years of work by an author and publisher to make it meaningful at all have also been bracketed out as an "unobservable" prehistory to reader engagement. If creation, production, and reception all matter, what is lost by independently studying these processes and the transitions between them is actually *most* things.

As a result of this arrangement, to make sense of a novel by describing only its authoring can be like trying to describe an elephant by describing only its ear. So too can describing a novel by describing only its production be like describing an elephant by describing only its trunk. Maybe the reception of a novel in the metaphor is an elephant's legs: another important component in the description of an elephant, but still not the elephant.¹ There are no shortages of things to learn and know when specializing in ears, trunks, or legs—and thankfully for us, there are cardiologists, neurologists, and oncologists who specialize in this way—but if the goal is to *really* understand

an elephant, descriptions of its individual body parts must be brought back together in order to describe the whole. Following the creation, production, and reception of a novel from start to finish is how this book goes about doing that.

THE ESTRANGEMENT OF PRODUCTION FROM RECEPTION IN SOCIOLOGY

From the early twentieth century through the beginning of the 1970s, the sociological analysis of cultural objects took one of two competing paths, which interestingly shared a core assumption. The products of mediated culture, whether books, songs, or fashion, were thought to be expressive symbols that changed in lockstep with evolutions in society. For example, in 1919 the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber argued that the hemlines of women's dresses were prescribed through "civilizational determinism"; they were a window into macro-level cultural values and belief systems.² In turn, by the mid-1920s the economist George Taylor argued that instead the hemlines of dresses go up with rises and go down with declines in the stock market.³ For Taylor, hemlines were determined by macro-level economic, not cultural, shifts. While these "nothing-but" arguments quibbled on the direction of the association between culture and the economy, they both assumed that hemline lengths in women's fashion were reflections of outsized societal forces.⁴ Such was also the case with the sociological understanding of cultural objects as reflective of either a more abstract Parsonian values system, or a less abstract capitalist system within a Marxist framework.⁵ In both accounts, the production and reception of culture were conjoined and determined by outside forces.⁶

In reaction to both of these macro-level functionalist theories of culture, starting in the 1970s, the sociological study of production and reception split. Scholars of production, like scholars of reception, scaled down from grand narratives into thinking of culture and structure as "elements in an ever changing patchwork."⁷ Like all patchworks, the details of one piece may tell you very little about the details of another. Such was also the case with production and reception, it seemed. Production-oriented scholars noted that changes in popular culture are generally asynchronous with bigger transformations in society; hemlines change because of what's happening in the fashion industry, not because of the stock market or broader shifts in values.⁸ For reception-oriented scholars, how people actually made sense of things like hemlines and what they did with them proved to be much more interesting than the theories we had saddled onto them. For both production and

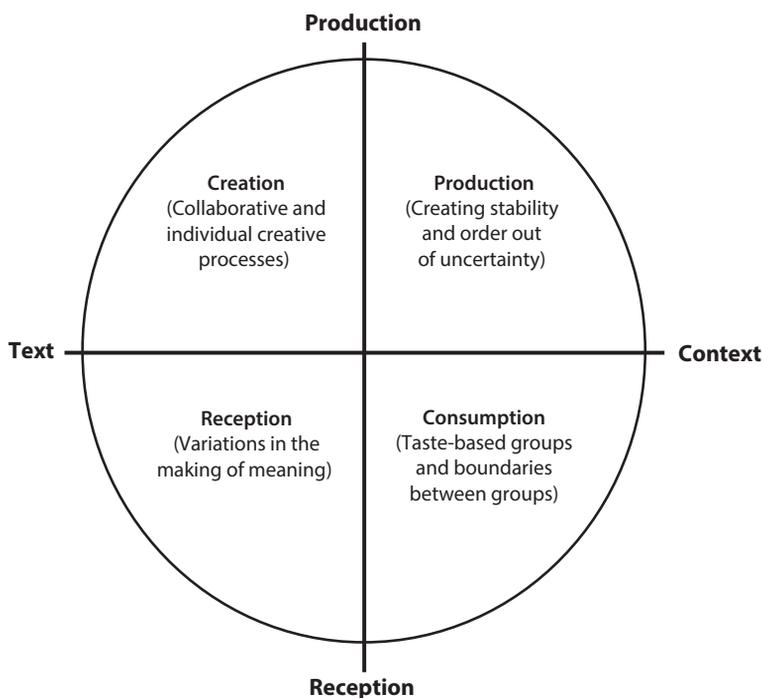


FIGURE 1.1: The Friendly Divvying Up of Material Culture.

reception scholars, once they pried open the black box of assumed values or ideological intentions, it turned out there were real people inside, working within systems of conventions and constraints in the case of production, or to foster identities and senses of meaning in the case of reception.⁹ Yet over time, as this split between the studies of production and reception widened, rather than having grouped into competing teams, scholars of each area had basically resigned themselves to playing entirely different sports (see Figure 1.1).¹⁰

Production-oriented scholars focused on the specific *contexts* of production, investigating how order and stability were created in the construction of one-off cultural goods for which audience demand was unpredictable.¹¹ The culture that was produced was, in effect, conditioned on the circumstances in the industries in which it was created.¹² As cultural objects were the “outcomes” of industry conditions, their meanings became dependent variables, which was part of a self-conscious research position to move away from prior models. As Richard Peterson argued, “If production studies run the risk of eliminating ‘culture’ from the sociology of culture, researchers

who focus on the content of cultural products run the risk of . . . taking the ‘sociology’ out.”¹³ As such, as noted by Wendy Griswold, for production scholars meaning was thrown “overboard in some sort of disciplinary triage.”¹⁴

Not so, however, for scholars of reception, who empirically doubled-down on the study of cultural objects and their meanings by focusing on an underlying instability of meaning as based on who was doing the reception, and what they were doing with that reception.¹⁵ While the focus remained on texts, here too cultural objects became the dependent variable in a quite different, if ultimately somewhat similar, denuding of objects’ possible ability to do things.¹⁶ Most importantly for both parties, however, was that if the contents of texts were wholly based on the conditions of their production and the meanings of that content were wholly based on the specifics of their reception, very little was to be lost by studying these processes independently from one another.

With the split of production and reception, from one path two diverged, and at least in the core of mainstream sociology, the path to reception was the road less traveled. As Paul DiMaggio had noted by 1987: “The divorce of consumption and production studies has led to an estrangement . . . and a marginalization of the former, that a more integrative position can help bridge.”¹⁷ In 1993, Wendy Griswold echoed DiMaggio’s call for integration in an *Annual Review* piece, and with little changed by 2000, Richard Peterson took his turn, suggesting to production perspective adherents that “it may prove useful to focus on . . . a reception process in which people actively select and reinterpret symbols to produce a culture for themselves.”¹⁸ By 2015, almost three decades after DiMaggio’s call to action, in yet another *Annual Review* piece the consumption scholar Alan Warde again noted the problem, writing that “to separate out consumption [from production] for specialized attention was very valuable . . . but other ways to reconnect with production . . . are needed.”¹⁹

Somehow also lost in this split was “that forgotten soul, the author,” who for both production- and reception-focused scholars seemed to mostly provide the raw materials so that the “real” work could be done.²⁰ As a result, what could be gained by moving “upstream” from production and reception and into “the mental and material workshop of the creative artist” has also been a question that has mostly gone unanswered in this arrangement.²¹ Although for nearly forty years both production- and reception-oriented scholars have repeatedly and consistently noted problems with these estrangements, over time reconnection has become harder rather than easier, as production and reception have become increasingly dissimilar research

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programs, with their own ritualistic citations, underlying assumptions, and research traditions.

In the story of this divorce, as it was for the increasing invisibility of cultural creators, there was, however, a notable exception. While scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu took up topics of production and consumption in separate studies, Griswold integrated empirical research across creation, production, and reception.²² First in a study of the revivals of revenge tragedies and city comedies in London and then later in a study of the Nigerian “fiction complex,” rather than specializing in the ears, trunks, or legs of elephants, Griswold empirically investigated them as wholes.²³ Her notion of a “complex” of creation, production, and reception serves as an important intervention in the split of production from reception, as the goal of the “complex” is to treat these things not as an overly integrated “system” (as was the case for the pre-1970s dominant frameworks) nor as separate “worlds” divorced from each other (as is the case, in consequence if not design, for the post-1970s dominant frameworks). For Griswold, and in this book, the relationships between creation, production, and reception fall somewhere in between.

Yet this book both builds off of and differs from Griswold’s work in three important ways. First, rather than taking a bird’s-eye view on the relationship between creation, production, and reception of a nation’s literature, the empirical work of this book is anchored down in the dirt; it builds its arguments up from a worm’s-eye view of the creation, production, and reception of a single novel. Second, while Griswold’s goal is to clarify that creation, production, and reception are neither worlds apart nor a single integrated system, this book delves into the nuts and bolts of both *how* they are linked and the *ways through which* cultural objects are pitched and translated across them. Last, although it is the perspective here that creation, production, and reception are in fact a “complex” made up of three adjoining subsystems, what are those subsystems, and how are they similar or different from one another? What happens when you have three interdependent fields that each contain their own novel cultures?

THREE INTERDEPENDENT FIELDS

Field theory is a tree from which several limbs have sprouted.²⁴ Fields, regardless of which variation in sociology one is using, are social arenas of focused attention and habituated action.²⁵ Put most simply, fields are made up of people who orient their attention toward each other, and toward similar stakes and issues that are specific to the field they are in. Until quite recently, field theory has almost exclusively been concerned with the relationships

within fields. This has begun to change with a recent interest in the relationship *between* fields, as well as how inter-field relations affect intra-field activities and practices.²⁶ This book empirically addresses these recent theoretical advancements and the questions they engender head-on. It also takes up two more recent developments in field theory. First, until quite recently the underlying premise of field theory has presupposed that actors within fields are mostly operating on autopilot; preprogrammed through their positions and habitus, they follow their scripts.²⁷ Yet, as this book shows, down in the dirt, rather than action in any given situation always being automatic, to participate in a field regularly requires deliberation: people have to figure out if the rules apply to a situation, and if they do, *which* of the rules are the ones that apply, and *how* they do apply or not.²⁸ Second, the structural relations of field theory have at times been pitted against the interpersonal relations of different approaches.²⁹ As a result, field theory can sometimes present as a deeply relational world that seems unencumbered by interpersonal relationships. As this book shows, while structural relations surely matter, so do relationships, as meanings are made in substantive interactions, and it is through the circuits of those interactions that novels are pitched across fields. As a practical matter, writers, publishers, and readers aren't living in different worlds, but they are certainly spending the vast majority of their time in different fields. How cultural objects like novels actually get from there to here requires a different conceptualization of the relationships within fields, and between fields (see Figure 1.2).

With each field come different orientations, issues at stake, hierarchies of values, and returns on symbolic investments that don't apply or even make sense in companion fields. Put another way, most authors in the field of creation no more understand the "rules of the game" in the field of production than do readers in the field of reception, just as a publisher does not know, or need to know, the "rules of the game" as authors and readers write or read together.³⁰ While a lover of novels may be able to draw out her mental map of the field of reception—what are "good" and "bad" novels, which people consume which type and where they are positioned—the processes and social arrangements between authors (in the field of creation) or publishers (in the field of production) resulting in her most and least favorite novels appear as far-off mountains, visible, but with details obscured by distance and haze. An avid reader surely knows that the fields of creation and production exist, but even she would have considerable trouble creating mental maps of them, if she ever considered doing so in the first place.

A field in focus surrounded by blurry fields is also experienced by a publishing professional who can elaborately map out subtle distinctions and

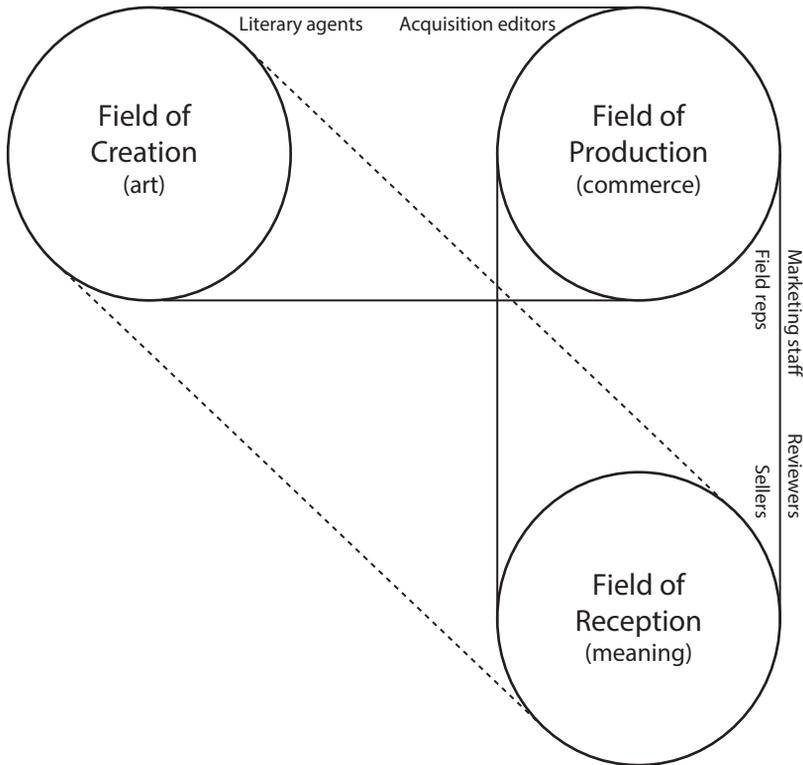


FIGURE 1.2: Three Interdependent Fields of Creation, Production, and Reception.

hierarchies between different presses, wax poetic about the multifaceted dangers of Amazon to some categories of books and not others, and passingly discuss the different field-configuring effects of BookExpo America and the Frankfurt Book Fair. But this publishing professional may actually know very little about the creative processes of authors, or the meanings made of their books by readers, beyond sales figures. By way of example of the different issues at stake across the fields of creation, production, and reception, describing a book as “similar to *Harry Potter*” in the field of reception is an entirely different statement from describing a book as “similar to *Harry Potter*” in the other two. Whereas in the field of reception by this statement a reader would likely mean in plot or style (e.g., “if you like *Harry Potter*, you’ll like this too”), in the field of production nobody would ever compare a book to *Harry Potter* unless they meant sales, and in the field of creation the statement could mean any number of things: a decently writ-

ten book with inconceivable levels of success, or just another author writing schlock to try to ride the wave of *Harry Potter*.

While the creation, production, and reception of novels mostly happen in three different fields, novels travel across them, which makes them interdependent. The field of production cannot exist without those in the field of creation generating the objects that they'll go on to produce and distribute, or without readers in the field of reception who will vote for their offerings with their eyes, mouths, and wallets. It is a similar story for the field of reception, which to meaningfully exist requires cultural creation and production; where the things came from and how they got there—the “real” stories to those who made and produced them—might not be interesting or observable to most readers, but they had to happen for people to have reading experiences at all.

If creation, production, and reception exist in three distinct yet interdependent fields, we would expect different values and issues to be at stake in each of them.³¹ These values are most typically expressed through the language of art in the field of creation, the language of commerce in the field of production, and the language of meaning in the field of reception. While all three languages can be deployed across all three fields, each has its own home turf in which it is the dominant language through which talk of novels is expressed. In the transition across fields, as objects are “pitched” from one field into another, their values must be translated so that they can make sense in ways that are familiar rather than foreign to their new hosts. These translations can result in the blending of languages and values by those who keep each foot planted in a different field, as they are tasked with shepherding objects across them. Literary agents and acquisition editors blend language from the fields of creation and production as they shepherd texts across them, just as field reps, bookstore buyers, and reviewers blend language from the fields of production and reception as they shepherd texts across that divide. Likewise, as the three fields operate both independently and interdependently, changes in one field can necessitate changes in others—or not, depending on how or if those changes affect “business as usual” in their companion fields.

This book makes the case for reconnecting creation, production, and reception as a dynamic and interlocking system by focusing both on the *internal* order of each field, and on what happens at boundary-spanning points of overlap as cultural objects pass *between* fields. It goes under the cover of a book, and under the covers of fields, to tell the full story of a novel named *Jarrettsville*.

HOW TO TELL A TYPICAL PUBLISHING STORY

To tell a “typical publishing story,” as Counterpoint’s CEO Charlie Winton described *Jarrettsville*, requires finding an author who is willing to let an outsider into her creative process. It means interviewing her many times over, and poring over the notes, drafts, emails, and communications she generated while writing. It means sitting side by side with her for enough time to apprehend her aspirations and her fears, her decisions and why she made them, what she has been proud of, and what she regrets. It also means tracing out to the silent partners in her creative process: the novelists, friends, and allies who sent her novel into directions she could not have arrived to on her own. To tell a typical publishing story also means to know why publishers that rejected the novel did reject it, and why the publisher that published it did so too.

To know this means that the next step is to then embed oneself inside the publishing house that published the book, to work and watch, and then ask questions, as a whole new set of people collaborate to make culture. It means getting to know the editor: what attracted him to the story, and what about it concerned him? What were his solutions to alleviate these concerns, and why were they solutions? To tell a typical publishing story also means to learn why the publisher made its decisions: why one cover was selected from five options, or why discussion over how to describe the novel on its back cover became contentious. To tell a publishing story means getting inside these processes.³² Yet like the novel itself, the study of the novel again has to travel, over to its marketing and distribution, and into why it can be a mistake to talk about the plot of a novel “too much” when pitching it to a review outlet, and why it’s important for publishers to possess good reputations despite the fact that their names usually signal very little to readers.

To have done this is to watch a book being *born*, without yet knowing how, where, or even if it will *live*.³³ To follow a book into its life means to then follow it over into the field of reception. It means asking questions of readers of the novel across the country, and sitting and listening in order to make sense of how *they* make sense of the novel. Did they like it? What for them was it about? What, if anything, did it mean to them? And again, after the book has long since been released, what, in retrospect, does it then mean to its author, her agent, or its publisher?

To get to this point is to tell a full publishing story: it is to follow a novel all the way from start to finish.³⁴ But even after this has been done, what makes the publishing story a *typical* publishing story? Was the publishing story typical throughout the process, just sometimes typical, or really not

typical at all? To answer this question means retracing your steps back to the beginning of the circuit in order to find out from *other* authors who write different novels what for them is a typical authoring story. In turn, how do agents or editors make decisions for books that *aren't Jarrettsville*, and so on, for everyone else whose hands touch novels? To tell a typical publishing story one has to know what is typical and what isn't, so in addition to following *Jarrettsville* from its creation through its reception, that is what I did. As a result, while in some ways this is a book about the creation, production, and reception of a novel, in other ways, it's a book that uses that novel as a keyhole to peer into the relations within and between the fields through which it passed. From both of these perspectives, to fully understand how Cornelia Nixon's family story became a book called *Jarrettsville* requires many more stories, told in an entirely separate book—this one.