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What Is the History of the History of Books?

Joan Shelley Rubin

Perhaps an emergent subdiscipline attains maturity at the moment when its adherents assume—usually erroneously—that their colleagues outside the new field understand what it is all about. By that measure, the history of the book has arrived. Early efforts to explain the enterprise, such as Robert Darnton's classic 1982 article, "What Is the History of Books?," or to set agendas for research, such as the 1984 American Antiquarian Society (AAS) conference, "Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book," have evolved into flourishing institutions. The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing (SHARP), for example, attracts members both in the United States and abroad, holds well-attended yearly meetings, runs an active online discussion group, issues a newsletter, and publishes an annual journal, *Book History.* Yet if students of print can now take pleasure in recognizing each other by their name badges rather than by what Darnton called "the glint in their eyes," it may be time to move beyond insiders' exhilaration so that other Americanists can gain a sense of the field's usefulness for their own work. The history of the history of books presents an opportunity for those dealing with all sorts of texts—not just literary or journalistic expression but also laws, sermons, scientific papers, business manuals, or political tracts—to think anew about how such artifacts acquired their particular shape and significance. It also invites historians to stand back from familiar distinctions on which they have come to rely, adopting a greater appreciation for ambiguity and flux as historical forces.[1]

Book historians are quick to note that for them "book" is really shorthand for the full range of written communication; their subject is "the creation, dissemination, and uses of script and print in any medium, including books, newspapers, periodi-

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[1] Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?" (1982), in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History,* by Robert Darnton (New York, 1999), esp. 108; David D. Hall and John B. Hench, eds., *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book in America, 1639–1876* (Worcester, 1987). A study that applies to nonliterary materials (in this instance, statutes and court decisions) the book historian's emphasis on examining printed texts in light of readers' actual uses of them is Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

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cals, manuscripts, and ephemera." Their purview encompasses "the social, cultural, and economic history of authorship, publishing, libraries, literacy, literary criticism, reading habits, and reader response."[2] Much of the initial impetus for the American adoption of that agenda came from European historians—particularly the French scholars affiliated with the *Annales* school of social history. On the technological and material conditions that permitted the spread of print, the classic text is Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800* (1958; English edition 1976). For Americanists picking up the story later on, however, the greater influence of *histoire du livre* has come from its emphasis on recovering the *mentalités* of ordinary people. In this regard the work of Roger Chartier on the circulation of cheap print, the relationship between authorship and markets, and communities of readers has been preeminent. Americanists also learned from other Europeanists writing in English—among them Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Anthony Grafton in the United States and, in Britain, the historian David Vincent and the bibliographer D. F. McKenzie.[3] The preparation of *Histoire de l'édition française* (completed in 1986) and *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (in progress) led to plans for numerous other national histories, including the collaborative *History of the Book in America,* a project of AAS and Cambridge University Press. Volume 1, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World,* edited by Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, appeared in 2000.

Acknowledging the European origins of the field may seem to implicate American scholars in the relationship between provincial outpost and cosmopolitan center that they write about in discussing the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet the energizing effect of Europeanists' models has been indisputable, demonstrating the value of thinking across national boundaries to acquire fresh perspectives on the past.

American forays into book history also owed something to the political climate in the United States during the 1970s. The egalitarian impulses that prompted American historians to examine the experiences of women, minorities, and urban workers created restlessness with the text-bound outlook of intellectual history as well. Moreover, such features of the American scene as the high literacy rate in colonial New England, the spread of evangelical religion, the institution of slavery, and the nation's large influx of immigrants required a distinctively American orientation.

[2] Ezra Greenspan and Jonathan Rose, "An Introduction to *Book History,*" *Book History,* 1 (1998), ix. Some bibliographers, wary of subordinating their discipline to social history and of favoring people over the book as object, would take exception to that statement. See Nicolas Barker and Thomas R. Adams, "A New Model for the Study of the Book," in *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society: The Clark Lectures, 1986–1987,* ed. Nicolas Barker (London, 1993). The range of the field is evident in Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, and Jeffrey D. Groves, eds., *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary* (Amherst, 2002).

[3] See especially Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, 1994); and Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West* (Amherst, 1999). Examples of Europeanist scholarship include Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); Anthony Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor, 1997); David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750–1914* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989); and D. F. McKenzie, *Making Meaning: "Printers of the Mind" and Other Essays,* ed. Peter D. McDonald and Michael F. Suarez (Amherst, 2002).

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Of course, there had been many accounts of publishers, printers, and authors prior to the late 1970s, including painstaking efforts by bibliographers to identify the textual and physical variants of books. Students of journalism and communication had been charting the growth of mass media. Furthermore, most historians (and, more recently, literary scholars determined to jettison the ahistorical methodology of the fast-aging New Criticism) have taken for granted that texts originate in specific settings and periods. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, the movement of cultural history from the margins to the center of the historical profession—itself a corrective to the social historian's preoccupation with the measurable, material dimensions of daily life—resulted in a widespread recognition that the narrative of America's past must incorporate evidence of its citizens' values, anxieties, aspirations, and beliefs. Those well-established approaches continue to inform contributions to book history. Bibliography remains important. Some studies still focus on prominent individuals and institutions; others retain an emphasis on re-creating the contexts in which written documents arose. The overlap with cultural history is sizable. Nevertheless, the principle animating the most exciting work in the field is that the history of the book is more than the sum of separate "social, cultural, and economic" histories; rather, it integrates the lessons of all three. As many of its practitioners insist, their enterprise requires discerning relationships between material conditions, social structures, and cultural values—relationships that establish the meanings print forms carry as they pass from author to reader.

Since the AAS "Needs and Opportunities" conference (a convenient benchmark), the pursuit of book history's expansive subject has yielded an enormous, wide-ranging body of scholarship. Between 1985 and 2001, the *Journal of American History* alone ran roughly sixty reviews of monographs on subjects pertinent to the printed word. To make sense of that large output, historians of the book have endorsed a classification system involving three rubrics: production, distribution, and reception. Under the first heading fall not only authorship and editing but also the technological innovations, governmental directives, and economic forces that shape the business of publishing. Distribution refers to all the activities that bring print to people, whether or not they are connected to profit making—advertising, book selling, transportation networks, censorship and self-censorship, learned societies, libraries, and schools. Reception is synonymous with reading or use, although the word suggests more passivity than readers' actions entail. Reception may be public, private, oral, silent, individual, and collective; it bears the weight of various emotions, ideologies, and identities; and it consequently invites attention to how as well as why and what readers read.

The categories of production, distribution, and reception are serviceable. Yet the tripartite division subverts the argument Darnton made for a communications "circuit" joining authors, disseminators, and readers.[4] In other words, it imposes artificial distinctions on phenomena that are actually connected: publishers distribute as well as produce works; readers may be ordinary members of the broad educated public or

[4] Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?," 112.

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literary critics, teachers, librarians, or ministers who are involved in dissemination as well as functioning as an audience that influences production. Thus, while bearing the three headings in mind, it may be more helpful in surveying Americanists' own recent scholarly production to adopt a classification scheme that captures the variations in conception and purpose such works collectively embody. The overview that follows sorts studies issued since 1985 according to a three-part arrangement based on the complementary questions historians have sought to address.[5] This procedure also underlines the divergent disciplinary demands that persist even in an interdisciplinary endeavor.

The first set of queries might be summarized: On what material foundations did the history of the book in America rest? Or simply: What was *there*? The second group asks: What values and needs have books served in American society? Studies in the third category use the book to pose a problem that goes beyond the history of print: How does a culture work?

In asking what was there, historians of the book have raised such matters as: What forms of print existed? What economic, geographical, and political conditions affected their production? Who imagined texts, arranged for their publication, set them in type (or handwrote them), and bound them? What people and institutions disseminated them? What did readers read? Finding the answers to those questions has often required historians to dig patiently in unexplored sources and to devise inventive research strategies.

That fact is abundantly clear in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World,* which, while it tackles sweeping topics, also marks a giant advance in the documentation of early American printing, importation, and book selling across region and time. Alongside that indispensable volume, however, stand earlier monographs that register aspects of the development of printing and publishing as a business. Venturing into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such studies note how printers, at first bent on making money through the production of large, inexpensive editions, evolved into entrepreneurial publishers desirous of capitalizing on the book as both commodity and embodiment of literature.[6]

Other works carry forward the history of distribution. One line of inquiry involves analyzing the economic underpinnings of the spread of print, such as peddling, the shipment of print by rail, and the system of traveling book agents. A body of work devoted to the history of libraries has made clear how audiences gained (or forfeited) access to print. Some library historians have concentrated on institutions and organizations; others have contributed accurate descriptions of private collections. Thanks to the stimulus of the history of the book, however, a third strategy has now taken hold: combing the policies and records of subscription and public libraries for the

[5] For lack of space I have omitted discussion of most histories of journalism.

[6] Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital: Philadelphia Book Publishers in the New Republic* (Philadelphia, 1996); Michael Winship, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995); Ezra Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam: Representative American Publisher* (State College, 2000); James L. W. West III, *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace since 1900* (Philadelphia, 2000).

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titles available to borrowers and the standards of taste librarians and patrons exercised.[7]

The attempt to explore the role of print in the lives of individual readers has generated substantial results as well. Until a few years ago, literary critics tended to infer audience response from the implications of an author's rhetorical strategies, while historians were satisfied only with the reading records of "real" people. The glaring exception was Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), which rested on an ethnography of readers who were real but also alive. A compromise emerged in studies that, quite rightly recognizing that editors, publishers, and other book professionals are also readers, draw on the opinions of those professionals as evidence of reader response. Of late, however, students of both literature and history have joined bibliographers and librarians in probing diaries, book lists, and other archival materials to discern the ordinary, or nonprofessional, reader's mental world. Although the results differ widely, they help recover precisely which texts constituted the intellectual and emotional lives of figures ranging from public personages to anonymous young women workers. In addition, *Literacy in the United States,* by Carl F. Kaestle and others, encompasses several meticulous case studies of who read what, based in part on an exhumation of the sociological findings of early-twentieth-century librarians.[8]

Among the scholars of print production, dissemination, and reception who have taken recovery of what was there as their major task, some have been warier than others about generalizing from their results. Edwin Wolf's *The Book Culture of a Colonial American City* represents the skittish end of the continuum. Asserting that he had "merely set [the evidence] down," Wolf (an eminent librarian) explained that he hoped "to lead the American and English scholars working on the 'History of the Book' to titles of books that may flesh out the bones of their generalizations." In distancing himself from the field, Wolf self-consciously anticipated criticism—and with good reason. In today's competitive scholarly climate, efforts to gather data can evoke dismissive responses from historians and literary critics alike. From his base in literature, Michael Denning has pronounced interest in real readers' testimony "antiquarian" unless addressed to "social movements and cultural formation."[9] Historians may be even quicker than their counterparts in literary disciplines to minimize the significance of such empirical reports; lately they seem to have grown more strident in greeting evidence of the kind Wolf provides with a withering "So what?" Ironically, given their predilection for theory, literary scholars (apart from Denning) may be

[7] Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York, 1993); Wayne A. Wiegand, *The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876–1917* (New York, 1986); Edwin Wolf II, *The Book Culture of a Colonial American City: Philadelphia Books, Bookmen, and Booksellers* (Oxford, Eng., 1988); Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa* (Amherst, 2001).

[8] David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst, 1996), 169–87; Ezra Greenspan, *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990); Barbara Hochman, *Getting at the Author: Reimagining Books and Reading in the Age of American Realism* (Amherst, 2001); Cathy N. Davidson, *Reading in America: Literature and Social History* (Baltimore, 1989); Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas, eds., *Reading Acts: U.S. Readers' Interactions with Literature, 1800–1950* (Knoxville, 2002).

[9] Wolf, *Book Culture of a Colonial American City,* vii; Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London, 1998), 263.

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more tolerant of "mere" data because, for them, archival research is still a novelty. Moreover, for those in literary studies, raised on the assumption that an author's work was an unvarying entity, merely discovering the existence of discrepant printed versions of the "same" text has been a powerful lesson.

In any event, historians are not wrong to demand interpretive reach, yet, by virtue of their predilection for facts, they ought to insist that in a new field efforts to unearth what was there have intrinsic value. For one thing, they know from experience that a rich evidentiary base—of the sort Kaestle's early-twentieth-century librarians assembled—increases the interpretive possibilities for the book history of the future. For another, they should appreciate that the habit of compiling data with care can prevent distortion and error. Hugh Amory noted as much in admonishing two literary scholars for staking their hypotheses about the popularity of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) on the text and marginalia in expensive first editions rather than on later, more widely circulating versions of the novel.[10]

By virtue of their training, historians should also be aware that the simple mission of recovery does not necessarily lead to simple outcomes. Reconstructing the panoply of production, for example, reveals that "publishing" is more than the issuance of printed books by trade firms oriented toward the profitable sale of literature. Rather, as several studies have shown, the term must be expanded to denominate an array of genres and formats. Scribal (handwritten) publication, further discussed below, has been restored to view in the context of seventeenth-century England by Harold Love's *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (1993). Although it may seem a strange bedfellow, another indication of the capacious nature of production is Jay A. Gertzman's *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920–1940* (1999), which examines both the publication of "obscenity" and some of the crusades against it. The group of essays entitled *Free Print and Non-Commercial Publishing since 1700* (2000), edited by James Raven, likewise underscores the diversity of print forms. Raven avers that recognizing the interests of patrons underwriting such "free" publications as missionary tracts and the role of self-promotion in self-publishing can throw into relief similar phenomena in the ostensibly open market for commercial publication. Finally, Megan L. Benton's *Beauty and the Book: Fine Editions and Cultural Distinction in America* (2000) looks at the other end of the spectrum, the phenomenon of the high-priced "fine book" that showcased typography, design, and bindings while exhibiting tensions about the standardization and materialism characterizing twentieth-century consumer culture.

Recognizing the range of publishing opens the way to reassessing certain commonplaces of American literary history. One is the assertion that poets found it difficult to reach audiences in the late nineteenth century. That statement, which served the self-image of the figures in the "new poetry" movement around 1912, turns out to have been true only if one excludes the anthologies, so-called vanity publications,

[10] Hugh Amory, "Remarks Delivered at the . . . American Literature Association," *Book,* 54–55 (July and Nov. 2001), 1–3.

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and poetry books from small regional presses that far outnumbered singly authored volumes of verse intended for wide sale. To insist that "publishing" includes those formats is not to quibble about terminology, but rather to ask how those who availed themselves of such opportunities to circulate their verse experienced the literary marketplace—or their distance from it—and what impact that experience had on the cultural status of the genre. One should note as well that the distinction between literary publications and other print media was often ambiguous: as Frances Smith Foster has shown, nineteenth-century Afro-Protestant newspapers nurtured African American poetry and fiction while advancing evangelical and political causes. Heeding the variety of print forms—the little magazine alongside the Luce periodical, the output of a small ethnic press as well as that of a mainstream New York house—seems especially important for historians of the twentieth century, when corporate consolidation may obscure the countervailing trend toward multiplicity and even fragmentation.[11]

An analogous argument may be made about the picture inventories give of what readers read: one comes to appreciate that, in any given era, reading could mean encountering a mix of new works and "steady sellers" that remained in print for decades, European imports and American texts, the ostensibly permanent and the obviously ephemeral. The inclusive literary history such an appreciation enables seems essential in a democratic society, a point that has sometimes escaped cultural theorists such as Denning. The real danger in collecting information—whether about reading, production, or distribution—is succumbing, not to antiquarianism, but to its opposite: the compulsion to dress up good data as a thesis about "culture." Devotees of cultural studies have furnished particularly egregious examples of that peril. Even Michael Winship's otherwise estimable study of the publishing firm Ticknor and Fields purports to deal with the "importance of books and the book trade to American culture and society" but rarely speculates beyond Ticknor and Fields's ledger books. Writing a history of print culture, as opposed to a chronicle of printed texts, calls for more than that.[12]

What it requires is consideration of the second large question noted above: Which values, interests, ideologies, and needs have shaped the production, dissemination, and reception of books? Obviously there is some overlap between the works engaged in that inquiry and those principally devoted to taking stock. But there are also differences. To take a small example, Winship observed that Ticknor and Fields used heavier paper "to bulk out short texts."[13] It is not clear whether that decision entailed some advantages in the manufacturing process, but it presented consumers with

[11] Frances Smith Foster, "African-Americans, Literature, and the Nineteenth-Century Afro-Protestant Press," in *Reciprocal Influences: Literary Production, Distribution, and Consumption in America,* ed. Steven Fink and Susan S. Williams (Columbus, 1999), 24–35. On ethnic presses, see James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand, eds., *Print Culture in a Diverse America* (Urbana, 1998).

[12] On "steady sellers," see Hall, *Cultures of Print,* 61. Winship, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* 5.

[13] Winship, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* 101.

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more for their money. Why such bulk was appealing—as opposed to the cachet of the slim volume of verse—and why the publishers felt they needed to meet that demand are queries that touch on the figurative as well as the literal dimensions of the book as commodity; arguably they even raise the theme of anti-intellectualism in American life. They are questions of culture, and here they remain unaddressed.

But many historians of the book have fruitfully explored such deeper patterns of belief and behavior. Their accomplishment may best be grasped by recourse to the vocabulary that Europeanists in the field have popularized. Among the key entries in this lexicon is "mediation." Rejecting the view that a printed artifact is simply the embodiment of an author's words, the term denotes the multitude of factors affecting the text's transmission. Darnton's construct of the "communications circuit" singled out such mediators as printers, booksellers, paper suppliers, shippers, and censors; for modern America the list would also include literary agents, editors, librarians, book clubs, reviewers, and mass-market retailers. Some forms of mediation are concrete and explicit—for instance, Richard Wright's revision of *Native Son* (1940) at the behest of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Others are less readily apparent—for instance, the unacknowledged effect of copyright restrictions on the contents of anthologies. For Elizabeth Carroll Reilly and David D. Hall, a crucial "structure of mediation" is religion, manifest, for example, in the creation of evangelical reading communities that in the 1740s began exerting a major influence on production.[14]

Some book historians have adopted the term "appropriation" for readers' remaking of the text within the frameworks authors and mediators have imposed. Appropriation, in Chartier's phrase, enables the same texts to be "differently apprehended, manipulated, and comprehended." In the world of the appropriating reader—and of many historians of the book—a text is "stable in its letter and fixed in its form" but unstable in the meaning it carries.[15] Finally, two other terms, derived in part from anthropology, have helped historians specify the social sources not only of reading but also of writing, publishing, and dissemination: the concept of a cultural "practice"—reading aloud, keeping a journal, writing a poem for a funeral, regulating the book trade—and the "site" or setting in which "practices" occur. Thus a "print culture" might be thought of as the nexus of practices creating and sustaining the ideological, psychological, political, and economic power of the printed word for a given social group.

Among the scholarly works that have focused implicitly or explicitly on the mediation of cultural values and interests are those concerning authorship. Such studies have grounded authorial activity and identity in a convergence of market conditions, popular values, aesthetic choices, and personal circumstances. In elucidating the "array of literary possibilities" facing Louisa May Alcott in the 1860s, Richard H. Brodhead articulates the principle guiding those studies: "no author comes to be an author in an unmediated way. A writer can only become a writer by first constructing

[14] Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?," 111; Elizabeth Carroll Reilly and David D. Hall, "Customers and the Market for Books," in *A History of the Book in America,* vol. I: *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World,* ed. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 392–95, esp. 392.

[15] Chartier, *Order of Books,* 2, 8, 16.

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some working idea of what a writer is and does. Such definitions in turn are never merely self-generated but are formed in and against the understandings of this role that are operative in a particular cultural space." As if to appease the ghost of the pioneering scholar of print William Charvat, who at the end of his life reaffirmed his allegiance to the text itself, Brodhead then shows how that insight was more than "external" to Alcott's work by arguing that competing literary cultures were the subject, as well as the source, of *Little Women.*[16]

Although they couch the topic in different language, historians of journalism have contributed notable studies of the mediations restricting authorship. In *Truth in Publishing: Federal Regulation of the Press's Business Practices, 1880–1920* (1993), Linda Lawson delineates the interventions of both the newspaper industry and the government to curb the publication of advertisements as news. Similarly, John Nerone's *Violence against the Press* presents its subject as one of several forces—consumer demand, professionalism, ideologies such as "objectivity" and "good taste"—that control "free expression."[17]

More answers to questions about the values and interests shaping production and dissemination lie in works on literary critics, educators, and other cultural authorities. Because of the curricular debates on college campuses in the last twenty years or so, the continuous modification of the literary canon to suit academic and social priorities has come to light. Scholars have also examined the packaging of "classics" and the decisions of publishers' advisers about the selection of titles for series offering cheap reprints of well-known works, such as the Modern Library, practices that represent canon formation in less familiar guises. (Their activities echo the collaborative efforts of colonial printers and ministers to mediate the popularity of "godly" books.) Finally, recent studies have considered intermediaries whose more diffuse recommendations were equally important as constituents of print culture: figures who postulated the moral and aesthetic benefits of reading, particularly by valorizing certain genres, thereby affecting not only production but also distribution to libraries and schools. For example, although he took pains to examine readers' responses, Scott E. Casper showed that nineteenth-century writers of and about biographies helped spur demand and mold reception by imbuing life histories with competing concepts of nation, character, and selfhood.[18]

[16] Michael Winship, "Afterword," in *Literary Publishing in America, 1790–1850,* by William Charvat (Amherst, 1993), 95; Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 1993), 80, 86, 89. See also Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill, 1989); and Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1990). On the failure even of book historians to distinguish among modes of authorship, see Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore, 1999).

[17] John Nerone, *Violence against the Press: Policing the Public Sphere in U.S. History* (New York, 1994), 7.

[18] On various canons, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987); Jay Satterfield, *"The World's Best Books": Taste, Culture, and the Modern Library* (Amherst, 2002); Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1992); and Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill, 1997). On "godly" books, see David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989), 49–51. On prescriptions for reading, see Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1999); and Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860–1880* (New York, 1991).

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The critics and educators who devised hierarchies of genre and taste—issuing edicts about who should read what—were participants in a broader politics of literacy that affected both the availability and the uses of print in American society. Several scholars have elucidated the values Americans have attached to the ability to decode written English. For slaves and masters alike, literacy was associated with freedom and power; for women's club members who helped americanize immigrants, it was a skill that enhanced their own status as well as that of their pupils. The term "literacy" nevertheless remains a cloudy one that covers multiple abilities. At the least, it should not be conflated with the "literary"—for example, the reading or writing in which clubwomen enacted their ideals of gender and refinement.[19]

When book historians have turned to ascertaining the values that governed reading practices, they have established the figure of the active reader who creates meaning within the constraints of the text. That impulse owes something not only to trends in the study of literature but also to the politically informed determination of scholars writing the histories of women, workers, slaves, and consumers to repudiate earlier depictions of those groups as passive and powerless victims. The breakthrough book in this regard was Radway's *Reading the Romance,* which shows women making well-considered interpretive judgments that differentiated a supposedly uniform "product." One of Radway's most important insights, however, is that for the reader the act of reading can be as consequential as what is read. Although in this instance plot and style heightened the effect of "escape," Radway's interviewees revealed that reading by itself "connotes a free space where they feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own."[20]

Reading to obtain emotional satisfactions that might be extrinsic to the text is limited by neither gender nor genre. Nevertheless, gender norms have often affected readers' attribution of significance to their reading experiences. When they internalized the disapproval of putative onlookers, for instance, Radway's informants evinced guilty pleasure at taking time from household duties; by the same token, a former newspaper editor called his early-twentieth-century affinity for verse a "secret joy and shame" in an era that associated manhood with practicality. Since the appearance of Radway's study, gauging the precise mediations of gender has therefore rightly preoccupied many historians of reading. In particular, they have understood the act of reading as an aspect of identity formation, with gender a key component. In the best of this work, the model of the reader as appropriator of a text's manifold messages has supplanted the oversimplified one of women resisting the domination of male authors. Similarly, historians intent on reconstructing actual groups who read texts in common—and in the same ways—have given greater specificity to the literary theorists' concept of "interpretive communities," instead of assuming that the label "female" or "male" is sufficient to establish shared practices. The result is a collective

[19] Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C., 1991); Anna Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880–1920* (Urbana, 1997); Edward W. Stevens Jr., *Literacy, Law, and Social Order* (DeKalb, 1988); Carl F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven, 1991).

[20] Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 93.

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portrait of women seizing from printed works visions of the self that moderate (although they do not dismantle) the gender conventions of their eras. Both playful and disciplined, oriented toward both public and private life, the mid-nineteenth-century learned women in Mary Kelley's account are also both masculine and feminine. For the late Victorian era, the fullest picture of women readers as appropriators emerges from the thoughtful investigations of Barbara Sicherman, who has questioned rigid formulations of the workings of gender (as well as class) in the construction of middle-class identity through print.[21]

Other book historians attuned to the values attending reading have emphasized the mediations of religion. In an essay in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World,* Hall and Elizabeth Carroll Reilly put "modalities of reading" in the context of Protestant commitments to the transformation of the heart. For the nineteenth century, David Paul Nord has used colporteurs' (peddlers') reports to explore the extent to which readers complied with the American Tract Society's instructions to read with purposive intensity. He concludes that religious publishers and their audiences exploited the capabilities of new mass media while sustaining an older practice of earnest perusal. Nord thereby casts doubt on the thesis of Isabelle Lehuu that the "popular classes" of Americans in the antebellum period "devalued and desecrated" print culture through practices that aimed to "mock and subvert" it.[22]

Despite such scrutiny of reading as a set of practices, it remains true that, as Robert A. Gross observed in 1996, historians know much more about women, than men, readers. It may be time to take the next step, namely, to compare women's self-fashioning with men's to assess the impact of gender. Yet, it bears remarking that learned women, instead of experiencing liberation through reading, may have merely escaped from the kitchen frying pan into the study or parlor fire. The propagandist George Creel, for instance, recalled that "night after night, when she must have been ready to drop," his mother "told us stories that made dead heroes live again, and actually had us believing that it was a privilege to learn the poems of Scott and Longfellow."[23] Even if exposure to print broadened the horizons of young women, reading could also augment domestic responsibilities. More generally, historians who have learned the axiom that the act of reading carries consequences only partially related to the

[21] For the editor's account of his poetical interests, see Walter A. Locke, *This World, My Home* (Yellow Springs, 1957), 92–93. On women as readers, see, for example, Elisabeth B. Nichols, "'Blunted Hearts': Female Readers and Printed Authority in the Early Republic," in *Reading Acts,* ed. Ryan and Thomas, 1–28; Mary Kelley, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," *ibid.*, 53–78; and Barbara Sicherman, "Reading and Middle-Class Identity in Victorian America: Cultural Consumption, Conspicuous and Otherwise," *ibid.*, 137–60. See also Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "'Have you Read . . . ?': Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region," *Nineteenth-Century Literature,* 52 (Sept. 1997), 139–70. On male readers and social life, see Thomas Augst, "The Business of Reading in Nineteenth-Century America: The New York Mercantile Library,"*American Quarterly,* 50 (June 1998), 267–305.

[22] Elizabeth Carroll Reilly and David H. Hall, "Modalities of Reading," in *History of the Book in America,* I, ed. Amory and Hall, 404–10; David Paul Nord, "Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic,* 15 (Summer 1995), 241–72; Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 60.

[23] Robert A. Gross, *Reading Culture, Reading Books* (Worcester, 1996); George Creel, *Rebel at Large: Recollections of Fifty Crowded Years* (New York, 1947), 19.

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text should remember a corollary: the meanings readers make of print include those derived from the competing ideologies governing the sites where they read.

Taken together, studies assaying the presence of print and ones exploring the nature of print culture fulfill a central goal of the history of the book: to achieve, as the proceedings of the "Needs and Opportunities" conference put it, "wider understanding of the place of books in American society."[24]

As the Europeanists showed early on, the field holds an even greater promise: the potential to change historical narrative by throwing ostensibly settled issues into productive disarray. Rather than regarding recovery of the place of books primarily as an end in itself, scholars impelled by that promise have pursued a third question: How can a history of books illuminate the nature of culture? The compulsion to enlist book history in that venture separates the historians in the field from many (though not all) of their colleagues in literary studies. To the extent that they argue against a sharp division between male and female texts, Kelley's and Sicherman's projects on reading and gender shade into this third kind of inquiry. In addition, Americanists have made the study of print a starting point for rethinking a number of other accepted antinomies.

As the title of Amory and Hall's volume indicates, one dichotomy that has come in for revision is the customary one between *Britain* and *North America.* The reconception of those locales as "the Atlantic world" has occurred within the entire early American field. Nevertheless, printed communication, crossing the ocean in both directions, was especially important in maintaining that world. The traffic in print involved complex interactions between metropolitan center and less "civilized" outpost. The history of book production and dissemination suggests that the designation of North America as "provincial," while an apt way of capturing American ambivalence toward the mother country's artistic standards, inadequately conveys the economic and social realities that set Philadelphia or Boston apart from the English countryside. As Amory argues, "colonial" is a better term to indicate the peculiarities of the American print trade: its freedom from English copyright laws but its even greater dependence on British imports than previous scholars had thought. That double-edged situation explains the special kinship the gentry on the eastern seaboard felt with their counterparts at home, as well as the urgency with which Americans proclaimed the birth of a national literature. Between 1828 and 1868, the period for which Michael Winship has assembled data, imports continued to grow dramatically, reflecting and reinforcing the friendships that created a transatlantic community of Victorian intellectuals. Given the evidence from the history of the book, it has now become imperative to mistrust pronouncements about American culture that overlook its Anglo-American dimension.[25]

[24] John B. Hench, "Preface," in *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book,* ed. Hall and Hench, viii.

[25] Hugh Amory, "Reinventing the Colonial Book," in *History of the Book,* I, ed. Amory and Hall, 26–54; Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675–1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York, 1981), 269–71; Michael Winship, "The Transatlantic Book Trade and Anglo-American Literary Culture in the Nine-

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A second dichotomy book historians have overturned is the one separating *high* and *popular culture.* Lawrence W. Levine's widely read *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988) portrayed the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a period when the egalitarian cultural life of the antebellum years hardened into a sacralized high art enjoyed by a social elite and dissociated from the popular entertainment of the working classes. As long ago as the "Needs and Opportunities" conference, however, David Grimsted warned that "there is no indication that taste followed whatever broad financial divisions might be traced" and remarked on the "difficulty of separating popular taste from elite or high standards." On the same occasion, Chartier, whose stance has been so influential as to constitute almost a school of thought, asserted that the public for cultural objects is "always cross-class and mixed." Those who agree advance the concept of a middle ground where the high and the popular coexist and commingle.[26] The most powerful sustained study to reimagine culture in those terms is David D. Hall's masterly *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment,* which establishes the participation of both ordinary people and the clergy in a mental world—mediated by printers and booksellers—of magic and ritual. In Hall's framework, hierarchical distinctions do not disappear, but they are always challenged or obviated by countervailing movements from both above and below. Thus ministers preach chilling sermons infused with the rhetoric of terror; printers conventionalize and distribute them; but the laity, seemingly under the clergy's control, learns to distance itself from some of the "lore of terror" by pigeonholing it as fiction. Working on a different period, Alice Fahs has redefined the popular literature of the Civil War as an inclusive entity "neither obviously 'high' nor 'low' in its content or its audience." She, too, does not disavow hierarchy entirely; for example, she differentiates the cheap sensational novel from other popular print forms. Nevertheless, she is careful to indicate the multiple publics to whom war literature appealed and the personalized meanings readers extracted from it.[27]

Inexorably, their reexamination of cultural hierarchy has involved such scholars as Hall and Fahs in a related matter: the tension between *authority* and *democracy* in the United States. The argument against the autonomy of popular culture opens its proponents to the charge that they devalue the expression of workers and underestimate their resistance to "the elite." One might go further and indict as inherently unprogressive a history of the book that discounts the primacy of class. Yet, at bottom, the insistence that elites are always fractured is predicated on the conviction that ordinary people have exercised more, not less, agency than historians have often accorded them. Fahs, for instance, couples her exploration of the race and gender inequities Civil War literature perpetuated with her contention that the middle ground authors and readers inhabited was "an expanded realm of imaginative freedom"; in her estimation the individualism inscribed in wartime writing led to a "diversified national-

teenth Century," in *Reciprocal Influences,* ed. Fink and Williams, 98–122.

[26] David Grimsted, "Books and Culture: Canned, Canonized, and Neglected," in *Needs and Opportunities,* ed. Hall and Hench, 193, 194; Roger Chartier, "A Comment on Mr. Grimsted's Paper," *ibid.*, 227.

[27] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 135–37; Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 3.

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ism" that "embodied a democratizing impulse," one the literary marketplace "both energized and constrained." Those statements bespeak a democratic commitment to creating a history of ordinary people that grants them their full humanity.[28]

Other scholars have come at the tensions between democracy and authority by focusing on issues of access and distribution. Richard D. Brown's *Knowledge Is Power* asks whether the more abundant print of the early national period signified democratization. In his view, the growth of distribution mechanisms undid the correlation between information and privilege. Brown argued that greater opportunities for knowledge and entertainment, at least for white men, went hand in hand with the emergence of competitive, specialized "information marketplaces."[29] His affirmation of print's democratic functions (albeit limited by race and gender) disputes the conclusions of Ronald J. Zboray's laudably painstaking *A Fictive People* (1993), partly because Zboray equates democracy with access to literature in book form. Zboray laments the disappearance of community that he believes accompanied the spread of print, although one might counter that allegiances to locality, region, and nation are not mutually exclusive.

Ann Fabian's *The Unvarnished Truth* approaches access to print by examining authorship, provocatively expanding that category. Fabian is less concerned with whether print aided democratization and upward mobility than with controversies over textual authority. She considers that theme by retrieving from obscurity the memoirs of beggars, prisoners, slaves, and soldiers. In tracing how such "unschooled writers" found a voice and an audience through publishers' mediations, Fabian probes the standards of authenticity the public applied in granting credibility to individuals at the bottom of the social scale. Her work thus pursues for the nineteenth century the contestations over fact and fiction to which stories of portents and prophecies gave rise in Puritan New England.[30]

The link between print and power is also at issue in studies of scribal publication. Here scholars have stepped back to the meanings of print technology itself. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, discussing the initial consequences of the invention of printing, posited a revolutionary shift away from manuscript transmission. On the one hand, Eisenstein maintained, readers with access to printed copies of reference works and scientific data acquired confidence in the knowledge that came from the book as "silent instructor"; hence they were "less likely to defer to traditional authority." On the other hand, the standardization that print facilitated diminished the authority of a handwritten—and error-ridden—text, while creating communities of readers who were literally on the same page. The new technology may have allowed more self-trust or more social control, but in either case it altered the way people regarded one another's words. By contrast, Harold Love's pioneering work on scribal systems demonstrates that the circulation of script coexisted with, and could actually carry more

[28] Hall, *Cultures of Print,* 2; Fahs, *Imagined Civil War,* 16.

[29] Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York, 1989), 275.

[30] Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 2000), 4; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 94–110.

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social authority than, print in certain milieus, such as the literary coteries and oppositional political circles of seventeenth-century England. His corrective is responsible for the frequent reminders in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* that the colonies did not uniformly adopt print for government documents and for Hall's assertion that protests against political and religious authority in the Chesapeake Bay area were not a direct response to the technologies that conveyed laws or doctrine.[31]

Those conclusions exemplify one perspective historians of print culture have brought to a related conversation about a fourth antinomy, the *public* and *private spheres.* Their participation in the wide-ranging response to Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* first published in English in 1989, was a logical outgrowth of Habermas's contention that print made possible the formation of a knowledgeable, disinterested citizenry loyal to reason and the common good. Michael Warner elaborated the American case, arguing that the Puritan equation of text and author gave way to the depersonalized print constitutive of republicanism and eventually to liberal capitalism. Robert A. Gross has written an invaluable appraisal of Warner's and other relevant studies and of the concurrent vogue of Benedict R. O'G. Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983, reissued in 1991); he has also offered his own countervailing evidence that prerevolutionary newspapers were neither impartial nor open to all facets of the public and that thereafter printers, editors, and the party press as a whole were hardly neutral.[32]

Here it suffices to highlight two additional works that are strong examples of the role historical research can play in evaluating political theory. The first is Christopher Grasso's *A Speaking Aristocracy.* Organized around six exemplars of Connecticut learned culture between the Great Awakening and the early republic, Grasso's project relies heavily on the exegetical strategies of intellectual history. An underlying purpose, however, is to test generalizations about print and the public sphere against the reorientation of writing and of speech in the lives and thought of those individuals as they encountered an expanding literary marketplace and a vocal democracy. One of Grasso's fundamental principles is that the same phrases can have variable meanings in different contexts. Hence, instead of drawing sharp lines between "traditional, republican, and liberal public spheres," Grasso saw them as "overlapping rhetorical possibilities in a dynamic age." In the writings of Timothy Dwight during the 1790s, for instance, he found both "reverence for the power of the printed word" and rejection of an anonymous, impersonal press. Similarly, the poet and essayist John Trumbull stood for "a middle way" between "false gentility" and vulgar democracy,

[31] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), 26. That work is an abridgment of Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Eng., 1980). Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 64; Hall, *Cultures of Print,* 101.

[32] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* trans. by Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Robert A. Gross, "Print and the Public Sphere in Early America," in *The State of American History,* ed. Melvyn Stokes (Oxford, 2002), 245–64.

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between literature as commodity and civic act. The mixed, incomplete transformations Grasso so perceptively described leave a chastened Federalist aristocracy sparring with Republican partisans in public.[33]

While Grasso thus employed history to qualify Habermas's idealized public sphere, Meredith L. McGill, a literary critic with historical expertise, sustained Warner's conclusions about the strength of republican ideals. Nevertheless, she dissented from the inferences about authorship some literary scholars have drawn from examining copyright law. McGill focused on the 1834 American copyright case *Wheaton v. Peters,* wherein the Marshall court refused to grant authors common-law property rights in the printed versions of their manuscripts. The ruling departed from British law and from previous American legislation by differentiating the material book from other products of labor. The decision construed publication as a surrender of private interest, whereby readers took possession of an immaterial text from the author. Thus, McGill wrote, the Supreme Court affirmed a republican theory of authorship that empowered the state to protect the public's stake in the dissemination of useful knowledge. One of McGill's points is that the development of American literature depended, not on the consonance of economic opportunity with an individualistic definition of authorship as commodity production, but on the "productive misalignment of legal discourse and the market." In the American setting the public sphere shapes print culture even as abundant print requires readjudications of the boundary between public and private; moreover, in the 1830s the author is not solely the personification of liberal capitalism. Bringing an acute critical sensibility to the lawyers' briefs for each side, McGill interpreted them as signs of a reconception of state power and of anxiety over mass production. By clarifying the legalities mediating production, she set an agenda for a literary history grounded in the exigencies of the book trades while she illustrated the centrality of the book to political and social history.[34]

The word "speaking" in the title of Grasso's book locates it too among studies in book history that confront cultural hierarchy, technology, the public sphere, and other issues by reconsidering the divide between *orality* and *literacy.* In barest outline, such works assert that people without decoding skills still experienced print culture through listening to the written word; that the social uses of reading call for multiple literacies; that the performance of texts, like scribal publication, complemented silent reading even when print became abundant; and that within early American literary and political culture, authority was as intertwined with speaking styles as with writing. Sandra M. Gustafson's *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (2000) presents preaching and oratory as arenas in which women and Native Americans exhibited types of passionate, untutored speech that competed with,

[33] Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 282, 288, 298.

[34] Meredith L. McGill, "The Matter of the Text: Commerce, Print Culture, and the Authority of the State in American Copyright Law," *American Literary History,* 9 (1997), 21–59. See also Grantland S. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago, 1997), 70–96. Rice argues that legal discourse contained Lockean and utilitarian strains and hence was partially aligned with the market. *Wheaton v. Peters,* 33 U.S. 591 (1834).

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recast, and lost out to the expression of white males. By underscoring the pleasures of literary culture in eighteenth-century coffeehouses, salons, and similar public sites, David S. Shields's *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (1997) dissents from Habermas's stress on reasoned communication in the private realm as a precondition of the public sphere. For historians of later periods, the instructive facet of Shields's book is his characterization of print—circulating on paper and aloud—as an agent of sociability. Those traditions survived in the early twentieth century, for example, when literature as shared talk helped solidify the community of Greenwich Village "moderns" and bound participants in the poetry recitation rituals of schools and summer camps. Ironically, for some historians of the book, the refusal to endorse the myth of a civilizing literacy triumphant over orality leads logically to the proposition that print may not be so important after all. In the standard narrative of Puritanism, that conclusion, recently broached by David D. Hall and Alexandra Walsham, may be revolutionary. Given the scarcity and a degree of suspicion of print in early Massachusetts, the authors proposed that the prevalence of practices reliant on the spoken word, such as listening to sermons and repeating them at home, "does much to qualify and weaken the presumed link between literacy and Protestantism which pervades so much of the historical scholarship on old and New England." They argued as well that popular religion, even when transmitted in printed form, bore the marks of the opportunistic preachers, writers, and printers who appropriated chapbooks and ballads for both "piety and profit."[35]

As in Hall's earlier work, that statement arises from the recognition that "religious publishing" should be understood as an amorphous label that blurs the contrast between the *sacred* and the *secular.* Grasso's exposition of the phrases "sacred liberty" and "faithful patriotism" in the politicized sermons of the 1760s does the same. Neither can an account of a United States on an unwavering trajectory toward secularization withstand the inspection afforded by studies of later print production, dissemination, and reading. David Paul Nord's essays show nonprofit evangelical publishers developing new technologies and distribution methods that both absorbed the lessons of the mass market and taught commercial firms more efficient ways to deal with that market. The Puritan inclination to assimilate news to God's plan likewise continued to color journalistic practice thereafter. Similarly, scholars are beginning to rectify the distortion resulting from the failure to include in tallies of American popular books devotional and inspirational works emanating from nontrade presses.[36]

[35] Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York, 2000); Joan Shelley Rubin, "Modernism in Practice: Public Readings of the New Poetry," in *A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States,* ed. Townsend Ludington (Chapel Hill, 2000), 127–52; David D. Hall and Alexandra Walsham, "Communications in the Anglo-American World of John Winthrop," in *The World of John Winthrop: England and New England, 1588–1649,* ed. Francis J. Bremer and Lynn Botelho (Boston, forthcoming).

[36] Grasso, *Speaking Aristocracy,* 78–80; David Paul Nord, "Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism, 1630–1730," *Journal of American History,* 77 (June 1990) 9–38; Candy Gunther Brown, "Salt to the World: A Cultural History of Evangelical Reading, Writing, and Publishing Practices in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2000); R. Laurence Moore, "Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America," *American Quarterly,* 41 (June 1989), 216–42.

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If book history can disclose commonalities as well as tensions between religion and business, the same can be said for the relation between *art* and *commerce.* Lawrence Buell has challenged the assumption that commodification "must entail some sort of aesthetic debasement." Buell does more than recognize how commercial considerations motivated decisions about texts' attributes. He adduces sales figures, the physical properties of books, and stylistic criteria to substantiate that the adaptations Walt Whitman and Herman Melville made in their verse following the Civil War drew them closer to images of the war in popular media and, in welcoming readers, in some respects improved their poetry. As is well known, the compatibility of art and commerce has been heretical in some quarters ever since writers and critics responded to industrialization by defining themselves as above the market. Their insistence that commodification was selling out furnished rhetoric for several waves of American expatriation; it undergirded mid-twentieth-century critiques of middlebrow culture; in the last few decades, it picked up speed among historians and literary critics intent on making plain the detrimental effects of consumer culture; in 2002, it fueled controversy over the book club run by the television personality Oprah Winfrey. In Buell's hands, the history of the book questions how much that polarized view obstructs a subtler estimate of authorial intentions, book promotion, reader response, and literary merit.[37]

Those book historians who seek to illuminate how a culture functions have conceived of print not only as the product of socially inflected mediations but also as itself a mediating element in cultural life. Their paradoxical effort to make sense of the past by undermining dualities that have given previous chronicles shape and order may be disconcerting—perhaps the look in their eyes is anxiety!—but their emphasis on reciprocal processes and on fluidity, multiplicity, overlap, and instability have resulted in histories closer to human experience than the ones they supplant.

For all of their attainments in inventorying what print existed, what values it encompassed, and what it meant in broader terms, Americanists in the field still have ample work to do. Current needs and opportunities are particularly glaring for the history of American print culture since the mid-twentieth century, perhaps because the digital revolution tends to overshadow other aspects of the period. Although scholars are busily charting the activities of African Americans, Hispanics, and members of other minority groups as producers of print, for example, the subject of minority reading communities after 1950 remains largely untouched. Studies of that subject would ideally pose questions about the extent to which ethnicity and race created shared modes of appropriation rather than assuming the existence of community at the outset. Another pressing need is for further information about noncommercial and nonbook print forms, ranging from government publications to comic books—

[37] Lawrence Buell, "American Civil War Poetry and the Meaning of Literary Commodification: Whitman, Melville, and Others," in *Reciprocal Influences,* ed. Fink and Williams, 123–38.

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information about not only production and distribution but also the kinds of literacies those forms stimulated and challenged.

Historians might also extend forward chronologically their substitution of middle ground for polarities in reconceptualizing the workings of a culture. For instance, between 1890 and 1930 the growth in production of new titles, the increasing availability of reprinted "classics," the mushrooming population of high school and college graduates, and eventually the advent of radio all helped desacralize high art; that is, they pulled against the solidification of cultural hierarchy. How those developments intersected with the mediations of publishers and literary critics is fairly well established; how they played out in the lives of readers—for example, in families where children surpassed parents in educational level—is much less clear. And what are the implications for the putative separation between the high and the popular when certain types of literacy—for example, the technique of interpreting literary images symbolically—cross the line between print and other media such as the movies?

As discomfiting as the inquiry may be for fans of Chartier and Hall, it is also time to question whether severing class from cultural level makes sense for the history of American readers in the second half of the twentieth century. Granted that some working-class individuals might enjoy the occasional brush with the classics, hasn't the correspondence between high culture and elite social status become far closer by 2002 than in the nineteenth century? An observation about dime novels that James Gilreath made at the "Needs and Opportunities" conference may now seem even more pointed: "To claim that these books were read by everyone leaves unanswered the question of their primary audience and method of distribution."[38] Has sophisticated niche marketing and the widening gap between the rich and the poor perfected the alignment between primary audience (in the producers' view) and actual readers?

But simply identifying cultural level with class can mask distinctions within each broadly defined class. Arguments for the porousness of the boundary between the high and the popular always made an exception for the less accessible realm of "learned culture." Given both greater specialization of knowledge and larger numbers of college graduates in the past half century, it would be worthwhile to reconsider what learned culture now means. More guidance lies in Timothy J. Gilfoyle's and Patricia Anderson's cautions against regarding either the working class or the middle class as a single entity with uniform taste and values. Gilfoyle's dissent from Sven Beckert's depiction of "bourgeois New Yorkers" listening to works by Mozart in the 1890s fits the later period as well: "But does listening to classical music in the same orchestral hall," Gilfoyle asks, "signify a shared social identity?"[39] The ethnic and religious differences fracturing that audience—to say nothing of the "bourgeois" Americans who shunned Mozart altogether—suggest that even if economic divisions

[38] James Gilreath, "American Book Distribution," in *Needs and Opportunities,* ed. Hall and Hench, 166.

[39] Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "Making an American Upper Class," *Reviews in American History,* 30 (June 2002), 285; Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790–1860* (Oxford, Eng., 1991), 180. See also Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnson, eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York, 2001).

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hardened in the twentieth century, the model of a fluid and unbounded culture still holds within those divisions. What the term "elite" denotes, in view of the large, educated population identifying itself as middle class by 1950, is another issue.

The next task for historians of the book interested in such matters might be to document the conflicts that reveal the multiple, contested standards and expectations within both popular and middlebrow culture. Episodes in which readers fight the judgments of reviewers are particularly telling in that regard. Nonetheless, even if the primary audience to which Gilreath alluded cannot be specified in terms of class, it remains important to identify that audience in other ways and to recognize that reflexively invoking fluidity can produce as many distortions as automatically invoking hierarchy.

Along with updating the understanding of the high and the popular in relation to class, book historians concerned with the twentieth century might place on their agenda the reconsideration of an additional well-worn dichotomy: the opposition between the *traditional* and the *modern.* One legacy of early-twentieth-century literary critics and more recent historians alike is the assumption that rejecting the so-called genteel tradition in literature was a prerequisite for constructing a self-image as a modern American. Yet that premise is flawed not only because readers simultaneously appropriated Edna St. Vincent Millay and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow but also because literary taste may have less to do with self-concept than scholars who are themselves invested in literature have thought. A newspaper item that Flora Neil Davidson, a Wisconsin librarian, pasted into her diary in 1921 implies as much. Cast as a letter from "Anne Elizabeth" to a "Youth, Cynical," the item read:

> Because I say "damn" and use lipstick, you were sure that I was a flapper; however, the fact that I hated F. Scott's type of youth, and that I hadn't been kissed was inconsistent with flapperism. But when you found out that I subscribed to the "Bookman" and read Huneker, you decided that I must be a "Young Intellectual," and were surprised that I hated "Erik Dorn" and preferred Whitcomb Riley to The Benets. . . . Please believe that I *do* hate studio parties and the "new" literature and blasé youths, and that I can like organ music and lolly-pops and Thackeray and still be modern.[40]

That entreaty is notable, first, for the way it places such a figure as Stephen Vincent Benét in an innovative and even oppositional role, a position that his customary consignment to the ranks of middlebrow poets obscures. More important, though, "Anne Elizabeth" challenges the conflation of literary modernism with an acceptance of modern mores that underlies scholarly studies of American culture, especially in histories of the 1920s.

Although presumably "Anne Elizabeth" is fictive, her letter also points to a more general problem that awaits students of print culture regardless of the era on which they work: how to know when readers are relying on convention to describe their encounters with texts, and what weight to accord such descriptions. Anyone who has

[40] Flora Neil Davidson Diary, 1921, box 1, Davidson Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison). See also Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, eds., *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston, 2003).

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thumbed through early-twentieth-century autobiographies, for example, realizes that a section on favorite childhood books almost invariably follows chapters on the genealogy, birth, and early schooling of the author. The recurrence of that pattern suggests the need to reckon with the meaning of the convention itself: in this case, a cultural expectation that a well-ordered household exposed children to time-tested literature. Literary scholars, who have remarked on the tropes of reading as consumption and the author as the reader's friend, have much to teach historians about recognizing and interpreting the conventional. The point to stress (along with Grasso's analogous contention about rhetoric), however, is that, in Barbara Hochman's words, "conventions, whether literary or social, gain meaning and force in a particular context" and historians may be better equipped than students of literature to re-create that context fully. The relationship between convention and sincerity—how much stock responses vitiate an autobiographer's credibility—nonetheless remains a vexing methodological dilemma that warrants further attention.[41]

Finally, as the history of the book in the United States moves forward, one might profitably ask why so many among the first generation of scholars to enter the field have found ideas of flux, ambivalence, middle ground, appropriation, and agency so appealing. As any good historian of print will immediately grasp, the explanation will not reside in that generation's intellectual training alone but rather will spring in part from the social backgrounds, emotional makeup, and cultural ethos—perhaps even the childhood reading—its members have brought to their own practices as authors. As they explore print's contours and contents, excavate the values it has represented, and determine its historical significance, the next generation to accept those invigorating assignments might augment the history of the history of books by pondering that question as well.

[41] Hochman, *Getting at the Author,* 118.

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