

Rubin, Joan Shelley. *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2007. ix, 470 pp. Cloth, \$29.95. Paper, \$18.95.

Joan Shelley Rubin's highly accessible and persuasive book explores the diverse and complex ways American readers "used" poetry from 1880-1950. Identifying herself as a cultural historian, Rubin positions her study of poetry's readers in opposition to projects that are organized by poets, textual analysis, and literary or historical movements. In addition, Rubin's nontraditional time period, 1880-1950, bridges the common divide between nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetic studies. She is particularly adept at handling the first decade of the twentieth century, the proverbial "no man's land" of American poetry studies. By unearthing the cultural and emotional work poetry performed for individuals and communities, Rubin's book will be of great interest to scholars in reception studies, the history of the book, poetry, and popular culture, and particularly those interested in the intersection of these fields.

Rubin's most important contribution to American literary studies is her claim that the poetic movements scholarship has traditionally presented as progressing from romanticism to realism to modernism were actually coterminous with and complementary to one another. For instance, Rubin demonstrates that the fireside poets remained an integral part of school curricula and women's book clubs well into the twentieth century, even though grand narratives of American literature assert modernist poetry's dominance during this period. To support her conclusion, Rubin turns to school textbooks and curricula, diaries, journals, anthologies, newspapers, and other public and private documents.

The book's organization is refreshing precisely because the focus on readers and reading, instead of authors and movements, lends itself to a nonlinear configuration. Rubin frames each of her chapters with famous moments in poetic history or interesting unknown anecdotes that illustrate the significance of poetry to individuals. Besides serving as engaging chapter openings, this strategy also demonstrates the personal and individual nature of poetry reading in America.

Part one consists of a series of short chapters exploring the state of poetry in the book trade and periodical press, including the production, marketing, and reception of poetry, through a study of competing poetic models that dominated American culture from 1880 to 1950. For example, the opening chapter addresses perhaps the two most famous models of the American poet: "seer and sage." Drawing on anecdotes about Emerson and Whitman, Rubin describes how the conception of the poet as "seer" evokes the idea of the poet as a visionary whose vision required separation from society. Conversely, as "sage," the poet was responsible to his community by bestowing the wisdom and truth through his art.

These models represent the conflict between individualism and communitarianism in American culture as a whole. Rubin illustrates how American readers valued both the wisdom of the reclusive “seer” and the civic and social responsibility of the public “sage.”

Each additional chapter in part one works off of the “seer and sage” dichotomy and explores other oppositional pairings that Rubin reveals to be ultimately more harmonious than antagonistic. “Amateur and Professional” addresses how changes in nineteenth-century printing promoted the work of both amateur and professional poets and encouraged readers to see poets as both reverential figures and as friendly comrades. Chapter three, “Absence and Presence,” complicates the perception at the turn of the century that the quantity, quality, and importance of poetry were declining. Even as the time period expressed an anxiety about the declining stature of verse, Rubin demonstrates how publishing and readership records confirm poetry’s continued presence and importance to American readers’ daily lives. Chapter four, “Sophisticate and Innocent,” focuses on the rise of the modern poetry movement and the burgeoning celebrity status of poets. Rubin demonstrates how American audiences were fascinated by both the “sophisticate,” who represented the New York, bohemian, social poet, and the “innocent,” who epitomized the pure “girl” poet uncorrupted by modern society. In “Celebrity and Cipher,” Rubin illustrates how readers celebrated not only mainstream American poets who made themselves accessible through lectures, dinners, and socialite parties, but also the aloof, distanced poet who hovered outside mainstream culture. The final chapter of part one, “Alien and Intimate,” addresses the dichotomy between accessible and inaccessible poets and poetry that emerged from the modernist era. The thread that ties all these brief chapters together is the fact that these models are interconnected to one another; the seer and sage coexist alongside alien and intimate in the publishing, marketing, and reception of poetry. Rubin’s careful study in part one offers a far more complex portrait of twentieth-century poetic culture than scholarship has acknowledged.

In part two, Rubin turns from the production of poetry to its consumption by focusing on physical locations of poetry reading in America, demonstrating how the genre was meaningful to individuals and communities. Working under David D. Hall’s contention that “readers remake texts,” Rubin documents this process for specific groups of poetry readers. Each chapter focuses on a specific site and works towards Rubin’s goal of understanding poetry reading as a social and emotional act by “affirming how individuals used poetry in the service of identity formation” (9). The first site Rubin addresses is the schoolroom, possibly the site most readily identified with poetry reading in America. Through a study of curricula and first-hand accounts by students, Rubin illustrates how poetry reading

and recitation in American schools at the beginning of the twentieth century was designed to instill morality and patriotism in students. In service to these goals, the fireside poets and genteel tradition remained an integral part of school curricula and, thus, to American culture at a time when modernist verse and fiction were thought to dominate the period. The next chapter, “I Am an American,” addresses the role poetry played in the civic lives of Americans in schools, book clubs, and the larger community through a study of patriotic celebrations and civic pageants, “Americanization” efforts, and war propaganda. One of the fascinating results of Rubin’s focus on ordinary readers in this chapter is that it demonstrates how these readers regularly traversed the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow without the anxieties literary scholars often associate with the task.

From the public spheres of the schoolroom and civic pageant, Rubin moves to the home and reveals how integral poetry was to the moral, emotional and psychological life of the family. The next chapter moves into the realm of another emotionally charged site for Americans: religion. In “God’s in His Heaven,” Rubin addresses how poetry is used in service of religion through an analysis of its role in devotional literature and religious ceremonies. Finally, Rubin addresses the liminal space of the “outdoors” by opening with a meditation on Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees.” This poem raises the central question of Rubin’s book: how does poetry impact the real lives of its readers? She answers this question within the site of the outdoors by examining field-guide reviews of John Burroughs, cowboy poetry, and the reading practices of Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls. Collectively, part two demonstrates Rubin’s ability to create a cohesive portrait of poetry readers that augments their differences.

Rubin concludes her study by complicating the presumption that poetry reading in America is a “story of decline and fall” (381). Instead, she argues that poetry is making a moderate comeback in contemporary American culture. She uses Robert Pinsky’s 1997 “favorite poems project” to illustrate the genre’s resurgence. Pinsky’s project asked Americans to identify and explain their favorite poems. Time and again, responses illustrate how readers’ interpretation of poems is divorced from the text’s meaning. Within the context of *Songs of Ourselves*, the results of Pinsky’s project make perfect sense: readers’ social, personal, and emotional contexts continue to shape the ways they read and interpret poetry. This important contention cannot be overstated, especially given that scholars of American literature are directing an increased amount of attention to readers and the reception of literature. *Songs of Ourselves* serves as a model for scholars interested in reception studies. Ultimately, Rubin’s book is a fascinating and enjoyable read that challenges grand narratives of poetry’s role in American literature and American society as a whole.

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