

Willes, Margaret. *Reading Matters: Five Centuries of Discovering Books*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008. ill, 295 pp. Cloth, \$30. Paper, \$22.

The cover of this edition of Margaret Willes's *Reading Matters* declares that it is "A must-have for anyone obsessed by books." This impressive study is evidence of just such an obsession--for books as material objects bought, borrowed, and collected over five centuries of British history. Willes, formerly a Publisher for the National Trust, a librarian, editor, bookseller, and now a writer, takes on a vast project here, managing it effectively by focusing on nine specific case studies. Though she relishes the smallest details of each of these studies, from the height of Elizabethan bookcases to the composition of wrappers and bindings, she never loses the tone of fascination that keeps her book lively and appealing.

Among the nine studies are examinations of six private collections--those of Bess of Hardwick, a Tudor gentlewoman who died in 1608; Samuel Pepys, the enthusiastic diarist of the Restoration era; Thomas Jefferson, the founding father and only American in the text; Sir John Soane, a rags-to-riches success and one of the leading architects of early nineteenth-century London; Charles Winn, a Victorian bibliophile, who inherited and expanded an impressive library that remains today almost as he left it; and the charming Denis and Edna Healy, who take us through the twentieth century. Along with cataloguing each of these collections, Willes takes captivating side trips through historical particulars, such as how London's first coffeehouses quickly became gathering places where intellectuals congregated to drink that "muddy kind of beverage" (30), how the early British novel, with its racier counterparts in France, endured constant censure and suspicion, and how the demand for cheap books began with seventeenth century chapbooks and led to the penny dreadfuls of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While these private collections dominate *Reading Matters*, the most engaging chapters are not about individual bibliophiles or the libraries of their estates. Along with a brief chapter on three provincial libraries, two studies of women and the working classes cover more ground and are the longest, most compelling chapters in the book.

"A Little Light Reading: Fact and Fiction in Georgian Britain" traces women's fraught and longstanding relationship with the novel. As Willes notes, "Where today we may debate concerns about delinquent teenagers or the effects of the European Union on employment, late Georgian society fulminated about the twin evils of novel-reading and circulating libraries. And it was women who inspired these attacks" (136). This chapter recalls the remarkable popularity of novels by Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Sir Walter Scott and the more

modest success of Jane Austen's novels (the tortoise to Scott's hare, in Willes's assessment). Whereas early novels by Fielding, Richardson, and Smollett were evaluated positively by many critics, by the time Scott set out to write his novels fifty years later, he was already determinedly distinguishing himself from the writers of gothics and romances in "the current crop of fiction" and aiming for "a superior form." He successfully attracted "both cultural elites and popular audiences," both men and women, according to Willes (164-5). In fact, as Jane Austen reminds us in *Northanger Abbey*, "The person, be it gentleman or lady who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid" (167). Thus, while reading women, especially in the rising middle class, were targets of social concern, men, too, enjoyed novels, and even fine private libraries had their share of them.

"The Common Reader: Books for Working Men and Women" traces the expanding access to literacy and books, now no longer a luxury item, in nineteenth-century Britain. Notable is the examination of lending libraries in Scottish mining towns, though some of their lists of appropriate books (*The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Whole Duty of Man*, *Philosophical Principles of Universal Chemistry*) make it very clear why the working class so eagerly embraced novels. Willes also takes us to Dickens's immensely popular "penny readings" and to the first W.H. Smith book stalls at London's rail stations, before concluding that British common readers and their preferences still invite prejudice, both social and intellectual.

I fault Willes only with the selection of Jefferson's library as the focus of one of her chapters. As this is clearly a study of British history and culture, an examination of Jefferson's library seems a blatant bid for expanded readership. It is out of place. Even though Jefferson's book collection was the foundation for today's U.S. Library of Congress, he visited London only once and amassed most of his books, even those from British booksellers, from afar in Paris and Virginia. Moreover, his Declaration of Independence definitively severed the Colonies' political ties with England. While it is surprising that Willes includes any American, the decidedly democratic Jefferson seems like a strange choice. At the end of her final chapter, Willes also remarks on Oprah Winfrey and the striking success of Oprah's Book Club, before concluding that the "overwhelming impression . . . about books in Britain in the early twenty-first century" is their range, with 100,000 new titles a year, and their resilience. The book trade will adapt to whatever comes, she argues, with no mention of Kindles, iPads, or Nooks.

These shortcomings aside, *Reading Matters* is a fine example of careful scholarship on the book in its material manifestation, as a thing produced and disseminated, acquired, treasured and passed from generation to generation. This

book is also attractive, with many illustrations throughout and several color photographs at its center, including sumptuous views of the private libraries. Especially intriguing is the centerfold: a reproduction of a cartoon published in 1825 and entitled “Advantages of a Modern Education.” It features a cook so deeply engrossed in Scott’s bestselling *Heart of Midlothian* that her food is burning, the pets are stealing from the table, and, in a telling detail, cobwebs are covering the good books on the shelf behind her. This clever counterpoint to the precious collections of the privileged and the sanctimonious preferences of the elite makes *Reading Matters* a broadminded and pleasurable venture into the history of the book.

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