

Hochman, Barbara. *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2011. xv, 377 pp. Cloth \$80.00. Paper \$28.95.

Ever since its first serialization in the *National Era* in 1851-1852 and its publication as a book in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been held up as a shining example of how a literary work can actually move great numbers of readers to take actions that concretely affect the world. Often offered in support of this claim is Abraham Lincoln's alleged comment to Stowe upon first meeting her during the Civil War: "So you're the little lady who started this great war." Despite the novel's supposed impact, for many years after the war, as arbiters of high culture privileged realist and then modernist artistic prowess over the sentimentalist polemics pervading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it was relegated to the fringes of American literary history.

During the past forty years, however, academic critics have looked more favorably on fictions of all genres that reached great numbers of readers and performed various types of cultural work; as a result, scholars have rediscovered *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and written extensively about it. Literary historians during these decades have argued that it validated sentimental women's fiction, altered racial attitudes, and paved the way for written texts to become multifaceted cultural phenomena, among other things. There is, understandably, a large body of scholarship about the novel that scholars must engage when constructing their projects. Besides Joan Hedrick's magisterial biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (1995), some of the most significant studies extensively discussing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* include Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977); Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1985); Sarah Meer's *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (2005); Jo Ann Morgan's *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (2007); and Claire Parfait's *The Publishing History of Uncle Tom's Cabin* (2007).

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, Barbara Hochman enters the ongoing conversation about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and creates something wholly original. Instead of charting the changing critical reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* only among elite, professional readers or detailing the reception history only of the first serial or book publication (strategies commonly employed with many other authors's works, too), Hochman investigates and analyzes the novel's effects on critics, common readers, and authors. She examines the impact not only of the first textual forms with which readers interacted in 1851-1852, but also of the many other textual forms the novel later took, including an 1853 children's version entitled *Pictures and Stories from "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"* a two-volume edition published in 1891 by Houghton Mifflin, and a 1901 children's edition entitled *Young Folks Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was reissued numerous times in the following half century.

Hochman argues that each of these textual forms meant different things to its readers, not only because of the bibliographical variations among them but also owing to changing horizons of expectations among readers throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, she states that the serialized version that appeared in the *National Era*, a religious, abolitionist newspaper/magazine, "altered the horizon of expectations for sentimental tales" (31) and "challenged the moral messages of the *Era's* 'high toned' literature; it ushered religious doubt, political conflict, and the problem of human rights into installment fiction" (33). Hochman proposes that in doing so, Stowe prompted the *Era's* readers to engage more seriously

and directly with social and political issues such as the humanity of slaves. As for the first book edition of 1852, Hochman offers an intriguing hypothesis that the text, in conjunction with the six illustrations by Hammatt Billings, offered white readers a new way of seeing black literacy as non-threatening and possibly even desirable. Hochman further believes that the early editions by the Boston publisher John P. Jewett radically revised cultural expectations of fiction: “By suggesting that fiction could encourage active reading practices, benevolent emotion, and faith, rather than passivity and foolishness, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became a significant factor in the complex process that made the novel an important cultural force by the end of the century” (80).

One of Hochman's most interesting chapters is the fourth one, which analyzes the effects on its readers of *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the children’s version published by Jewett’s firm in 1853. This greatly abridged version, she posits, was very unlike the adult one in that it was “designed to propel a reader directly into the tale of a threatened child” (110), thereby teaching young white readers to feel more empathy rather than sympathy for black people.

Between the Civil War and the end of the century, as Hochman relates in later chapters, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* continued to sell well. However, she argues that among white adults and children this popularity derived not from any agreement with the original text’s radical notions about African Americans’ humanity but rather from their desire to believe that racial conflict between African Americans and white Americans was no longer a major issue, and that African Americans were inferior beings who deserved to be kept in subservient roles. In fact, for the most part, Hochman asserts, whites deemed it a “historical” novel about a time long ago, with little relevance to contemporary racial issues. Hochman incisively analyzes how an 1891 edition of the novel illustrated by E. W. Kemble, who also illustrated *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and the 1901 *Young Folks Uncle Tom’s Cabin* completely de-fanged the social and religious critique Stowe offered in the original 1852 version. Hochman contends that in the 1891 version this taming was achieved chiefly by Kemble’s illustrations, which, instead of representing scenes promoting black literacy, as Billings had in his six illustrations for the 1852 edition, offered numerous caricatures of African Americans that made them appear deserving of condescending pity and benevolent patronage. As for *Young Folks Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Hochman concludes that it “offers clear prescriptions for the continued subordination of African Americans in U.S. culture and pointed lessons in white middle-class complacency” (206).

Hochman does not limit herself to examining the responses only of white readers to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; she also explores African American reactions to the novel. For instance, she argues that in the 1890s, African American readers, unlike white audiences, took it more seriously and personally; as a result, “African Americans were among the most engaged consumers of Stowe’s book from the 1890s through the first half of the twentieth century” (24). In her epilogue, too, Hochman analyzes the responses of African American writers such as Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Mary Church Terrell, and James Baldwin. She notes that even though these writers often criticized *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Baldwin condemned it in his 1949 essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel”), they were also simultaneously attracted to it.

Hochman offers a number of intriguing and valuable hypotheses about the changing meaning of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for multiple interpretive communities, owing both to the differing forms that text took and to the changing experiences and needs of the readers who made up these communities. This study certainly deserves credit as a fine model to follow for future book historians who wish to demonstrate that the meaning of any text--and especially one republished as many times as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was--is not at all stable over time. Especially

laudable is the attention paid to the ways illustrations contained in these various editions possibly affected readers' responses. At times, however, Hochman's study overreaches its available evidence in its assertions about probable reader reaction and the effects on publishers' policies and authorial efforts. Hochman references in a number of places, for instance, "Stowe's aim" or what the text was "designed" to do; she then notes how the text and/or illustrations "invited," "encouraged," and "offered" particular interpretations or practices. Just because Stowe and/or the text offered such possibilities, however, does not mean that readers accepted them and acted accordingly in response. In the field of historical reception study, this issue of affect and use is a perennial difficulty, since it would be impossible to determine conclusively how large numbers of readers responded to a particular text or what they did as a result. Nevertheless, one would have welcomed a bit more qualification of the claims made or a good deal more hard evidence linking cause and effect. To be sure, Hochman makes the most of what she has found: a white girl's reading diary, an African American reader's scrapbook, and marginalia in one children's edition, among other artifacts. Yet I would have appreciated a fuller exploration of some of the sources mentioned only briefly, such as the fan mail children wrote to Stowe (possibly these were only mentioned in a contemporary newspaper article and were destroyed, but possibly they are in the Stowe archive?) or "the multiple well-worn copies of *Young Folks Uncle Tom's Cabin* still circulating in the United States, available on Ebay and elsewhere" (230).

Nonetheless, this is an excellent study overall, and I hope its approach and methodology will inspire a great number of future scholars to investigate the rich "afterlives" of other texts.

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