

Machor, James L. *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2011. xiv, 403 pp. \$75.

In 1993, James L. Machor edited a collection that would come to be a founding text for American reception studies: *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*. In his introduction to this work, Machor described the problem with response criticism as practiced in the 1970s and '80s: it invariably focused on authorial conceptions of readers rather than on readers themselves. When the reader did manage to constitute the center of analysis, she was posited as a largely static and uniform entity. What was missing, Machor claimed, was a consideration of the reader defined not as an invention of the text or as a passive respondent to textual codes and conventions, but as a historical actor responding to specific reading strategies that are themselves historically constituted.

Almost twenty years later, Machor has produced a book that is, in many ways, a response to his frustrations with academic studies in reception. *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America* is an impressive exploration of early nineteenth-century reading practices as they developed in relation to changing ideological, material, and social conditions and of the literary texts that both responded to and helped to construct this historical reading formation. Beautifully written and diligently researched (its copious footnotes provide a first-rate bibliography for anyone interested in the history of reception studies), *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America* advances our knowledge not only about how nineteenth-century Americans read but also about the crucial role played by major and minor works of fiction in shaping and reflecting these interpretive conventions. In this way it is essential reading for those interested in reception studies and literary history alike.

In the first chapter, Machor fleshes out the issues he first addressed in *Readers in History*. While early forays into response theory in the 1970s posited a transhistorical interpreter, this essentializing tendency was countered in the 1980s by a "turn towards history" in which scholars professed an interest in real historical readers. However, despite its best intentions, this criticism suffered from "a lingering formalism" (5): the reader was alternatively reduced to that figure "implied" by the text itself or equated with the more professional response habits of authors and critics. What was still missing was what Jonathan Rose has notably called "the actual ordinary reader in history." Enter the history of the book. In the 1990s, the practitioners of this emergent field turned to letters, diaries, memoirs, and marginalia in an attempt to locate how "common" readers responded to texts. But while acknowledging the important contributions made by historians of the book, Machor faults this scholarship for being narrow in scope and generally more interested in questions of access and distribution (Who are the readers? How did they acquire their books?) than in the dynamics of response.

Between the Scylla of response theory and the Charybdis of reception studies (including histories of the book), Machor locates "historical hermeneutics," a practice that integrates theories of interpretive processing with an emphasis on historically specific readers. In his own words, historical hermeneutics "is concerned with the dynamics of response and reception as the products of historically specific reading formations shared by particular interpretive communities" (331).

Machor chooses as his temporal focus the antebellum period in America because of its well-documented intersection with advancements in printing, distribution, and literacy practices. He chooses as his archive periodical reviews and literary essays for slightly more complex reasons. These and more private media (letters, diaries, marginalia) constitute the two sets of data through which historians might glean response habits. Machor prefers the former because reviews constitute a public and communal (rather than private and idiosyncratic) interpretive code, one that can be used to make more general statements about the sociology of response in antebellum America. “[W]e need to study not just readers but reading, as manifested in interpretive practices and. . . reading ‘systems,’” Machor clarifies (31). Moreover, periodical reviews offer access not only to reception practices but also to those surrounding production, since so many authors relied on these to gauge their readership. Indeed, as Machor demonstrates in the second half of his book, reviews were crucial in shaping the reputation of writers who in turn responded to these characterizations through their novels.

The two chapters constituting part I of *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America* do the important work of not only contextualizing Machor’s study in relation to other scholarship but also providing the texture of the reading experience in the antebellum years. More specifically, they offer a wealth of information about what Machor calls “informed reading practices”: those competencies (including the desire for novelistic verisimilitude, the recognition of satire, the censure of immoral character) that were advanced by periodical reviews seeking to both model and create a disciplined and educated readership.

As illuminating as part I of his study is, however, the pleasure of *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America* (at least for this reader) lies in the second half where Machor provides fascinating case studies of four authors, each of whom occupied a particular interpretive formation in relation to his/her antebellum readers. Although Machor keeps the focus squarely on the reviews of their literary texts rather than on the texts themselves, what he offers in each case is a kind of response biography—a new way of understanding the author and his works through the public reaction to it. In this way, lodged though it is in reception studies, the book is a crucial supplement to author criticism.

In selecting for his case studies Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, Catharine Sedgwick and Caroline Chesebro’, Machor compiles a representative list of authors who achieved a range of notoriety, both in their day and in ours. My own favorite is the chapter on Sedgwick in which Machor traces the writer’s trajectory within her own lifetime from national treasure to devalued writer of domestic and juvenile fictions. Her first two novels, published in the early 1820s, were hailed for their distinctly American character and were assumed by reviewers to hold interest for men and women alike. With the publication of three new novels in the mid-1830s, however, Sedgwick became increasingly identified “as a womanly writer of domestic fiction designed to be read, in particular, by other women” (242). Interestingly, this was not so much a function of a change in emphasis in the novels themselves; rather, as Machor convincingly argues, changing ideas about the female novelist (no doubt inspired by the dominance of the True Woman as a cultural trope by the mid 1830s) led readers to interpret Sedgwick along a new horizon of expectations. By the late 1840s, Sedgwick had been firmly typecast not

only as a domestic writer but also as “a writer of juvenile fiction,” and her entire *oeuvre* was being reinterpreted to match this new representation (246).

Machor’s narrative of Sedgwick’s slow devaluation during her own lifetime is crucial because it helps to contextualize the neglect of her fiction in the first part of the twentieth century. This was not (or not simply) the result of patriarchal institutional forces that created a canon of male literary elites. Rather, Sedgwick’s fate was sealed early on by an antebellum reading public increasingly prone to understand her work through the prism of juvenile domesticity. His take on Sedgwick’s most enduring novel Hope Leslie is equally instructive. While contemporary feminist critics have tended to celebrate this as an anti-patriarchal work, years ahead of its time, this was not the approach that characterized Sedgwick’s own readership, although they were quite capable of reading other novels as transgressive. It is sobering to consider that our own interpretive codes for Hope Leslie may be as contingent as those that governed the antebellum period. A hundred years from now, we can presume, reception theorists will understand our liberal response to this novel as a function of the specific historical preoccupations that accompanied our reading of it.

Machor’s argument throughout this study is that attention to reception habits can radically reshape our understanding of literature and literary history. He demonstrates this wonderfully in his conclusion where he reevaluates the familiar assumption that romances dominated the American literary marketplace during the first part of the nineteenth century while realism reigned in the last. Response patterns, Machor observes, paint a very different picture. The same novels that were praised for verisimilitude in the antebellum years were often described as fanciful and idealized in the decades following the Civil War. The novels themselves had not changed, of course; rather, because of a range of historical factors (a professionalizing literary marketplace, a sobering ethos brought on by the war, etc.) they were now being read in new ways. The “rise of realism,” in other words, is a function of the emergence not of a new genre but of a new reading agenda that privileged and deployed particular interpretive codes. In Machor’s keenly persuasive worldview, there are no generic categories reflecting inherent properties of fiction; there is only the “contextual interpretive encounter” in which texts work on readers and readers work on texts (318).

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