

Sicherman, Barbara. *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010. 380 pp. Cloth \$35.00. Paper \$26.95.

Although it focuses on women's reading practices during a specific historical period, Sicherman's *Well-Read Lives* is a timely book for twenty-first-century readers. We of course live in an era of online texts, e-readers, and claims that the book in its finite, paper form is an awkward beast lumbering toward extinction. Amid such assertions, we should remember the claims that computers would make work faster and easier, while creating a paperless society. Unfortunately, faster work meant more work was expected, on top of the email and file maintenance we must now perform, as well as learning, often largely on our own, new software upgrades and technologies. Meanwhile both small companies and large corporations must rent space to store their paper documents. It is not that the claims about faster, easier work were entirely wrong, but as narrow pitches to market a new product, they did not account for other social and cultural forces that would influence the workplace. Claims about a totally paperless book-reading culture no doubt suffer the same myopic vision.

That conclusion is bolstered by Sicherman's examination of how girls and young women of the Gilded Age were shaped not just by their reading but by their reading amid an array of social, political, and cultural dynamics that would make it possible for many middle-class women to move from domesticity to the public domain during the Progressive Era in the U.S. These dynamics--an expanding middle class, increased leisure time, a shift from piety to secularism in a range of texts, more opportunities for higher education and paid employment for women, among other factors--and their effect on women of the Gilded Age have been well-documented elsewhere. Sicherman's contribution combines a synthesis of these effects with an analysis of what middle-class girls and women, as well as those of the less privileged classes, read, based on their autobiographies, diaries, letters, and essays.

*Well-Read Lives* is a three-part study, beginning with childhood reading and the pervasive influence of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Sicherman describes the cultural moment in which this book first appeared and became a publishing phenomenon, as well as its appeal to different groups of readers. Selling out within a month of its initial publication in 1868, *Little Women* was a cross-over success during a period in which "good literature" included juvenile literature (what we now call "young adult" literature). Alcott's novel appealed to all ages and both sexes, was read multiple times by its fans, and spanned the centuries in its readership. It was intended to be a domestic story, but readers would define it in accordance with their needs and circumstances: as a bildungsroman, as a model of selfhood, and later, as a capitulation to traditional femininity. Middle-class female readers who had the opportunity for advanced education and professional careers admired the book's theme of female independence; working class immigrants saw it as a model for becoming Americanized. Both groups admired its realism. Sicherman's analysis here is a model itself for the kind of case-study approach she uses throughout the book.

Those familiar with women's history will recognize most of the Gilded Age readers discussed in *Well-Read Lives*. It begins with those blessed with a combination of family wealth and progressive parents who valued reading and education for their daughters. The four Hamilton sisters--all of them professionally accomplished during the Progressive era, with Edith being the best known for her classical scholarship--are examined as a group, because reading was a group activity for the family. M. Carey Thomas, who would become professor and president of Bryn Mawr, located a reading group outside of the family and read her way through

a religious crisis, though not the limitations of her racial bias; African American women would not be Bryn Mawr students under her watch. Jane Addams wrestled with the disconnection between cultural enrichment that reading provided and the practical application of knowledge for humanitarian purposes, creating Hull House as a result.

Addams' story serves as a transition of sorts for Sicherman's consideration of immigrant and African American readers, who, in addition to financial constraints, faced other barriers. For Jewish immigrants like Rose Cohen, author of the 1918 autobiography *Out of the Shadow*, the barriers included language and Jewish resistance to education for daughters. For Ida B. Wells, racial identity was both a limitation and advantage, since she lived in an era when urban African-American communities pursued literacy and education with zeal. Like many white women of the era, she taught for a while to support her siblings after her parents died, but her fame and passion developed through journalism, activism against lynching and racial discrimination, and the promotion of literacy. Her reading of Shakespeare enhanced her oratory skills, and she, too, made use of reading groups.

The wide range of writers these women collectively read over a lifetime, as well as the genres represented--poetry, drama, fiction, autobiography, history, theology, science, philosophy--is impressive, and Sicherman grounds her discussion in the scholarship of Stanley Fish, Janice Radway, and others specializing in juvenile and adult literacy and reading. By focusing on both the childhood and adult reading of her subjects, Sicherman also locates the nexus of reading and broader social forces. For example, the increase in secular juvenile literature before and after the Civil War had its disadvantages for female readers; its split across gender lines meant boys read adventure stories and girls learned how to lead domestic lives. Consequently, and not surprisingly, privileged and intellectually motivated female readers would often struggle to translate their abilities and confidence into meaningful work outside of the home, even in an era of increasing opportunities.

Reading, then, was not simply the great equalizer, and Sicherman acknowledges this fact by pointing out that in the Gilded Age, even *reading*, or more precisely the *appearance* of reading, was gilded. For many of the privileged class, it was a show of culture and status and wealth, much like a beautiful, well-dressed, non-working wife. Many mansions held collections of never-read volumes to give the appearance of knowledge and culture. Of course, this marriage of arrogance and opulence extended into the Progressive Era and beyond, as Dorothy Parker demonstrated in her story "Mr. Durant."

Sicherman's claims about the importance of reading are wisely tempered through these considerations of broader forces, as well as through the issue of privilege itself. Reading alone is not enough to shape or define one's life; one must have opportunities in a variety of possible forms: money for books, school, and travel; a parent or parents who value education for girls; a home in or near a cultural center where lectures, reading groups, and museums are available. It also helps to live in a time when reading is as valued in the home--genuinely and over the long term--as it is in the English upper classes. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* comes to mind, though Sicherman argues that reading can still transcend class and racial boundaries and contribute to the shape and direction of one's life. She proves her point splendidly in *Well-Read Lives*.

Rhonda Pettit  
University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College