

Sweeney, Megan. *Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010. xvi, 360 pp. Cloth \$65.00. Paper \$22.95.

Near the end of Megan Sweeney's *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons* an inmate describes how her relation to books involves the assumption of new ideas. "I can take stuff from that and add to like my closet," Solo observes; "I can wear some of Oprah's dresses sometime," and "I can kind of step in her shoes sometimes by her book. . . . I can take stuff from those pages, and I can put them inside of me" (235). Figuring books as clothing, Solo emphasizes a flexibility that for Sweeney, following Wayne Booth, turns reading into a doubled act of inhabitation and incorporation. Solo steps into Oprah's shoes even as she puts "stuff from those pages . . . inside of me." The Oprah reference thus yokes Sweeney's examination of the reading lives of female prisoners to the feminist interest in the particular dynamisms that reading represents in the lives of women. If *Reading is My Window* takes a long look at what happens when reading occurs within the confines of prison walls, it does so with the intent of understanding how reading engages living so as to re-imagine it.

In this way it is almost necessary to trace a direct line of descent from Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* to *Reading is My Window*. When Radway's book appeared in 1984 it sought to contest the feminist account that women readers, held in thrall by romance novels in particular, were little more than willing and passive consumers. In asking the "Smithton" women what they did when they read romances and what they wanted from those acts of reading, Radway initiated a move to flesh out a readerly silhouette that in *Window* emerges out of interviews and group discussions with female prisoners incarcerated in Ohio, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Like Radway, whom she thanks in her acknowledgements, Sweeney describes her argument as a balance struck between reading and readers--between the specific dimensions and practices of reading she comes to understand and the women whose turn to reading is so thoroughly defined by their environment. Indeed this balance is as fraught for Sweeney as it was for Radway, whose later comments about the experience of writing *Reading the Romance* take a self-critical turn and emphasize, retrospectively, that an ethics of interpretation constitutes one limit to the ethnographic impulse. The context of imprisonment, with its peculiar flattening of agency, renders the ethics underlying Sweeney's inquiry as pressing as they are strenuous. For her own preferences and desires as a reader and scholar, she reports, were regularly challenged and undone by the women whose conversations she shared and witnessed. Genre, for instance, turns out to be an ongoing occasion in which the women of *Window* articulate to Sweeney ways of reading she does not anticipate. Their preferences for urban fiction, self-help accounts, and narratives of victimization mark for her the continued imbrication of women readers with popular genres, but these preferences also necessitate that she acknowledge, face, and to a certain extent absorb the value the female prisoners accorded these texts. In this way her call to witness reading means following it as it happens and not assuming that textuality will guarantee how reading will proceed.

Sweeney's privileging of the desires, needs, and feelings of these readers pervades *Reading is My Window* down to its structure. Following two chapters that set out the history of reading and education throughout the penal history of the U.S. and the institutional conditions that define reading in prisons, *Window* proceeds to three chapters that pair readerly affect with genre. These pairings foreground Sweeney's investment in illuminating what and how the inmates read narratives of victimization, self-help accounts, and urban fiction. One of the book's

strengths is that these pairings enable Sweeney to discuss readers' responses in relation to public and academic feminist debates about subject formation, agency, socio-economic structural conditions, and the gendering of silence. Here the discrepancies between what feminist thinkers assert and what inmates claim is a crucial dynamic. For if the fact of such discrepancies is not surprising, there is much to appreciate about the deftness with which Sweeney addresses them. Her critical and personal sympathies lie with the readers she has come to know and, indeed, anchor her critique of contemporary feminist thinking and its failings. In the chapter on "mis lit"--memoirs of abuse and trauma written by author-survivors--she thus places readers' insistence that the texts have value alongside the feminist concern that texts like these run the risk of reifying the association of women with suffering. Because reading narratives like these prompted inmates to articulate their experiences in ways that were reflective *and* empathic, such reading could hardly be said to embody a "cult of victimhood." Instead, Sweeney maintains that the memoirs the group read--from the fictional to the autobiographical--fostered a productive self-critique that anticipated their eventual reading of self-help books. That this line of thinking brings Sweeney to Foucault is less surprising than the turn her argument takes in that theoretical encounter. In the chapter on the inmates' reading of self-help books, Sweeney looks to Foucault to understand how the discourse performs disciplinary work; the genre, she writes, normalizes selfhood, and readers subject themselves to it. That picture of subjection disappears, however, through her turn to those "technologies of the self" that later emerge in Foucault's thinking. Taking this development in his thinking as a better account of the inmates' reading of self-help accounts, Sweeney aligns their efforts at self-inquiry with a Foucault whose own investments have shifted from discipline to aesthetics, from subjection to self-creation and innovation.

This association of reading with self-creation is perhaps most evident in the two interludes between chapters, which Sweeney describes as portraits meant to provide more nuance and detail. These portraits, like the discussion of urban fiction, foreground inmates' assessment of reading as a practice that takes on specific value in the context of imprisonment. In these accounts Denise and Monique emerge as voices framed, but not absorbed, by the book's argument and, perhaps even more significantly, as subjects whose narratives of selfhood turn on their reading practices. Thus when Denise describes the significance of reading, she focuses on moments of self-reflection--positive as well as negative--that books have afforded her. Monique, meanwhile, describes a shift in what she reads, aligning her turn to motivational books with her desire to improve her situation. These portraits extend the intense focus on self that is so much a part of the reading life in *Window*. In so doing, they also emphasize the shift *Window* represents from Radway's *Reading the Romance*. Just as principled as Radway in her commitment to foregrounding what women have to say, and just as attentive to the impact of her professorial persona on the reading experiences she seeks to understand, Sweeney's gesture to include these interludes gives these ideals structural weight. Thus, the interludes, coupled with the book's wide-ranging snapshots of inmate reading, embody the critical negotiation she has enacted.

*Window* ends on a doubled note by discussing social dimensions of the reading Sweeney shared with inmates that occasion her conclusion that the women she has come to know have as much to say about social health as they do about reading. While this turn towards the explicitly social may move *Window* from its focus on individual readers, it reinforces the argument's impulse to know reading through what it does for those who take it up.

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