

Towheed, Shafquat, Rosiland Crone, and Katie Halsey, eds. *The History of Reading*. London: Routledge, 2011. xiii, 454 pp. Cloth \$135.00. Paper \$47.95.

*The History of Reading* is a reader whose goal is to provide a “clear introduction” to the history of reading and a “taste of the breadth, diversity and vitality of the current debates” in the field. It contains thirty six excerpts from works published between 1970 and 2008, with two exceptions: an excerpt from *Fiction and the Reading Public* by Q. D. Leavis, published in 1932, and one from *The Uses of Literacy*, by Richard Hoggart, published in 1957. The excerpts are brief, ranging from two to fifteen pages and averaging around eight pages each (4000-5000 words).

The book is divided into seven sections, each with a brief introduction. Section 1, “Defining the Field: What Is the History of Reading,” contains five excerpts, only two of which are concerned with defining the field: the excerpt from Robert Darnton’s “First Steps Towards a History of Reading” and the excerpt from Roger Chartier’s Preface to *The Order of Books*. My misgivings about a book of excerpts is confirmed by the selection from Chartier. Two pages from his Preface seems to be a very slight representation of one of the founding works in the field. The excerpt from Reinhard Wittmann, “Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the eighteenth Century?” published in 1999, cites statistics on literacy rates, book print runs, book fair catalogues, and demographic information to answer the question in the affirmative. In German speaking Europe (as in France and England) reading, particularly fiction reading, became a widespread activity, engaging people from a broad range of social classes. “Reading in Late Antiquity” by John Moorhead gives an account of reading in a culture where the production and reception of texts were oral and aural performances. Wittmann's and Moorhead's pieces are excellent examples of the sort of work that might be done by historians of reading, but they are not really concerned with defining the field. It is not clear, moreover, why the excerpt from Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* was chosen as the lead entry in this section. The field of the history of reading can be dated from the 1950s at the earliest, but Leavis’s book was published in 1932. Since it is about how much and what people in England were reading in 1929-1930, it contains information that might be useful to someone doing research on this period, but it does not offer any insights on what a historical perspective on reading might entail. The Leavis extract should have been relocated in the section on mass reading--or perhaps, left out of the collection.

In Section 2, “Theorising the Reader,” excerpts from essays and book chapters present some of the key concepts in reception study and reader-response criticism: from Hans Robert Jauss (the horizon of expectation), Wolfgang Iser (the phenomenology of reading), Judith Fetterley (the resisting female reader), Mikhail Bakhtin (dialogism), and Michel de Certeau (reading as poaching). However, this is the weakest section of the book. No doubt, it would be difficult for a handful of essays to give an accurate representation of the fields of reception and reader-response theory. But the necessary reductiveness of any selection is compounded by the reductiveness of using short fragments of theoretical works. The five pages from Judith Fetterley is an extreme reduction of studies of gender and reading. The five pages from Bakhtin is an oversimplification of his theory of dialogism. It would have been better to leave it out, since it is about texts, or maybe about writing, and only peripherally about what readers

do. “Silent Reading: It’s Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society” by Paul Saenger, about the enabling conditions and the implications of the transition, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, from reading as vocal performance to the practice of silent, sight reading gives a good historical perspective on the type of reading practice that today we take for granted. But it is not clear what it is doing in this section.

Section 3 contains excerpts from research on the enabling conditions for and the social and cultural implications of the spread of literacy. It provides useful information about the methodology of literacy research. Section 4 contains excerpts describing the expansion of the reading public as a result of wider literacy, technological developments in printing, and the increased effectiveness of systems for the distribution of printed material. This section has an international cast featuring two articles about England, and one each about late Ming China, nineteenth-century Bengal, nineteenth-century Russia, and Australia from 1890 to 1930.

Section 5 contains excerpts illustrating what can be learned about the reading practices of specific communities by examining the records of cultural institutions: the libraries established by miners’ institutes of New South Wales, 1890s-1940s; the Sage library of Osage, Iowa, 1890-95; the literary societies and reading rooms founded by free African Americans, 1828-1860. The fourth item in this section, about Italy in the middle ages, fits oddly in the company of the three other articles. Section 6 contains four case studies of individual readers: a poet, scholar, and pamphleteer working as a professional “reader” in the service of prominent Elizabethan political figures; an eighteenth-century Dutch child; an excise officer and inveterate annotator in eighteenth-century England, and a nineteenth-century English surveyor. These studies illustrate the method of examining marginal annotations, private library records, diaries, journals, and letters. The last section features essays indicating new directions and methods in the history of reading. Of particular interest are the possible connections with post-colonial studies indicated by “Mata’s Hermeneutic: Internationally Made Ways of Reading Bunyan,” by Isabel Hofmeyr (Mata was a Kongo-speaking porter for a British missionary in 1899) and the research avenues opened up by online reader postings and digital databases, illustrated respectively by “No longer Left Behind: Amazon.com, Reader-Response, and the Changing Fortunes of the Christian Novel in America” by Paul Gutjahr and “The Reading Experience Database 1450-1945” by Rosalind Crone, Katie Halsey, Mary Hammond, and Shafquat Towheed..

Despite this collection's number of excerpts, the claim that the book is an accurate representation of the field of the history of reading is questionable. The center of gravity of the collection is firmly on English and European studies. (The intention to include non-European perspectives is laudable, but the result is problematical in its tokenism.) There is not much about the American scene, and this paucity, perhaps, explains why the theme of reading and race and ethnicity is addressed only by the excerpt from Elizabeth McHenry’s study of antebellum African American literary societies and reading rooms. Less excusable, perhaps, is that the issue of gender and reading is addressed only by the five page excerpt from Judith Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader*. Also problematic are the rather ahistorical organization of the book and the decision to include only fragments of articles. It would have helped if the editors had included a rationale for this decision and for their choices regarding which parts of an article or book chapter to include and which to omit.

In spite of these misgivings, however, *The History of Reading* would work as a textbook for advanced undergraduate or graduate courses, together with other material to remedy the limitations noted above. For a course on reception study, I might assign the following articles: “Reading in Late Antiquity” by John Moorhead; “Silent Reading: Its Impact on Medieval Script” by Paul Saenger or “Reading in the Middle Ages,” by Armando Petrucci; “At the Boundaries of the Reading Nation” by William St. Clair or “Pursuing the Reader” by Kevin Sharpe; “The Welsh Miners’ Libraries” by Jonathan Rose; “ ‘A Benefit and A Blessing’: The Sage Library” by Christine Pawley; “ ‘An Association of Kindred Spirits’: Black Readers and their Reading Rooms” by Elizabeth McHenry; “Self-Development” by James Secord; and, as a contemporary example of reading as social interaction, “Listening to the Readers of ‘Canada Reads’” by Danielle Fuller.

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