

The Book History Reader, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2002)

D. F. McKenzie, Making Meaning: "Printers of the Mind" and Other Essays, ed. Peter D. McDonald and Michael F. Suarez, S.J. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

What exactly is book history? Literature students consulting their reference libraries would be hard put to find an answer: "history of the book" appears nowhere in M.H. Abrams' Glossary of Literary Terms or Margaret Drabble's Oxford Companion to English Literature. The names most ubiquitous in The Book History Reader, Roger Chartier and D.F. McKenzie, can be found on none of the new Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism's several thousand pages.

Perhaps this is as it should be; to call book history a theory would be to read it against the grain. For many literary critics a decade ago, the study of texts' production, circulation, and material form provided a last refuge from poststructuralism. The irony was that the former faces the questions most central to the latter: what is an author? how do readers make meaning? what allows us to recognize literariness when we see it? Even the dowdiest subset of book historians – textual editors – share many of their working hypotheses with the very theorists who dismissed them as a service industry. Post-structuralism reinvented the articles of skepticism which the most conservative bibliographers had long taken for granted: the instability of the text, the inevitability of misreading, the impossibility of ascertaining authorial intention. (Much less honoring it: as one bibliographer pointed out in 1975, if anyone paid more than lip service to the author's "final intentions," to edit Virgil would mean destroying every extant copy of the Aeneid.) One of the virtues of The Book History Reader is that it brings such continuities to light, pairing Mark Rose's densely particularized history of copyright law with Foucault and Barthes on authorship, or Janice Radway's lovingly detailed reconstruction of the Book-of-the-Month-Club's marketing strategies with Stanley Fish's aggressively perverse model of "interpretive communities." The culture wars of the past decade were too often fought as if both sides assumed historicism to be the opposite of formalism – the latter disputed in turn between impractical theorists and practical critics who defined their object of study as "the words on the page." The problem was that the second half of the phrase rarely rose above the metaphorical; it remained for book history to upstage the text (a sequence of "words") by its tangible form (the "page").

More to the point, it's not clear that literature departments are the proper home for book history at all. Anyone walking through a library or classroom could be excused for thinking that literary history is by definition a history of books. But literary critics only use books; they study texts. One is a tangible object, the other a verbal structure. One exists in space, the other in minds. ("If the Mona Lisa is in the Louvre," asks one bibliographer not included in The Book History Reader, "where are Hamlet and Lycidas?")

The origins of book history lie elsewhere: in the analytical bibliography developed by Anglo-American literary editors, the statistics on literacy rates compiled by French social historians, the biographies of authors and histories of publishing houses which provided later cultural theorists with their raw material, and the social-science-fiction of visionaries like Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan. Those strands have coalesced into a discipline only in the past few decades, through the publication of multi-volume national histories of the book (1982-86 in France, ongoing in Britain and elsewhere); through a professional society with a prizewinning journal (Book History), a hyperactive discussion list ([SHARP-L@listserv.indiana.edu](mailto:SHARP-L@listserv.indiana.edu)), and an

overstuffed website ([www.sharpweb.org](http://www.sharpweb.org)); and eventually through graduate programs at institutions both unlikely (a former Methodist seminary in New Jersey) and overdetermined (the University of Reading).

But if post-colonialism and women's studies are anything to go by, no academic discipline can really be said to have arrived until it receives the final mark of legitimacy: a Routledge Reader. At a time when library budget cuts have left the supply of original academic monographs without any corresponding demand, collections of republished essays sell -- The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, The Latino Studies Reader, The Science Studies Reader, The Green Studies Reader, The Disability Studies Reader, The Language and Cultural Studies Reader. Routledge has dibs on the definite article: their Cultural Studies Reader should not be confused with the knockoff What Is Cultural Studies? A Reader, any more than Edwin Arnold's The Media Studies Reader with NYU's Media Studies: A Reader, let alone Arnold's own Approaches to Media: A Reader. But anyone trying to tell Blackwell's Masculinity Studies Reader apart from Polity's Masculinities Reader can only be grateful that the three publishers fighting over The Media Reader have left Prentice-Hall to search a thesaurus for The Media Casebook, while Sage spins around the colon to distinguish Culture and Power: A Media, Culture & Society Reader from Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader. For the benefit of anyone who hadn't picked up on the family resemblance, Finkelstein and McCleery call their anthology of "book history studies" "a vital resource for all those studying cultural studies, library studies, and book publishing studies." This is a book where suffixes dangle as precariously as modifiers.

The symbiosis of "studies" with Readers should provide a thesis topic for some future book historian. In retrospect, Routledge's invention looks as epochal as movable type or sliced bread. No longer do students have to swallow uncut scholarship that could be more digestibly sandwiched with editorial introductions; no longer do instructors have to dictate quotations to a roomful of bored note-takers or handcraft minuscule batches of coursepacks on the local xerox machine. The secret is ventriloquism: Routledge mapped out new fields not through an omniscient narrator's homogenized summary of successive scholars' "thought," but rather by plunging readers directly into the original texts. No free indirect discourse here: what Readers supply isn't thought, but voice. More crassly, they supply sales. Reprinting excerpts from already published books rather than taking a gamble on newly commissioned essays, these collections keep academic presses afloat. Presses, but also disciplines. American academics worry that universities are outsourcing their personnel judgments to the publishing industry (tenure depends less on whether the department likes a candidate's book than whether a publisher does); it's less often noticed that entire fields stand or fall by the same criteria. For subjects invented in the 1960s, like women's studies, a university degree program was the stamp of approval. These days, a Reader is what it takes.

The harder question may be why anyone should care what book history is. From the outside, the discipline appears almost wilfully esoteric. (One of the most prominent figures missing from Finkelstein and McCleery's Reader, David Scott Kastan, has riffed on "New Criticism," "New Historicism" and "New Bibliography" to dub his expertise the New Boredom.) The New Critics took "the poem itself" where they found it, in cheap paperback reprints available even at institutions just beginning to build a library. However authoritarian their politics, their pedagogical democracy rested on the postwar technology of the Xerox machine. The single unannotated page passed around the seminar table levelled the playing field. From the outside, though, it's book historians whose ambitions and sympathies appear self-consciously

populist. Not only do they analyze Oprah's book club and theorize the uses to which peasant audiences put learned culture, they've also carved out a general readership for themselves – witness Nicholson Baker on card catalogues – and joined forces with groups slighted by literary theorists: librarians, book dealers, local historians. Even the form of The Book History Reader privileges empirical case study over theoretical generalization, omitting the John Sutherland who composed the classic polemic "Publishing History: A Hole at the Center of Literary Sociology" in favor of the John Sutherland who compiled "The Victorian Novelists: Who Were They?" – a questioned answered by bar graphs, statistical tables, bio-bibliographical sketches, and actuarial calculations. (Female novelists' life expectancy averaged 2.5 years more than male novelists'; 98% of novelists published under 100 novels – and so on.)

Although The Book History Reader privileges the local over the global, individual book historians often shuttle between the two. D.F. McKenzie, who held the Professorship of Bibliography at Oxford until his death three years ago, launched a methodological revolution via studies like "Eight Quarto Sheets of 1594 Set by Formes" and "Men Made Free of the Stationers' Company, 1605-1640 – Some Corrections to the List in Arber's Transcript." McKenzie's apparently implausible claim that "bibliography is an explosive subject" earns credence in one of his two essays reprinted in The Book History Reader, a savagely learned reflection on what it meant for illiterate Maori chiefs to sign away their land rights. (The metaphor gains weight from a digression on more literal explosives: the cartridges in English guns were wadded with pages torn from bibles.) Because McKenzie's polymathy conspired with his generosity to disperse his articles, some among small presses in his native New Zealand, it's only now, with Peter McDonald's and Michael Suarez's thoughtful edition of his selected essays, that readers can see just what varied audiences he argued with. McKenzie read the analytical bibliography in which he'd been trained as the long-lost twin of New Criticism: both treated texts as self-contained structures, accepted only internal evidence, and ignored cultural context. The division of labor between textual editors and literary critics made no sense to him, because "the material forms of books, the non-verbal elements of the typographic notations within them, the very disposition of space itself, have an expressive function."

McKenzie never hesitated to attack the enemy on their own ground. The other article reprinted in The Book History Reader takes as its example four lines of Congreve which appear as the epigraph to Wimsatt and Beardsley's 1946 essay "The Intentional Fallacy"-- a New Critical manifesto which declared the author's intention off-limits to criticism, because arguments about intention are either irrelevant (if they draw on extrinsic evidence) or circular (if an author's otherwise unknowable "intention" is deduced from the very text that it's invoked to explain). McKenzie's manifesto hinges on a misquotation. Where Wimsatt and Beardsley's epigraph reads "He owns with toil he wrote the following scenes," the line which McKenzie quotes from The Way of the World runs slightly differently: "He owns, with Toil, he wrought the following Scenes." So what, you might ask: at worst, Wimsatt and Beardsley sacrificed purism to readability. This is the objection that McKenzie sets out to answer. Moving inward from the wording of the passage to capitalization and punctuation to stage directions, scene divisions, and even the blank spaces on the page, he turns Wimsatt's and Beardsley's microscopic scale of analysis against them, mimicking – or caricaturing – their assumption that no detail is too small to bear meaning. When critics speak of "formalism," they usually mean verbal form; in contrast, McKenzie stubbornly ignores any distinction between what bibliographers call "substance" (the words themselves) and "accidence" (extrinsic features such as spelling, spacing, and typeface).

McKenzie's argument pivots on the changing sense of "scene," a topic that interested readers can pursue at greater length in the essays collected by McDonald and Suarez. The 1700 quarto of The Way of the World, printed in a form relatively close to Congreve's autograph, understood "scene" to mean a unit of a play set in a particular place. In contrast, the 1710 edition of Congreve's Works lent greater permanence and seriousness to the playtext through its neoclassical understanding of scene divisions as those moments when a new character enters on stage: "not impersonal places in motion, but distinct groups of human beings in conversation." It's tempting to read this distinction as code for McKenzie's own relation to Wimsatt and Beardsley: where the 1710 scene divisions replaced persons by spaces, McKenzie restored human intentions to the New Critics' verbal icon.

Crucially, though, he didn't attribute those intentions to authors alone. What differentiates McKenzie from the intentionalists against whom Wimsatt and Beardsley were arguing is that rather than attempting to eliminate deviations from the original text, he treats their misquotation as a new text worth taking seriously in its own right. In that sense, McKenzie's declaration that "any history of the book must be a history of misreadings." uncannily echoes the insistence of their successor at Yale, Harold Bloom, that criticism and poetry alike depend on "creative misunderstanding." Yet given The Anxiety of Influence's lofty indifference to the mechanics of bibliographical transmission, it's characteristically mischievous for McKenzie to replace Bloom's transhistorical meeting of poets' minds by the technologically contingent meeting of a playwright's hand with a compositor's. McKenzie's intellectual generosity will be missed, but so will his feel for the Yale critics' favorite mode: irony.

Academic specialization makes such agility increasingly hard to duplicate. These days, McKenzie's ambition to "marry the verbal preoccupations of literary and textual criticism, the material concerns of historical bibliography, and the economic and social dimensions of production and readership" can feel like a shotgun wedding. The most provocative recent attempts to face down the difficulty of confronting literary theory with editorial practice come from Jerome McGann, whose chapter in Finkelstein and McCleery argues that the means by which literary works secure their effects are never purely linguistic. (Thus, the placement of the glosses in the margins of the 1816 version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" bears meaning, because their position alludes to medieval conventions of laying out a page). What's kept that apparently unobjectionable premise from being acted on is that literary critics are as bad at reading bibliographical codes as they are good at interpreting linguistic ones. And English departments' resistance to book history suggests that the reason for this may not be entirely negative. It's not simply that unlike historians, literary critics aren't trained to analyze material culture; it's also that a common-sense cartesianism teaches them to actively filter out the look, the feel, the smell of the printed page. Even if one accepts that books mean, their mechanisms for producing significance are rarely those which literary critics are best qualified to analyze. Conversely, book history provides few tools for identifying how books – especially literary books – function differently from other commodities.

Because McGann practices more brashly than he preaches, the conventional form of the essay reprinted in the Reader conveys only a partial sense of a career spent working in different genres. The expository prose of this chapter is less daring than the projects that he's edited, from the hypertext Rossetti Archive (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti>) to the lower-tech but equally radical New Oxford Book of Romantic Verse, an anthology arranged by date of publication rather than composition, with the result that some of the texts that modern readers indelibly associate with Romanticism – The Prelude, for example – are excluded on the grounds

that they were written in this period but not widely read until later. A collection that limits itself to academic essays can't help flattening out the range of guises that book history can take: not just websites and editions, but also manifestos (McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy), dictionaries (John Sutherland's Companion to Victorian Fiction), biographies (Robert Patten's Charles Dickens and His Publishers), memoirs (Francis Spufford's The Child That Books Built), compendia of anecdotes (Alberto Manguel's History of Reading), exhibition catalogues (the Folger Library's The Reader Revealed), maps (Franco Moretti's Atlas of the European Novel.) Book history doesn't just cross disciplines, it mixes media.

But it would be unfair to ask one volume to circumscribe what's not really a "field" so much as a junction. Pity the scholar torn (in Robert Darnton's words) between "collating editions, compiling statistics, decoding copyright law, wading through reams of manuscript, heaving at the bar of a reconstructed common press, and psychoanalyzing the mental processes of readers" – and pity the editor trying to give each of those activities equal time. Finkelstein and McCleery divide the history of communications into three shifts: orality to literacy, manuscript to print, print to computer. Yet in taking "book" to imply "printed," the Book History Reader denies itself room for comparative maneuver – no case studies taken from classical antiquity, nothing on (or in) digital media or hypertext. As a result, we lose the recent insistence of scholars like Roger Chartier and Peter Stallybrass that the most useful analogy for the advent of electronic text is not the early modern shift from manuscript to print, but rather the transition from scroll to book (the codex) a millennium earlier. The codex may look low-tech, but its adoption by early Christians made possible an entirely new repertoire of what we'd now call "navigational aids." Pagination allowed readers to cite, cross-reference, and index; the discontinuity of pages allowed non-linear forms of retrieval (looking up isolated passages, skipping forward and backward); and unlike the scroll, too unwieldy to read without both hands, the codex freed the reader to write. The "book" in the sense of folded pages, then, is both prior to and distinguishable from print: inaccuracy meets tautology in Finkelstein and McCleery's claim that "since the invention of the printing press, books and print culture have been central to the shaping of culture."

At the same time, the Reader's chronological limits obscure scholars' growing skepticism about any absolute break between manuscript and print. Some historians now trace printers' distribution mechanisms back to manuscript book dealers, while others show how persistently the page layout of early printed books mimicked that of manuscripts, rather as our word-processing interfaces now depend on verbal metaphors (the "desktop") and visual allusions (the paper-clipped attachment). Conversely, recent studies have shown how stubbornly manuscript circulation survived the emergence of print: well into the eighteenth century, handwriting remained the preferred form for some kinds of poetry and some forms of political reporting. Scholars are now less likely to think of manuscript being displaced by print than to conceive of both as competitors carrying out complementary roles (and freighted with different connotations) at any given time and place. No evolutionary model can encompass the full range of synchronous tensions: between scroll and codex, chained folios and pocket-sized paperbacks, silent reading and reading aloud, Protestants and Catholics (or Calvinists and Lutherans), "intensive" and "extensive" reading. Nor can an exclusive focus on the means of production do justice to the humanists' interest in technologies for reading, such as the bookwheel – a cross between a Lazy Susan and a ferris wheel – which another of this volume's missing persons, Anthony Grafton, argues lent humanists' reading the same "expensively dramatic quality" that the personal computer has now given to writing.

As far back as 1982, Darnton declared that “books are economic commodities as well as cultural artifacts.” No one would deny the truth of either proposition, but no one has yet figured out a way to act on both at once. Skeptics worry that attention to the material form of texts will distract readers from their literary qualities – to which book historians rejoin that genre inheres in physical attributes as much as verbal ones. (A short story is not just a particular narrative structure, but a sequence of words too short to make room for a title on the spine.) Both sides of the debate sidestep a deeper problem: so many institutional forces have defined book history as a subset of literary history that it's become hard to remember that the reverse is also true. In principle, the history of print culture is not exclusively or even primarily a history of literary texts: those works which we group under the rubric of “literature” have never made up more than a fraction of the world's printed matter.

That discrepancy makes it hard not to suspect that the distribution of book historians' attention is skewed by agendas imported from other disciplines. What gets over-represented is not just literature, but a particular genre: the novel. Neither biographical accident nor marketing strategy is enough to explain why a quarter of Finkelstein and McCleery's case studies draw on nineteenth-century Anglo-American prose fiction. Realist fiction's well-known obsession with the material world fits almost too perfectly with the book history's own anti-idealism; so does the unabashed worldliness of the drama. Both crowd out any attention to lyric. Book historians' gravitation toward prose fiction (preferably pre- or anti-modernist) inverts the “cartesian” contrast identified in Kate Flint's chapter on Victorian women's reading: nineteenth-century critics valued the cerebral appreciation of poetry, she argues, because they conceived of novel-reading by analogy with carnal appetites. (Victorian paintings of female novel-readers feature much lolling on sofas and licking of thumbs.) Book history itself challenges – or does it merely reverse? – the mind-body dualism that has come to shape the assumptions about literariness held by popular and scholarly audiences alike. Authorship as disinterested self-expression, reading as a solitary and purely mental act: these are the tenets of a post-romantic faith in the power of words to transcend social constraints and physical contingencies. This is the belief from which Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the “field of cultural production” tries to gain critical distance: at a particular time and place, he argues, art came to define itself by contradistinction to economic life. For that reason, the Bourdieu essay reprinted here is not so much a contribution to a materialist literary history as a genealogy of the conditions that make one impossible.

But calling book history “materialist” may give the wrong idea: despite a lively interest in the workings of the market, the discipline as a whole belongs neither on the Right or the Left. The closest thing that book history has to a political bent (among its Anglo-American practitioners, at least) is populism: an ethically-driven conviction that apparently passive and nameless readers have the power to make meaning. For all its interest in authorship (as a business proposition, as a side-effect of copyright law, as an ideological construct), book history finally stresses the independence of consumption from production. One generation's banned books become the next's set texts. Time and space separate a book's origin from its eventual uses: while Canadian students now read recently revived Canadian classics in their courses on nineteenth-century literature, most Canadians in the nineteenth century were reading pirated American reprints of British novels. The history of the book is also a geography of the book.

Perhaps it would be safer to characterize book history as honorably contrarian. Publishers' account-books turn out to be more interesting than authors' fictional accounts; the recipients of meaning are cast as its makers. If post-structuralism developed a hermeneutics of suspicion, book history invents an esthetic of surprise. Its most memorable catchphrases are

paradoxes: McKenzie's "printers of the mind" pairs the human spirit with the manufacture of commodities; Darnton's "social history of ideas" views intellectual history as synchronically porous rather than diachronically self-contained; McGann's "socialization of texts" and Elizabeth Eisenstein's "printing press as an agent of change" personify objects. Even the title of Darnton's ground-breaking study of eighteenth-century French publishing, The Business of Enlightenment, exemplifies book historians' flair for juxtaposition. Pairing philosophy with commerce and Parnassus with the cellar, his Literary Underground of the Old Regime rewrote the history of ideas not by "contemplating philosophical treatises" but by "grubbing in the archives." Book historians' obsession with dirty books has a metaphorical thrust (pornography has long been a favorite topic because it's one of the few genres to which readers' responses leave tangible traces); so does Darnton's image of the "underground" and Jonathan Rose's excavation of Edwardian miners' reading. (The metaphor resurfaces in Rose's own search for a "documentary gold mine" – an enterprise that he defends from charges of Micawberism, but which may remind skeptics more of Silas Wegg.) Researchers in this field like to think of themselves as digging and delving, rolling up their sleeves, not being afraid to get dust on their hands.

The past may be a foreign country, but anyone reading about the history of reading will experience flashes of self-recognition. Some book historians, like Adrian Johns writing on Renaissance scientific books or Ann Blair on early modern information overload, set out to trace a genealogy for present-day scholarly exchange; others, like Joan Rubin or Jonathan Rose, look outward to the "common reader," reconstructing the uses of literacy from which academic elites have fought to distance themselves. The final chapter of The Book History Reader makes clear how hard those two enterprises are to keep apart. Its author, Janice Radway, revolutionized the sociology of reading when she listened to women in a midwestern town talk about Harlequin romances. In the wake of the resulting study, Reading the Romance, she turned her attention to the Book-of-the-Month Club, the subscription scheme founded in New York in the 1920s and still going strong. The business that Radway describes appears in many ways as a low-tech forerunner of Amazon.com (with the difference that the Club made money). The absence of digital "cookies" and sophisticated market research didn't stop its staff from niche marketing: of the April 1928 selection, Elizabeth Bowen's The Hotel, their newsletter predicted that "those who enjoy writers like Joseph Conrad, Anatole France, Henry James ... will exult in it. ... Those readers, on the other hand, who prefer the straightforward narrative – as exemplified by such novelists as Galsworthy, Tarkington, Bennett and innumerable others ... may find The Hotel annoying by reason of its subtlety." This is literary criticism as matchmaking, genre as family resemblance: the reviewer's job was not to mold the reader's taste, but to predict it. That cheerful deference to pre-existing wants – and to the marketplace more generally – makes the Club's guessing games as different as possible from the austere corrective academic literary criticism being produced in the twenties, much less today.

In that context, Radway's study could be misread as a neo-Darntonian case of academic slumming, all the more courageous in that its subject lacks the exoticism of pornography or pulp. What makes A Feeling for Books more than this is the uncanny resemblance that the ethos of the Book-of-the-Month-Club bears to academic book history. At times, its employees seem to have anticipated Finkelstein and McCleery by half a century: one of the judges, Henry Canby, reflects that "I find too little in histories of literature and criticism of how books get to readers." Another judge "insisted that literary judgments, evaluations, and descriptions needed to vary with their audiences and their objects." Toward the end of the excerpt, Radway lays her cards on the table, describing the Club's distrust of what she calls "the dispassionate, highly intellectualized

aesthetic distance associated with experimental forms of literary modernism and the highly academic criticism that had appeared to legitimate it.” Their interest in the common reader makes Book-of-the-Month-Club staff book historians *avant la lettre*.

Book history differs from most scholarly disciplines in that its object of study is also its means of transmission. (The message is the medium.) For all its interest in marginalia and marginalized persons, the history of books is centrally about ourselves. It asks how past readers have made meaning (and therefore, by extension, how others have read differently from us); but it also asks where the conditions of possibility for our own reading came from. More crudely, how did the books on the shelves of our libraries get there – including Making Meaning, including the Book History Reader, including bound volumes of the LRB? Book history refuses to take for granted the survival, accessibility and legibility of its sources: in John Sutherland's words, it reminds us that no text is found under the gooseberry bush.