



Kristin L. Matthews. *Reading America: Citizenship, Democracy, and Cold War Literature*



Kristin L. Matthews. *Reading America: Citizenship, Democracy, and Cold War Literature*. Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016. 222p. ISBN 9781625342355. US\$ 29.95.

In *Reading America: Citizenship, Democracy, and Cold War Literature*, Kristin Matthews notes the long history of elite leaders connecting reading to citizenship in the United States. She argues that the Cold War marked a high point for this sort of discourse, as American government and cultural elites presented reading as “a duty and a responsibility, the proper performance of which was key to protecting one’s kin and country from America’s enemies” (31). Matthews argues that two forces made the Cold War a particularly important period in the history of reading: (1) the increasing size of the book market (literacy rates increased while book prices dropped and their availability skyrocketed); and (2) Americans’ sense of uncertainty and dismay at what seemed an assault on democratic values made reading into a remedy for Cold-War cultural anxieties.

Matthews’s history brings together a wide range of sources – from government reports to literacy training materials – to recreate Cold-War conversations about reading. Critically, she shows that reading discourse crossed political lines between conservative and liberal, linking disparate political actors from John Foster Dulles to Tom Hayden. Her narrative traces American faith in reading as a process to unify the nation, even as the meaning found through reading became uncertain, fragmentary, and tentative. She begins with Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, who reads both rebelliously and in ways firmly rooted in conservative ideals. She ends by examining reading’s fate in culture wars of the 1980s, connecting such figures as bell hooks and Lynne Cheney through their commitment to reading as a source of virtue and national self-definition. In this last chapter, Matthews analyzes Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, which presents a citizen-reader committed to unity through difference, uncertain about the “niceness” of the American character. Between these two readings of fictional characters reading, Matthews shows how Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, and John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* present characters who read both to connect to individual truths and to find a sense of community.

Matthews’s narrative juxtaposes popular discourse about reading with elite literary texts at the center of each chapter. This provides a useful model for thinking about how low-, middle-,



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and high-brow cultures coalesce around reading as a value, an idea that indicates greater connection between these cultures than critics at the time (or even now) might have accepted. This intriguing history leaves a number of open questions, mostly notably how ideas about reading shifted with the opening of mega-bookstores like Barnes and Noble and with the rise of the Internet and claims about its democratizing effects.

Matthews ends her book by connecting the domestic response to the 9/11 attacks to her history of reading, showing the ways that the nation continued to use reading to find unity and security in an uncertain world. Even in the twenty-first century, she suggests, reading remains a key locus of citizenship.

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