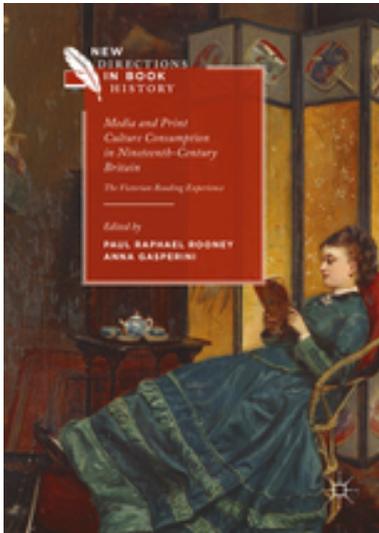


Paul Raphael Rooney and Anna Gasperini, eds. *Media and Print Culture Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Victorian Reading Experience*



Paul Raphael Rooney and Anna Gasperini, eds. *Media and Print Culture Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Victorian Reading Experience*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. *New Directions in Book History*. 241 p. ISBN 9781137587602. U.K. £66.99.

Simply because the Internet exists, the opinions on a medieval-style fantasy novel series called *A Song of Ice and Fire* or on *Game of Thrones* (GoT) in the television adaptation are easily found. Today, in addition to hearing from professional critics on staff at *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, and *The Metro* papers, various GoT fans can share their pop culture thoughts on Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media social platforms, pop culture websites, and discussion forums. Sites like YouTube allow fans, as amateur content creators, to present imaginary battle tactics of knights and dragons fighting against zombies; to argue theories of characters like Jon Snow, speculating if he is secretly the nephew of Ned Stark rather than the latter's illegitimate son; and to express their appreciation of the fine muscles on actor Kit Harington, who plays Jon Snow on TV. Unfortunately, what audiences thought of different books produced in the nineteenth century is not so straightforward. Scholars must conduct investigations in libraries, archives, and repositories, to find diaries, newspaper reviews, and letters, which may or may not mention what people were reading and communicate their opinion on that material. There are no Victorian equivalents to Goodreads.com, which allows anyone to share and rate books, explain why they enjoyed a work, or what they found lacking in the plot. Therefore, studies which reveal audiences for any nineteenth-century publications are very welcome, particularly because research into readers' views helps historians uncover hidden layers of



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wider Victorian culture.

Editors Paul Raphael Rooney and Anna Gasperini selected and organised ten essays for *Media and Print Culture Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. The contributors of these chapters aim to answer the question of why audiences in the 1800s consumed certain types of reading material. They also provide case studies showing temporal, monetary, and mental investments that reconstruct acts of reading. Rooney and Gasperini state that the essays contained within the book focus on the plurality and diversity of reading and look at areas not yet comprehensively explored (2). This book covers new material and new areas of research. Three common themes run through the volume, which is part of the New Directions in Book History series. The first theme is the belief that reading could stimulate a person morally and intellectually. Chapter 1 and chapter 4 study *Self-Help*, a bestseller by Samuel Smiles, and three Glaswegian magazines by mutual improvement societies respectively. These chapters provide an interesting contrast to each other because one looks at a well-known work that circulated through the country, whilst the other focuses on local needs, and brings to light how the magazines interacted with their community of readers, deriving their importance from circulation from one individual to another. Chapters 3, 5, 6, and 9 cover a second theme: the framing of particular works, and how readers might have read their own experiences into those works. Chapter 3 looks at how girls might have received King Arthur stories: although the mythology had boys in mind as the main audience, the appeal is not age or gender specific. Chapter 9 discusses how the working class might have interpreted sensational stories set in London and wonders if the appeal of these works might be in the possibility of vicarious adventures into someplace dark and criminal. Chapter 5 studies the Black British experience through the anti-racist periodical *Anti-Caste*, finding that its readership encompassed progressive radicals including early feminists, socialists, pacifists, vegetarians, international students, as well as anti-slavery campaigners. Chapter 6 examines advertisements for a cheap reprint series by John Dicks, aimed at the working classes, generally, and tries to assess what readers belonging to the “unknown public” wanted and thought they ought to buy.

Finally, a third theme, the idea of reading for pleasure and inspiration, is covered in chapters 7, 10, and 11, although this theme is touched on in the previous chapters mentioned as well. Chapters 10 and 11 are about artistic works of plays or ballads and contain interesting ideas on how performance literature is different to literature that was meant to be read. Both



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chapters also provide instances of literature that were transposed from other mediums, and examine how both stage and printed page adapted and promoted each other to different audiences.

Chapter 7, by Marie Léger-St-Jean, was particularly interesting to me as someone who studies Victorian illustrations. This chapter looked at well-known writer R.L. Stevenson and contrasted his experience of reading with that of a working class boy, Billy, who was functionally illiterate. Being resourceful, Billy stole penny magazines he had seen displayed in shop windows, then managed to get his younger brother Charley to read to him. The magazines he desired the most contained striking images. This reading experience, and foray into minor criminality, provides a poignant contrast with Stevenson's experience with reading, for the author was blessed with better circumstances, allowing him to be literate and purchase what he wished. The chapter also delves into how stories and illustrations inspired Stevenson and enabled him to eventually create his own works. This study seems to show how creativity can be channeled either constructively or destructively, depending on class, ambition, and personal circumstances.

In a way, the last two themes of this collection are the most universal. Indeed, reading can be good for us and that is a quintessential Victorian message. But people also read to communicate and feel connected with others. The written word, whether consumed on a page or watched in a performance, has not just been a one-way street from an author conveying a message to a potential reader. Artistic works contain ideas and characters who remind us of people we know, people we despise, as well people we aspire to become. Sometimes one media is chosen because the message is simple and a straightforward argument carries it forward. Sometimes the message is so complex that it needs the backdrop of a fictional setting, where dwarfs, pirates, or kings speak the truths about the human condition. Engaging plots and relatable characters always help ideas and messages to spread, especially when someone in the audience can talk to somebody who is also in the audience with them. It is thus useful to learn about different ways that scholars study readers from the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the research methods described when unearthing these different audiences are as intriguing as the literature the audiences, themselves, were consuming.

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