By turns patient and polemical, both deeply researched and light on its feet, this book mounts a sustained challenge to literary-historical conventional wisdom and business as usual. Working at the crossroads of book history and textual interpretation, Leah Price begins with a basic, indisputable fact—books are physical objects—and asks: so what? (I must add that Price restricts this statement to the nineteenth century and is quick to address the contemporary resonances of her historical project.) Showing just how much weight the materiality of printed matter was made to carry in Victorian Britain, Price anatomizes the meanings that were ascribed to the things people did with books other than reading them. This wide-ranging analysis is fascinating in its own right, but in making it, Price also throws down a gauntlet. Calling for more scholarly attention to "the wide range of nontextual . . . uses to which the book is put" (20), she aims to dislodge "the primacy of reading itself" (21) in current book history and literary criticism alike.

After a chapter in which Price deftly lays out the stakes of her project, the book is divided into two sections, the first focused mainly on the handling of printed matter, "doing something with the object" (5), and the second on its circulation, "doing something to, or with, other persons by means of the book--whether cementing or severing relationships, whether by giving and receiving books or by withholding and rejecting them" (5-6). The first chapter of Part I highlights the depiction of books and other printed matter as tools for blocking out other people. Several of Price's strengths as a critic are on full display here: her talent for pattern recognition, as when she shows that "pseudoreading"—pretending to read—"forms one of the set pieces that knit together the loose bagginess of the Palliser series" (47); her literary-historical awareness, as when she observes that "the deployment of reading [and "pseudoreading"] to mark a loveless marriage neatly inverts the age-old trope that makes dropping the book a preamble to courtship" (59); and her clarity in challenging critical assumptions and theoretical paradigms (which she is an expert at distilling), as when she asks us to consider "novelistic representations of unread books" in light of the fact that "since Don Quixote at least, writers and critics alike have assumed that one defining feature of the novel lies in its investment in the act of reading" (67). Price thus makes certain features of Anthony Trollope's fiction newly visible and newly salient as no mere quirks but instead hallmarks of an antiquixotic "strand of realism that shares classic quixotism's obsession with the book, but that values bibliographic or social surfaces over linguistic or psychological depths" (67).

Price next examines the treatment of books and reading in midcentury bildungsromans, especially David Copperfield, Jane Eyre, and The Mill on the Floss. Extending her earlier discussion of the book as "a pawn in familial power struggles" (73), Price also argues that the would-be bookish protagonists of these bildungsromans tend not to read but rather to use the unread book as a "prompt or alibi for inwardness and abstraction" (72). But whether reading or daydreaming, these characters tend to be unaware of the materiality of books, which typically interest only minor characters and villains. Major characters also tend to overlook the commodity status of books: "by reading bildungsromans," Price asserts, "we learn . . . not to ask what books cost" (84). Thus, she concludes, even while promoting the still-powerful view of books as "the refuge of the powerless," bildungsromans "forget that access to books requires a minimum of economic power" (87).

Pivoting toward the second half of the book, the next chapter compares the bildungsroman to the it-narrative. Both genres, Price points out, combine "strong focalization with represented weakness" (124). But rather than simply arguing that the bildungsroman borrows its structure from the eighteenth-century it-narrative, she is more interested in comparing the former genre to it-narratives of the nineteenth-century. Often taking books themselves as their narrators, these later it-narratives reveal "what the bildungsroman conceals: the backstory by which books reach their readers" (124). "Nothing could be further from the fantasy of the self-made reader and the self-distributing text" of the bildungsroman, Price argues, "than it-narrative's understanding of books as vectors for human relationships" (124). For Price, then, whereas the "bildungsroman both generated and limited the stories scholars tell about reading," the it-narrative provides an alternative model to "make the book narratable" (107).

Yet for all the it-narrative's corrective virtues, Price finds that the agency it grants to books threatens to occlude the human agents of transmission. With this worry, Price turns to the second half of her book, which begins with two chapters on the book not as barrier, weapon, or agent but instead as burden. As Price notes, "the Victorians pioneered institutions--whether secular (the post) or religious (the tract society)--that allowed printed matter to be distributed at the expense of someone other than its end user" (139). Pursuing the implications of this shift, Price convincingly argues that "giving free print its due would result in . . . a different cultural history in which--far from enabling mobility or independence--the book
would become a prop for commemorating one's forebears, deferring to the judgment of one's elders, and accepting favors from one's betters" (150). This point leads the way--in the next chapter--to Price's explanation of why mid-Victorian fiction often represents the circulation of tracts. The tract, she argues, replaces the romance as the genre against which the novel defines itself. "[By] satirizing intrusively personal forms of charitable and familial transmission," she writes, "the novel made a virtue of a traditional accusation against it: that its commercial distribution and solitary consumption made the novel an antisocial genre" (176). A final, concluding chapter on what Price calls the "after-uses" of books (218) suggestively links historical changes in the price of paper (both new and used) to the representation of old paper in the form of found manuscripts.

Throughout the book, Price provides a steady stream of local aperçus without losing sight of the overarching issues that frame and motivate her study. As a result, while the individual chapters have a congenial "loose bagginess" of their own, the book as a whole feels focused and forceful. Price succeeds wonderfully in what she describes, with characteristic pith and sweep, as her twin corrective and creative ambitions: to achieve "historical and critical distance from the heroic myth--whether Protestant, liberal, New Critical, or New Historicism--that makes textuality the source of interiority, authenticity, and selfhood" and to "recover stories that this myth overwrites: stories about women, children, and the working-class or non-European men who remained sensitive to the material affordances of books" (16).

I can envision two particular grounds on which Price's own readers might take issue with her. First of these she anticipates and ruefully admits: "this study of those uses of the book that exceed or even replace reading is based primarily on the evidence of my own . . . reading" (36). As Price goes on to argue, her overwhelming reliance on textual evidence does not undermine her claims, insofar as her true topic is "Victorian representations and perceptions of, and fantasies and illusions about, the circulation of books, and not the circulation of books itself" (36). Nonetheless, her reliance on reading cannot help but weaken her polemic against "the primacy of reading" in literary studies (21). More seriously, perhaps, her method tacitly reinforces the dominance of textuality over materiality that she aims not only to describe but also to destabilize. Yet while it may reflect my own professional (de)formation as a literary critic, I find this objection rather hollow, not only because Price is often alert to extratextual considerations, from the price of paper to the growth of tract societies, but also because she so convincingly establishes the significance of her topic.

The second potential problem involves a series of apparent inconsistencies or slippages in Price's argument. While she sometimes argues that canonical genres such as the bildungsroman "avoided any mention of the social transactions in which the book was enlisted or the material properties with which it was invested" (6), she often shows that canonical works stress these matters, or materialities--if only to diminish their significance and demonize those who value them. Furthermore, while she sometimes posits two distinct "strand[s] of realism" (67) exemplified by the materiality of the Palliser novels and the textuality of midcentury bildungsromans, these strands get so tangled that they end up seeming not so distinct after all. To ask where "those persecuted heroes and heroines get the books that so richly furnish their imaginings," Price contends, is to call "the bildungsroman's bluff" (86-7). But the bildungsroman often answers Price's question. David Copperfield tells us that the books he reads as a child were his father's; John Reed makes it clear to Jane Eyre that the book she is reading as the novel opens belongs to the Reeds and not her; and Mr. Tulliver is asked to explain how Maggie got a copy of Defoe's The History of the Devil. That Mr. Tulliver bought the book for its binding is of course significant for reasons Price explains very well, as she likewise nicely explains that John Reed "weaponize[s] the book he confiscates from Jane (73). Yet attention to the surface (and heft) of books is on the surface of these texts. If bildungsromans do promote the myth of the self-made reader, as Price asserts, they must do so by means more subtle than at times she suggests. Put differently, Price's rhetoric sometimes aligns her with the premises and methods of symptomatic reading, which focuses on gaps and silences, but her own evidence tends to support--and her own critical practice often follows--a more Foucauldian model of discourse analysis. Thus, though she asserts that "by 1850, paper falls under the same taboo as sex" (77), she tends to show us how the materiality of books was "put into discourse," as sex was according to Foucault (History of Sexuality Part 1 [1980] 11). (On the distinction between symptomatic reading and "surface reading," see Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," Representations 108, Fall 2009, pp. 1-21.)

In light of this discourse of materiality, Price tends to overstate the immateriality of canonical Victorian fiction. Does it truly refuse not only to recognize but also to valorize the materialities of the book? If--as Price notes--"the materiality of a thrown book . . . provides a reminder of the materiality of a vulnerable body" (75), this would seem to recommend rather than stigmatize attention to the former, insofar as the novels she discusses are generally thought to promote sympathetic attention to the latter. Price herself fascinatingly examines one context in which the book's status as a commodity is not suppressed or regretted but rather embraced. Although her discussion of tract distribution mainly explores the implications of free print, one especially surprising debate she excavates from the evangelical press considers (in a manner she is quick to compare to present-day debates about digital media) "whether content can be distributed more effectively through gift, sale, or rental" (156): price a bible too low, or give it away free, and it is liable to be resold as waste. A "commercial transaction," therefore, comes to serve "as a guarantor for a more than commercial value" (156). Price contrasts this view of the book's imbrication in the market with the ways in which mainstream fiction represents the book. But when she contrasts the tract with the novel in her next chapter, this alignment flips: "By mocking tract-distributors for harassing a captive audience," she argues, "secular novels and magazines congratulated themselves on being freely chosen and paid for" (204). At times like this, the suppleness of Price's detailed analyses clashes with the rigidity of her more general pronouncements.

Nonetheless, Price's fearless generalizations are among her book's most admirable and productive features. At times her neat formulations read like a dare--find the messy exceptions if you can!--and she certainly means to provoke. Yet she is no mere provocateur: her claims are considered, well-grounded, and consistently enlightening. All scholars interested in the Victorian novel, Victorian print culture, and, indeed, how to do things with books, will learn a great deal from this book and will need to grapple with its claims.

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