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Who was the Victorian common reader? In one sense the question is unanswerable, because the common reader is always more shifting figure than factual person. Signifying the "Mass Reading Public" that Richard Altick identifies in the subtitle of The English Common Reader (1957), the common reader embodies an aspiration to representativeness never satisfied by even the most detailed historical records of actual readers, the most imaginative reconstructions of implied readers, or the most sensitive and virtuosic close readings of Victorian writing about reading. Yet the endless search nonetheless yields fascinating results. Each essay in this collection, which evolved from papers given at the 2007 conference on Print Culture and the Novel: 1850-1900 held at Oxford University to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Altick’s book, elaborates and diversifies Altick’s well-known definition of the common reader as the product of an “increasingly democratic society.” “By using new, original, or overlooked sources,” the editors say, each essay interrogates "exactly who or what we mean when we talk of the ‘common reader’”(4).

Building not only on Altick’s book but on much more recent studies such as Jonathan Rose’s The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes (2001) and William St. Clair’s The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period (2004), contributors explore a wide range of topics, demonstrating that generalizations about the Victorian common reader, as the
editors note, may be even more difficult to make than we had thought. While almost all of the essays focus on the novel, the unifying force of the collection comes not from the specificity of its focus on this genre (which varies considerably from essay to essay) but rather from each contributor’s investment in critiquing, experimenting with, and refining methodologies for doing the history of reading. The strongest essays either bridge or fill what Leah Price calls "the gulf separating inscribed from implied audience" ("Reading: the State of the Discipline" 305), the empirical audience from the reader constructed by the text. While some contributors examine evidence of both types of audience, others use the formal and generic features of published writing to track the existence of historically specific reading communities, imagined and real.

Laurel Brake does the latter in her essay on "The Advantage of Fiction," which appears first and acts as a kind of second introduction to the volume. While reading publics in the second half of the nineteenth century grew increasingly splintered, specialized, and—as the editors of this collection stress—almost unmanageably diverse, Brake claims that periodical culture responded by seeking common ground. Though we often see the publishing industry in this period pushing towards specialization and niche markets, Brake finds also "a persistent aspiration for a general rather than a specialized press, and an attempt to bring different reading constituencies together in single titles – including women and men, political economists and novel readers, men of science and poetry" (16). Fiction's broad appeal, Brake explains, played a key role in this process, "carrying" periodicals across markets even as periodicals themselves sustained and created markets for fiction. Like Nicholas Dames, who has recently argued that the
frequency of long excerpts in reviews of Victorian novels "implies some sense of a common range of reading, a response all readers would have" ("On Not Close Reading," *The Feeling of Reading* 25), Brake skillfully interprets evidence about material form and literary genre in order to show that late Victorians considered reading collective and social. Without relying upon any of the mainstays of reading history -- without drawing on the recorded experiences of everyday readers, without reconstructing readers implied by texts, and without quoting what professional readers wrote -- she gives us new ways of interpreting all of these kinds of evidence.

Brakes’s concern with the collectivity of reading is central to the volume as a whole, which the editors have divided into two sections. The first, "Publishers, Authors, Critics, Readers," chiefly investigates individuals who might -- however problematically -- qualify as representative "English common readers." And like many recent studies of Victorian reading, most of these essays consider "what nineteenth-century readers and writers thought they were doing," as Rachel Ablow puts it in her introduction to *The Feeling of Reading* (3). Debra Gettleman, for example, studies the work of professional reviewers to learn how they thought about the subjectivity of common readers. In the 1860s and 1870s, she shows, literary critics and reviewers rejected the notion that getting absorbed in a novel was necessarily dangerous; on the contrary, they put readerly subjectivity at the center of novel reception. While recent criticism has paid a great deal of attention to Victorian anxieties about readerly absorption, Gettleman contends that "the positive valence of what might appear to be idle reading was even more present in the period" (65). Readerly musing, she claims, entailed "rumination" during the
"imaginative pauses" proffered by formal textual features as well as narrative maneuvers designed to stimulate the "intervening imagination" which "comes between the words on the page and their shape in the reader's mind" (66,67). Critics valued both forms of reading, she suggests, because they included "a sense of partial detachment" that promised to rescue the reader from over-identification with the text; this over-identification was the true target, she suggests, of all those distracting polemics against absorbed reading (67). (Apropos detachment in reading, see also David Kurnick's 2007 article, "An Erotics of Detachment: Middlemarch and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice."

Likewise examining the printed record for evidence about Victorian attitudes towards reading, Kate MacDonald’s analysis of the late-Victorian penny paper called The Dorothy shows that the contents of periodicals can provide us with some compelling evidence about actual as distinct from implied readers. Everyday readers, we learn, became periodical writers when they sent letters to the editor and entered contests — or so it seemed. Carefully sifting this material, MacDonald divides it into three categories: editorial invention (such as the letters to the editor in the paper’s first issues); writing likely produced by real readers (in contest entries accompanied by historically verified names and addresses); and —perhaps most interesting — work written by professional writers masquerading as common contributors (as when Edith Nesbit won a Dorothy fiction-writing contest). Anyone interested in the prehistory of full-text searching and of close reading will be especially struck by MacDonald’s account of the Dorothy’s “Literature Class,” a competition in which readers searched for specified passages in works ranging from Kingsley’s Westward Ho! to Milton’s Paradise Lost(29).
Two more essays in this section focus on the Victorian reception of two very different authors. Working with unpublished as well as published material gathered from both sides of the Atlantic, Jane Jordan mines the correspondence of Ouida (Maria Louise de la Ramée) with various of her publishers to show how, despite the author’s resistance, her novels were “marketed, priced and packaged like popular fiction for a popular reader” in a way that has perhaps forever marked critical reception of her work (54). Studying the reception of a quite different author, Kate Halsey considers the responses of "real historical readers" to the work of Jane Austen. Examining letters, diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies, Halsey tracks what readers felt about Austen herself, her characters, and her novels as friends, moral guides, and sources of consolation (71).

While the essays in the first half of the book center on individual authors and periodicals, the essays in the second half, “Scenes of Reading,” investigate what Louis Althusser might have described as the ideological state apparatus tucked within the machinery of the repressive state. Specifically, this set of essays examines the reading habits, practices, and propensities of groups organized around various institutions, many of them operating at the social and geographical margins of Empire rather than—like the readers studied in the volume’s first half—within Great Britain. Jenny Hartley, for instance, studies the circulation of novels within prisons; Rosalind Crone writes on convict ship bible schools; Sharon Murphy examines the spread of army garrison reading rooms; Beth Palmer analyzes the catalogs and contents of the Royal Colonial Institute’s library; and in the records of circulating libraries in Australian coal-mining
towns, Tim Dolin discovers some unexpected cross-class reading patterns. No longer assuming the background of a national community of common readers conjured up by the first half of the book, these essays focus on small and medium-sized groups of readers under various forms of pressure.

Tim Dolin, like the other contributors to this section, accepts the challenge of what he calls "the scantiness and patchiness of [reading history's] surviving evidence" (157). In seeking evidence of everyday readers, he must also contend with the fact that Australia has been historically represented as a nation of "inarticulate" readers fed by the imperial book trade, which, he argues, "created conditions under which Australian cultural identity was formed through the consumption of culture largely from elsewhere" (173, 152). But Dolin shows what Australian readers did for themselves. Into an essay of just over twenty pages he packs a short bookful of provocative ideas, statistics gleaned from the astonishing Australian Common Reader database, detailed charts, reflections on methodology in the study of reading, and critique of the field. His many discoveries include one gleaned from his study of early-twentieth-century circulating libraries. Judged by their borrowing patterns, reading communities were not just book clubs and classrooms (face-to-face social networks whose participants were known to one another) but also "formations based on genre," such as the community that might now be formed by all readers of the Harry Potter series, or (in the case of one early-twentieth-century Australian mining town) was formed by all readers of Joseph Hocking’s The Trampled Cross (171). The idea of a vertiginously contingent but not quite imaginary reading community based on genre, one akin to the reading communities
described by Dames and Brake, seems like an extraordinarily promising if still uncertain possible trajectory for the history of reading.

Bringing us securely back to earth, the evidence in Jenny Hartley’s essay on incarcerated readers moves from statistics kept by prison chaplains to prisoners’ own accounts of their reading, and to *Little Dorrit*‘s representation of the imprisoned Arthur Clennam’s inability to read. (Hartley’s list of late-Victorian prisoner requests for reading materials itself conjures Dickens: “Note for me a book about pirates.” “I want plenty of murders.” “If you give me any religious tales I’ll tell the Rabbi” [99].) Tracking discourse about the novel into prison, she suggests, “shows contemporary debates about the role of reading at their starkest” (88). In the end, Hartley finds, the novel survived and spread in prison just as it had in the outside world.

Balancing out the De Certeau-Foucault scale as she turns from landed prisoners to ship-borne convicts bound for Australia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Rosalind Crone reveals a world of readers given precious little freedom to choose: for them, she shows, both the content and protocols of Bible-reading were prescribed. Studying military libraries and reading rooms, Sharon Murphy gives us the view from the other side of the repressive state apparatus: Victorian soldiers adored the novels of Austen, we learn, along with – as we would expect – the work of authors such as Scott, Dickens, James Fenimore Cooper, and Captain Marryat. Like Hartley, Murphy finds the anxieties we associate with the wider Victorian reading public intensified in a highly and overtly regulated social setting. Finally, Beth Palmer’s essay on the library of the Royal Colonial Institute rounds out the collection. She will not convince everyone that
that the generic disruptions caused by the library's mode of cataloging offered its patrons "ways of reading against the grain of imperialism," but she clearly shows how fiction and nonfiction intermingled on the shelves of a library with a very powerful relationship to the work of empire (144).

For all its value, however, this collection of essays tends to sell itself short. Symptomatically, the introduction’s useful if brief overview of book history and its relation to the study of reading during the fifty-odd years since *The English Common Reader* includes a telling misquotation. “Under the influence of D.F. McKenzie and Robert Darnton,” the editors write, "bibliographic studies were liberated from their traditionally descriptive and taxonomic shackles by a new and exciting determination 'to show that form affects meaning'" (2). Yet the original reads as follows: "bibliographers should be concerned to show that forms effect meaning" (D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* [London: The British Library, 1986], 4). McKenzie would have enjoyed, I think, the deep irony of this not-uncommon misquotation of the published text of his 1985 Panizzi lectures, a misquotation which dematerializes the original, strips it of many connotations, and thereby dilutes its radicalism. (I should add that I once made the same misquotation, but was lucky to have it corrected before publication.)

Besides the misquotation, this book is marked by some errors that are less misleading but still surprising: an incorrectly named author or two, inconsistently formatted references, an inaccurate publication date for one major work of scholarship.

While these flaws are all small in themselves, they deflect attention from the usefulness of the book’s own insights, especially from the value of rethinking the
relation between common reading and the professional scrutiny of literary texts. While the editors don’t explicitly mention it, the title of this collection refers to more than just a revaluation of Altick’s book and to an expanded view of Victorian common readers. Reflecting the influence of books like Rita Felski’s *The Uses of Literature* (2008) and Catherine Belsey’s *A Future for Criticism* (2011), it allies itself with recent efforts to reconcile the reading methods and attitudes of common readers with those of literary critics. Those who propose such a reconciliation sometimes remind us that during the Victorian era, the practices of professional and common readers had not yet diverged. Within this collection, for example, Kate Halsey suggests that we have much to learn from Victorian readers of Jane Austen. “Although,” she writes, “both professional and nonprofessional readers of the nineteenth century seem to have engaged with Austen’s works in similar ways, literary critics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been trained away from precisely those aspects of reading identified in this chapter – the interest in the character of the author, the identification of and with the characters, the belief in literature as a force for good or consolation in life” (83). In light of this collection, the history of reading certainly does gain weight if we conceive it as a repository of methodologies that we may apply directly to our scholarly work. Less radically but more economically, however, we might simply pay more careful attention to our own professional reading practices as they actually work in and on the classroom, the study, the library, and the local archive. Linking the novel to the world as they show how forms *effect* meaning, such reading practices are already richly evident in these essays. They remain only to be more carefully and more fully noticed, delineated,
discussed, and valued. The common reading practices that many of us – perhaps in one way or another all of us -- fantasize about recovering from the Victorians may have been with us all along.

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