This book challenges the "orthodox" view of the antebellum South as an illiterate culture (199). Tracing the prodigious "output of small printing offices (much of which has not survived)," Beth Barton Schweiger reconstructs "the creative ways this burgeoning industry met its customers' demands," providing ample evidence of the production and circulation of spellers and grammar books, newspapers, almanacs, tracts, hymnals, and fiction (199). Schweiger's story of antebellum literacy includes itinerant peddlers who doubled as lecturers on temperance and grammar, travelling preachers who sold books, newspapers, and magazines from their saddle bags, authors of letter-writing manuals, and compilers of camp meeting songbooks. Yet even while she evokes a bustling world of improvisation that generated a diversity of texts, Schweiger chiefly aims to demonstrate "the hunger for printed matter among southern readers" (199).

Indeed, beyond showing that printed matter was widely available, and historicizing the practice of reading and writing "in the context of nineteenth-century pedagogy" (xvi), Schweiger sets out to offer a "history of readers […] as a study of cultural formation" (xvi). Mining the journals kept by two pairs of sisters who lived in the Blue Ridge, she aims to show "what reading meant to [them … not only] what they read, but also what they did with their reading" (34). For me, this was not only the book's most fascinating goal but also the one most difficult to accomplish.

From Robert Darnton through Barbara Sicherman, Elizabeth McHenry, and Patricia Crain, scholars emphasize the slipperiness of reading as an object of study. Most readers do not write about what they read, and those who do often recast the reading experience as they look back at it. Diaries, such as those that Schweiger examines, rarely focus exclusively on reading, and their comments are never easy to interpret. Diarists always write with some sort of reader in mind -- even if (as Walter Ong has argued) that reader is only an "ideal" version of the writer herself ("The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," PMLA [1975] 20). Nineteenth-century diaries were not private; educators, ministers, and commentators encouraged young people to keep journals for "self-examination and reflection," but parents or husbands often oversaw the process, as Schweiger notes (175). Most women, she comments, "recorded their thoughts expecting that they would be read by family members. Both the Speer and Cooley families read family members' journals after their deaths" (175). This prospect must have had some impact on the form and content of the diaries Schweiger analyzes, although she does not say so.

Concentrating on the journals of the Speer and Cooley daughters, A Literate South emphasizes the young women's desire to study, and their varying degrees of success. Comparing and contrasting the two families in terms of social positioning, economic status, and cultural capital, Schweiger provides a wealth of detail. Though Aquilla Speer's profession as a tanner gave him only a "precarious hold on respectability," he was "well-regarded" as a "Methodist layman and a temperance advocate" (98). Revering "learning and piety in equal measure," the Speers sent their daughters to the Jonesville Academy, a co-educational Methodist school eight miles away, where the girls' uncle was an early trustee (97, 106). "I am engaged in the delightful task of improving my mind' […]Jennie] wrote on her arrival" (108). With the backing of her family, Jennie became a teacher at Greensboro Female College, found a patron there in the Reverend Charles Deems, and spent a year at Mt. Holyoke Seminary; she was the only woman from North Carolina to do so before the Civil War. Eventually Jennie ran her own school and anonymously published essays in the Methodist Weekly Message; her first submission criticized fiction on moral grounds.

The Cooley sisters were not as goal-directed or ambitious as the Speers. James Cooley -- "a cabinetmaker, farmer, and self-taught silversmith, clockmaker, and occasional slaveholder" -- was not determined to advance his daughters' education (26). Betsy and her older sister Amanda attended a local school where they studied spelling and grammar, but went no further on the "path to eloquence"; they received "no formal training in rhetoric or composition" (94, 98). Nevertheless, they studied grammar at home and read an eclectic array of texts -- sermons and the Bible, magazines, humor, songbooks, advice literature, and story papers. They wove and spun, cooked and baked, dipped candles and sold some of their products to neighbors. They made their diaries by sewing pages together, and binding "them in a cover made of their own homespun; they wrote almost weekly in these journals until their deaths" (22-24). When Betsy married and went West, she took her diary along. Her husband brought it home to her parents after she died of a fever in Missouri a few years later.
According to Schweiger the Cooley sisters' journals reflect their commitment to study, indeed, their "passion" for grammar: "Amid their spindles, bobbins, and baskets of wool the Cooley sisters repeatedly voiced their desire to master the rules of English grammar. They wrote nearly as passionately about grammar as they did about their prospects for marriage" (68). Yet the brief diary extracts that Schweiger provides reveal more frustration than passion. "I have now kept my journal for 18 months," Amanda writes, "& thought when I commenced it I would soon study grammar but neglected it till now." Indeed, she fears that she will never "understand that one important branch of learning" (68). Betsy is daunted by grammar as well: "I have no Grammar book but Murrys and it is so tedious," she complains (72). Such comments do not support Schweiger's argument, which would have benefitted from fewer summaries and more substantial citations.

Comparing the language of the Cooley sisters with that of the Speers, Schweiger writes:

Although they wrote hundreds of pages in their journals, family letters, and other papers, Jennie and Ann Speer left virtually no record of what they did every day. The contrast with the Cooley sisters' writing is striking. Amanda and Betsy described their daily lives in beautiful detail, telling the time of day and who was in the room, counting the yards of fabric they wove, and naming the many different kinds of cloth they sewed into coats. They wrote about who was fixing the fencerow, when they sheared the sheep, and how many buckets of blackberries they picked. The Speer sisters presented their world on entirely different terms. "New Years day has been ushered in most delightfully. A few gorgeous clouds float through the heavens, forming a beautiful contrast with the clear blue sky," Ann wrote on the first page of her journal. "Joy floats on every breeze, but many sad changes may come before the bell tolls or the requiem is sung for the departing year of 1853 (95).

According to Schweiger, the "difference between the Cooley and Speer sisters' writing was to a large extent based on the level of learning they were able to achieve" (95). The contrast in style and content, she argues, demonstrates "the difference the study of rhetoric made in the way people recorded and perhaps even thought about their lives" (96). Yet if this difference is the result of formal study, so much the worse for book learning. Though Jennie may have studied rhetoric in quest of "something higher and nobler" than her quotidian life (97), the citations Schweiger offers show that Jennie mostly learned to copy approved passages and fulfill the expectations of her teachers. As Schweiger acknowledges, Jennie carefully "patrolled" herself so as to keep within the "boundaries of propriety" and "disciplined" her writing according to "the models offered in her studies" (162; 13). At Mt. Holyoke and elsewhere, she often felt inferior. The "advantages of a good English education" are not apparent in this outcome (121).

Unlike Jennie, Betsy Cooley never mastered the rhetorical art of formulating "refined sentiments," and regularly made grammatical errors such as "I do long to sing good" (103; 125). But her writing is less derivative, more spontaneous, and more expressive than Jennie's. The texts she seems to have taken to heart were not prescribed by her teachers. When Betsy was seventeen, Schweiger explains, she and Amanda "read a spate of English novels" (150). Betsy mentions Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Frederick Marryat in particular. On April 17, 1842, she spent a "long wet day" reading Bulwer's "Eugene Aram" (150). One month later she wrote: "I have employed myself reading the pilgrim of the Rhine it has some very interesting pieces in it" (qtd. 150). After explaining that Bulwer-Lytton was "one of the most popular writers of the Victorian era," Schweiger cites another snippet from Betsy's journal: "I feel as I have read today that I have many Poetical sentiments but have not language to express them [...] I have ever desired to see Towns & Rivers and people!" (qtd. 150-51). "[L]ike other provincial readers," Schweiger comments, Betsy "felt the gap between her life and what she read yawn ever wider" (150-51). Schweiger sums up; "rural readers were somewhere behind the times, cut off from the places where history was being made and progress was being accomplished" (151).

I could not help wondering whether Betsy wrote anything else in her diary while she was reading Bulwer. One of Schweiger's endnotes led me to a substantial portion of Betsy's journal published by the Missouri Historical Review in 1966. Later in the entry from which Schweiger cites, Betsy expresses additional feelings, in a different register:

I have ever desired to see Towns and Rivers and people -- but if I think of going if I had the chance it makes me shudder at the Thought of leaving a home so dear to me. I feel like I wanted to love and something to love me -- but stop I have went too far. There is danger in the thought. (Edward D. Jersey and James E. Moss, eds. "From Virginia to Missouri in 1846: The Journal of Elizabeth Ann Cooley," Missouri Historical Review 60.2 [January 1966] 162)

Many antebellum writers and commentators (Harriet Beecher Stowe among them) proclaimed Bulwer dangerous, especially for the young. Schweiger herself notes later that some "loathed" Bulwer-Lytton for lacking "artistic merit," others for writing fiction that "would destroy the morals of the nation" (162).

Was Betsy aware of Bulwer's controversial reputation? Schweiger does not consider this question, but she raises a related one: "How did readers like Betsy Cooley decide which novels to read?" (164). Wondering how Betsy made her choices, I paused over Schweiger's comment that "the magazines and newspapers the Cooleys read" contained advertisements from publishing firms (165). Recalling that the Cooleys not only subscribed to Godey's Lady's Book, but "carefully stitch[ed...] the issues together for safekeeping" (152), I followed a lead that Schweiger provides, but does not pursue. Browsing online, still pondering the "how" of Betsy's choices, I found several advertisements for Bulwer's work in Godey's during 1841 and 1842. I also saw that Bulwer's name figured prominently in a romantic story called "Little Things No Trifles" (July 1841). The hero of the story marries a woman of principle whose adamant refusal to read Bulwer is one of her cardinal virtues.

"Little Things No Trifles" appeared in one of Betsy's favorite magazines, just before she began reading the writer who made her aware of "Poetical sentiments" and prompted ideas of love -- hedged with danger. "Order the twenty-five cent volumes advertised in Godey's despite (or because of) what she took from "Little Things," she ultimately chose love over grammar. Shortly before marrying she wrote: "Weary and bitter it is to try to study Grammar and my mind so agitated as it is now. I study Grammar all day and marrying all night until my nerves become feeble and trembling. Good Lord do brighten my ideas and temper to that study. Oh could I learn it with more ease without my head aching and temple throbbing and perplexed to despair" (qtd. Jersey and Moss, 165; partially cited by Schweiger, 93). Betsy left home with her husband, feeling exactly as she had predicted after reading Pilgrims of the Rhine: "Oh!" she wrote on April 8, 1846, "How hard it was to part, next to death, but yet we tore away" (Journal, ed. Jersey and Moss 174). Five days later, on April 13, 1846, she wrote: "I love to travel. I am so well fixed . . . I love so well, all I hate is wagon is too heavy for our horses" (Journal 175; ellipsis in text).
Histories of reading require informed speculation. What we look for in the archive, what we zero in on, what we cite and ponder, is partly shaped by our academic disciplines and training, but also by the questions we bring to documents we find, and the stories we already hope to tell. "Most people did not expect to find themselves in their books," Schweiger writes, early on; "they understood that to be educated was to learn about more cosmopolitan places" (15). But when Betsy writes in her diary after reading Bulwer, she becomes aware of "sentiments" she thinks she has no language to express. As she sewed, spun, tried to study, read fiction, and wrote in her diary, she found herself at loggerheads with her initial intention to learn grammar "so as to teach it and write a shining hand" (68).

As Mary Naill Mitchell argues, any particular artifact can tell "more than one story" (Raising Freedom's Child [2008] 9). Drawing on Jenny and Betsy's journals Schweiger aims to animate voices that have been "silent in the archive," while providing a cultural context for the educational opportunities, goals, and achievements of young women in the antebellum South (xvi). A different story might be told by highlighting rich tensions in Betsy's writing that are all but invisible in Schweiger's account.

Early in A Literate South Schweiger suggests that her study, with its "eclectic list of subjects," resembles nineteenth-century "miscellanies" (xviii). Schweiger's broad variety of topics thwarts her effort to provide a nuanced explanation of "what reading meant" to Jennie or Betsy (or "to people like Jincy [the slave in the Cooley family] whose education began and ended with a spelling book" and whose reading is referred to briefly, only three times in the sisters' diaries [45]). However, Schweiger provides a very useful account of pedagogic texts and norms, a dense picture of how a flood of printed material made its way into sparsely populated rural areas, and multiple archival trails to explore, trails that provide rich opportunities "for further work" (xviii).

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