Andrew M. Stauffer’s sometimes lyrical, sometimes polemical, frequently brilliant book has several aims. One is to reconstruct how nineteenth-century Americans read and treasured their books of poetry, volumes that served them as “sites of sociability and reverie, of love and melancholy” (3). Stauffer skirts the published, professionally created sources that would receive star billing in reception history in another style: the reviews poets received in nineteenth-century periodicals, for example, go unmentioned here. Stauffer probes instead the marginalia, annotations, and insertions which, throughout the nineteenth century, amateur readers deposited in the volumes that they also customized and personalized through such markings. Using these materials, he re-describes and also vindicates the sentimental poetry of the nineteenth century—in acknowledgment of how “poetry in particular inspired readers to become annotators” (16). Through some gorgeous readings of the verse of Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and others, he reintroduces nineteenth-century studies to a corpus that was not only “printed and read on an industrial scale” (43), but also taken personally by its readers, having been written in deliberate anticipation of just that response.

*Book Traces* is also a manifesto for a mode of book history that accords “[c]opy-level attention” (14) to particular, personalized copies of books—even, or especially, the cheap reprints that proliferated during that first era of mass print. Addressing library professionals as well as humanities scholars, Stauffer offers a brief on behalf of these reprint editions: especially the volumes comprising the legacy collections received from donors, which now lie mostly unopened and forgotten in American university libraries’ open stacks or their off-site storage facilities. In the nineteenth-century middle-class homes for which they were first purchased, these books were cherished. In twenty-first-century libraries, they are so many white elephants. Yet scholars today, Stauffer argues, need urgently to acknowledge the evidential value of these “nonrare (or medium-rare)” books (138). Looking beyond the rare-book rooms that have hosted so much bibliographical study, we need to examine our libraries’ circulating collections. We should not assume that, as mass-produced reprints, the nineteenth-century books found there are just dead weight on the shelves. In fact, Stauffer and his associates’ ongoing survey of stack collections suggests that more than 10 % of the books published before 1923 have been personalized by markings that are traceable to an original owner or reader (162n58). “Looking at individual volumes,” Stauffer writes, “we find traces—we could call them hypodata --that challenge the certainties of metadata and of our assumptions about the sameness of books printed in the industrial era” (14).

Stauffer’s case studies demonstrate how much can be learned by subjecting those individual volumes to careful, page-by-page searching. We will see nineteenth-century books afresh, not just as the “literary objects that . . . helped make poetry a household word,” but also as “platforms for self-development” (9). We will learn how remarkably ready the nineteenth-century reader was to find a language for her own self in other people’s printed words.

In *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (2005), H. J. Jackson suggested that the practice of writing in books, though widespread in earlier centuries, declined after about 1830. But Stauffer and his fellow-explorers of the stacks have discovered lots of handwriting in the margins of mid- and late-nineteenth-century books. In late-nineteenth-century Kentucky, for instance, a group of readers argued about the character of the heroine in their shared copy of *Geraldine: A Souvenir of the Saint Laurence*, a narrative poem in anapastic couplets written by Alphonso Alva Hopkins and published in 1881. Stauffer and his associates have found many dates written beside specific lines of verse: records of a moment when some reader has paused in her progress through the book to recognize in the printed words that were common to all some acknowledgment of how “poetry in particular inspired readers to become annotators” (16). Through some gorgeous readings of the verse of Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and others, he reintroduces nineteenth-century studies to a corpus that was not only “printed and read on an industrial scale” (43), but also taken personally by its readers, having been written in deliberate anticipation of just that response.

*Book Traces* also explores --all the more effectively thanks to its sumptuous illustrations --the more cryptic, non-verbal ways in which nineteenth-century readers converted their reading matter into personalized keepsakes, as they created books preserving locks of hair, pressed flowers and leaves, and other relics and souvenirs.

By recovering such relics, verbal and non-verbal, Stauffer participates in and celebrates a “new sentimentalism” (20) in book history. Rather than segregate his own critical practice from the readerly behaviors he describes, he wears his heart on his sleeve. Stauffer’s account of how readers touched their books is touching--so much so that it might well have been packaged as an anthology of love stories. It documents a love of poems; it documents the human affections that were so
often memorialized in the margins of books of poems; and it documents a love of books—an investment in the medium itself, independent of its lexical contents, an investment that in our digital age has become all the more emotionally charged, as the tangible, physical objects that we call books threaten to vanish altogether.

Stauffer himself calls his method "intimate micro-reading" (15). With that label he distinguishes his enterprise from recent projects of "distant reading." Taking advantage of mass digitization, which has made the verbal contents of hundreds of thousands of volumes available to analysis, distant reading generates objective, hard data about large-scale patterns of language use and networks. But while distant reading projects use a wide-angle lens and aim for a comprehensive knowledge of textual structures and patterns of language use, Stauffer defines his own study as "stubbornly anecdotal" (14). Rather than ignoring the idiosyncrasies of individual readers' responses, it aims to recover them and thus resurrect the human dramas they inscribe. Stauffer likewise distinguishes his method of personally-inflected "micro-reading" from "close reading." Wearing his heart on his sleeve as he does, he is obviously unfazed by New Critical condemnations of the affective fallacy. Furthermore, the poems examined here are not well-worn urns but unfinished objects that need to be touched by readers' responses. The nineteenth-century book of poems was an interface designed to encourage interaction.

Stauffer thus shows how intimate micro-reading can reinvigorate English literary scholarship on nineteenth-century poetry and poetry publishing. But most thrilling here, I think, is how Stauffer's method also underwrites a rethinking of the book form more generally. While the codex serves and is valued as an "advanced technology of memory" (139), altered, marked-up volumes in particular show off its "heterochronic" capacity (83): not just to preserve its author's words, but also to record the history of its own uses across multiple times and successive scenes of reading. "Books," Stauffer observes, "accrue layers of meaning and significance over time via chains of attachment and investment made by their possessors" (114). Within nineteenth-century reading culture, an ethos of re-reading, and also re-annotation, was one response to that layered temporality. At the heart of that culture lay a practice of nostalgic re-visititation of the changing same. Stauffer prompts us to imagine two kinds of readers: readers returning to long-closed pages and calling forth once more the memories associated with a first reading, and readers re-viewing the annotations they deposited in a different, maybe happier era. Indeed, as Stauffer reminds us in an especially lovely passage, Thomas Hardy in his 1898 "Her Initials" set up his own readers to do the latter sort of imagining: while looking at a book, this poem's lyric speaker looks back decades to his earlier moment of "lovestruck annotation" (84).

Pursuing this line of argument about the codex and its affordances, Book Traces demonstrates how much it matters that books matter—and thus shows why the nineteenth-century print record, in all its cumbersome, costly, increasingly battered and unsightly materiality, deserves preservation. Throughout his study, Stauffer reminds us that time is running out for the kind of research he has been doing. It's not just that, as time passes, those leafy and flowery inserts that augmented nineteenth-century books will crumble into dust and vanish altogether; and it's not just that this botanical matter might very likely go astray when the pages of long-forgotten books are at last turned. (As he reports, the dried maple leaf he once found augmenting a copy of John Greenleaf Whittier's collected verse--poetry that itself connects trees, books, and human loss--had disappeared by the time he returned to the library to take a second look). The larger problem involves the twenty-first century's changing attitudes toward the printed book and the way they have been absorbed by institutions of higher learning. As academic libraries reinvent themselves for the digital age as "information hubs and learning spaces" (138), the print collections in which scholars might locate (or might have located) "book traces" are being further and further downsized.

Advocates for such downsizing often mention that digital surrogates of the titles being culled are now available through GoogleBooks or Hathi Trust Digital Library. But are books with the same tables of contents actually the same books? On the contrary, Stauffer's research demonstrates that "content--what books contain--goes far beyond words in a particular order and beyond page images of a single representative copy" (151).

Stauffer confesses that his plea for the preservation of bibliodiversity will likely sound impractical and anti-modern--nostalgic and sentimental--to the library professionals among his readers. But he also suggests that literary scholars would be wise to recognize the value of nostalgia and sentimentality: to see that those "abidingly Romantic attitudes" (15) do not necessarily detract from, but sometimes can advance, humanistic interpretation.

Not so long ago, some of the most high-profile contributors to book history were urging their colleagues to embrace the quantitative methods that would bring the discipline closer to the social sciences. In the pages of William St. Clair's The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period (2004) and James Raven's The Business of Books (2007), publishers' business models are thus reconstructed, print runs are computed, and graphs abound. These works were immensely stimulating on their first publication: by insisting that books were things and commodities, St. Clair and Raven provocatively undermined their standing as ideal literary objects. St. Clair in particular took pleasure in statistically showing that sales of Romantic poetry were pitifully low, and he repeatedly used quantification to dismantle the stories that Romanticists had most enjoyed telling about their period. (This was book history as party-pooping.) But once one reads Stauffer, the pitfalls of a quantitative approach become more apparent. It is hard not to notice that those in charge of culling libraries' print collections also treat books as uniform, quantifiable, interchangeable commodities.

St. Clair and others told us a decade ago that book historians needed to learn how to count. Committed to discovering how particular poems became meaningful to particular readers, Stauffer now argues that book historians need to learn how to feel.

Deidre Lynch is Ernest Bernbaum Professor of Literature at Harvard University.