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*How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* by Leah Price (review)

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Library of Western Australia and responses culled from the Australian Common Reader Database show that readers chose not to borrow books by Shakespeare, Thackeray, Hardy, Kipling, Stevenson, and Wells, and rarely borrowed Scott or Dickens. Instead, working-class Australians preferred contemporary best sellers by Joseph Hocking, Nat Gould, and Edward Phillips Oppenheim. The idea that reading choices shaped individual as well as communal and even national identities is one that permeates *A Return to the Common Reader*. This collection effectively illustrates that broad generalizations cannot be made about who the “common reader” was or how, what, and why she or he read. Palmer and Buckland have assembled engaging essays that explore an interesting array of potential common readers while reminding us that there is still a great deal of research to be done in this field of study and that Altick is still a guiding force.

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Leah Price. *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 360 pages. \$29.95 (cloth).

Animal, burden, cloth, dirt, furniture, gift, junk, keepsake, lens, medicine, napkin, prostitute, refuge, slave, toilet paper, virus, weapon. Literally and figuratively, books could be and are many things, as Leah Price demonstrates in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*. A rich account of the many (often competing) ways in which novels and other print artifacts were read, handled, and circulated, her study provides both a compelling reading of nineteenth-century print culture and a provocative methodological proposal. At the heart of both is the notion of “nonreading” (8), a term for the wide variety of practices in which books in the broad sense are used but not read (or *not only* read or *no longer* read). As Price expertly shows, print artifacts were also used for purposes such as furnishing the home, sheltering the reader from unwelcome gazes, disciplining unruly children, wrapping food, wiping excrement, and brokering long-term relationships between tract distributors and the not yet converted. Examining such practices in detail implies that we no longer see the book as a mute carrier of ideas, Price notes with a nod to Nathalie Davis, but as a material “carrier of relationships” (260). To accommodate that broader vision of literary culture, in her view, literary history in the traditional sense should be replaced with the study of “literary logistics” (31), a perspective that

affords equal if not more attention to the oft-decried *handling* of books than to the supposedly more proper *reading* of texts. Turning to the “social life of books” (34) allows us to connect literary studies more closely to cultural history, Price asserts, and sheds new light on well-known as well as unfamiliar publications from the Victorian era, including (junk) mail, newspapers, religious tracts, it-narratives and novels as generically diverse as Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, Anthony Trollope’s *The Small House at Allington*, and Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*. In (re)interpreting these publications, Price also offers valuable insights into the (non)reading practices of various categories of readers, including women, children, servants, illiterate figures (literally *nonreaders*) and colonial subjects (in brief excursions to India and China). Further underlining the importance of literary logistics to the Victorian age, she maintains that nineteenth-century scholars especially should “take paper seriously” (238), as the period witnessed the rise of cheap paper—via the 1861 repeal of the paper tax and the replacement of expensive linen with inexpensive wood pulp for paper production—and the concomitant, momentous shift “from recycled found [paper] objects to single-use manufactured books” (250). It is not surprising that current readers and critics have unlearned to read the handling of books and their secondhand “after-uses” (221), Price suggests, for we are systematic consumers of single-use and single-owner commodities and have learned to see books accordingly. Now, more than ever, the happiest reader is “the one who can imagine himself to be their first, their only, their implied” reader (259).

Although her book offers an indispensable contribution to the study of how books were used and (not) dispensed with in the nineteenth century, this historical argument should not blind us to its broader implications. Even if the Victorian period is a rich vein for the study of nonreading and literary logistics, similar practices are inevitably present in other periods as well, notably our own. We may no longer want to disinfect the books we borrow from libraries, foist instructive pamphlets on our servants, or wrap newspapers around our fish or cheese, but we are still confronted with junk mail, we still use books for display purposes, and we still, as Price ruefully notes, find it hard to say good-bye to our “old books” (229). These continuities explain her many (often witty, occasionally contrived) allusions to contemporary phenomena such as smart phones, multitasking, and coffee-table books (a twenty-first-century perspective which will be extended, one hopes, in Price’s future work). Additionally, the study of nonreading has a broader relevance because it is often thematized in literature itself. In fact, as Price candidly admits, her “subject is Victorian representations and perceptions of . . . the circulation of books, not the circulation of books itself” (36). This qualification may sound disappointing or even methodologically suspect, but it actually ensures that her work offers not just an “external” history of book (non)uses but also a refreshing close reading of meta-bibliographic passages in (non)literary works.

As these passages indicate, the outer part of a book frequently infiltrates the inner; not just in the frame narrative but also in the plot itself, novels reflect on their own “bookishness” via “allusions to the material forms that [the book] takes and the social transactions that it occasions” (110). Apart from highlighting passages where texts reflect on their material form, Price also devotes attention to the language books use to describe their own circulation, analyzing the use of tropes and “life cycle metaphors” (231) such as the found manuscript, the parable of the sower, and the message in a bottle. Situations in which characters are performing acts of nonreading are also examined. In *Madame Bovary*, the physical description of a reader segues into a paraphrase of “the content of the books being read” (49), but in many other works we get “a description of the real surroundings from which the text grants oblivion” (85). It may hence be true of the work of many writers, not just Dickens and Trollope, that “the moment of reading is as formally unrepresentable as thematically central” (74). With surprising frequency, as Price points out, scenes of reading turn out to be scenes of *nonreading*, with characters faking reading, having their absorbing reading interrupted, or simply dreaming over their books. Like the realities they portray, these literary representations of books, literary logistics, and nonreading are undoubtedly important in other periods as well and merit detailed analyses of their own.

A final reason why *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* deserves to be read by all literary scholars is that it expresses a number of important theoretical claims. Even if it is true, as Mark McGurl has noted, that literary studies has witnessed a shift “from the hegemony of theory to the hegemony of history,” Price’s book indicates that theoretical questions are reemerging in our new literary histories. For one thing, her study of nonreading challenges many assumptions about books and reading, four of which seem particularly important. First, in contrast to the long-standing preference for texts over material books, Price convincingly claims that we should pay closer attention to the material attributes of literary works, including their “color, texture, and smell” (1). In that sense, scholars of books and reception alike should counteract “the dematerialization of the text and the disembodiment of the reader” (220). Second, while books may be a specific type of object and commodity, we should study rather than ignore the relationships between literary and nonliterary objects, even paying attention to such unexpected relatives as coins, clothes, and “pharmaceutical patents” (223). Like many contemporary critics, Price hence feels that studying objects may actually be more important than studying subjects. Third, we should not subscribe unthinkingly to “the fantasy of the self-made reader and the self-distributing text” (124). Servants, for instance, were allowed to handle the books of their masters but not to read them. They had to make do with hand-me-downs and educational “gifts,” showing that acquiring printed matter was (or is) not always a matter of personal choice and individual liberation.

We should hence nuance “the heroic myth . . . that makes textuality the source of interiority . . . and selfhood” (16). Fourth, the worries of Victorian readers over who handled their books imply that shared reading does not necessarily create inclusive communities. Frequently, as Price observes, “fantasized intimacy with authors upstages any sense of commonality with other readers” (259). Her programmatic defense of nonreading is also important because it criticizes both book history, which “might do better to analyze the category of the ‘literary’ than to flee it” (37), and reception history, which often forgets that “reading is not the only thing that can be done to books” (34). Her alternative program, interestingly, is couched in language that explicitly targets earlier forms of reception study. As she puts it, she is not (primarily) interested in reception history, reader response, implied readers, and “interpretive communities” (151–52), but rather in “rejection history” (7), “reader-unresponse” (66), “implied handler[s]” (238), and what we might call “handling communities” (or noncommunities). There is a playful dimension to these phrases and swipes at earlier critics, to be sure, but also a serious one. In an age of disposable commodities, Price’s book therefore deserves rereading. Or, better still, read it, dream over it, and then pass it along to a friend.

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Gillian Silverman. *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 226 pages. \$55.00 (cloth).

In the half century or so since it became an object of scholarly interest, the Jacksonian print revolution has been treated as something of a mixed blessing. Considering that the rise of revisionist historicism roughly coincides with the development of academic investment in the topic, it should not be surprising that celebrations of the democratizing influence of inexpensive printing were quickly interrupted by those who argued, convincingly, that the populist press made possible the culture of paranoia, propaganda, and partisanship, which eventually led to secession and the Civil War. University of Colorado-Denver professor Gillian Silverman is cognizant of this latter tradition. In fact, her analysis of manuals for reading instruction reveals that antebellum psychologists, physicians, and clergymen anticipated with anxiety the ambivalent effects of the print explosion. However, the plurality of Silverman’s