How We Read

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Afterword
The Parlor Scene

At the end of a classic mystery, the famed detective gathers all the key players into a room and reveals the solution. Order is restored; the puzzle box is closed; what was invisible is revealed. Each turn of the story settles, to the reader’s satisfaction, into its proper habitation and name. That elegant taxonomy pervades this book.

When I first gathered all these essays to read them together, sitting on a muddy lawn in front of the Hall of Languages at Syracuse University, I noticed that many of us shared a library. Lochin’s spreadsheet of the works of Agatha Christie rubbed elbows with Kirsty’s loaned copy of *The Nine Tailors*. The copies of *Encyclopedia Brown* that Chris read twice, because he liked knowing the answer, jostled Anna’s well-labeled fanfiction, her collections of murder mysteries, and her beloved genre fiction. Although they are not, strictly speaking, mysteries, Jessica’s Choose Your Own Adventure books keep company here: just as Lochin deconstructed, labelled, and epitomized the laws of the mystery genre, so Jessica kept her fingers in the pages of each paperback to retrace the consequences of each choice.

This does not seem to me to be a coincidence. Rather, it is a telling clue about how we read, and why: these are readers of mysteries in more ways than one. Chris pored
over “catalogues of manuscripts, which, in the right hands, could be read like an Agatha Christie.” The archivist must be a detective, and must enjoy a good mystery. Yet, too, the historian has the advantage of the detective; “the reader of history,” Lochin reminds us, “is a reader who knows how the story ends.” The puzzle box is already closed. As Anna notes, in medieval literature, “Everything that can happen to them has already happened.” We can open it; we can rearrange it; we can furnish a reader with our own parlor scene from a place outside the mystery.

Genre is powerful. I laughed at Anna’s assertion that she doesn’t read anything without dragons or spaceships, but I cried when I understood what Brantley’s dragon was trying to say: when we stop recognizing the dragon, we have to get to know it again. Being familiar with the dragon, with the tropes, with the genre, is what gives us stability as readers. Our friend the dragon is as reliable and comforting as the detective’s puzzle box.

And, too, familiarity gives us access. I was struck by the intimacies of these essays — how these readers see themselves in these stories, as Irina saw herself in Aldhelm’s athletes and Lochin saw herself in a saint’s life. At times, the only way to access a text might be to localize it in the body. Just as Irina walked out the rhythm of a poem along the water’s edge, accessing the text through her stride, and Suzanne read her texts aloud, Lexi disappeared into the text, using her voice to give others access. The tension between presence and absence is felt in the body and the text simultaneously; the body and the text together negotiate a space.

Jenn’s struggle to be present in that space highlights the power and the danger of disappearing into a text, and equally, the power of grounding oneself in the world. Her
work of acceptance, explicit and organized, seems close kin to Kirsty’s meditation on space: the kitchen chair; the bedside table; the itch of reading, even at breakfast. Each visit to the text becomes a distinct departure, and there is always a return to the body afterward.

And the physical sound itself of reading is powerful, both a potential form of access and, as Jonathan notes, a potential form of intimacy, of encounter. The act of reading creates intimacies not only between bodies, but across time: Jonathan’s scholarly approach to Margery Kempe and her modalities of reading is inextricable from the physical experiences they share. Stephanie’s joy at finding kinship with Reformation annotators and readers, who themselves read aloud and scribbled notes as they went, shapes both her research and her pedagogy. Our connection to the past through our own modes of reading is not trivial; as I said in my own essay, I often find myself returning there.

I wrote this afterword, as I did much of my dissertation, on a Skype call with Jessica Hammer. I think often of what she has taught me about returning — to text, to life, to problems unsolved. We thirteen essayists are readers who return. As academics, most of us historians, we’ve already read the end of the book of time, and we spend a lot of time reading it again, solving the mystery, knowing what will happen.

If you read this essay first instead of last, I hope you had a good laugh about knowing what happens in this book. And if you read it last instead of first, I hope it proved a satisfying ending to the mystery. I also hope that in your life you will not, like me, need quite so long to finish reading your particular dragon. But if you do, rest safe in the knowledge that we understand how you read.
What do we do when we read?

Reading can be an act of consumption or an act of creation. Our “work reading” overlaps with our “pleasure reading,” and yet these two modes of reading engage with different parts of the self. It is sometimes passive, sometimes active, and can even be an embodied act.

The contributors to *How We Read* share their histories of reading in order to reveal the shared pleasure that lies in this most solitary of acts—which is also, paradoxically, the act of most complete plenitude. Many of the contributors engage in academic writing, and several publish in other genres, including poetry and fiction. Some publish primarily in print, and some are active online. All are engaged with reading’s capacity to stimulate and excite as well as to frustrate and confuse.

Together, we open our libraries to you. This is how we read.