

Read These Words

How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain. Leah Price. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. 350 pp.

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<1>Are you reading these words on a screen? Do the letters appear large and backlit, or are they squeezed onto the cramped window of a handheld device? Did you decide to print the page? If you are blind or partially sighted, perhaps you are using software that translates visual signs into oral ones. Or possibly you are reading this review at another historical moment than my own, when texts circulate in forms I cannot myself imagine.

<2>I invite you to spend a moment concentrating on details of the material form this review happens to take for you. You might notice, as you do so, how hard it is to focus on interpreting the sense of these words at the same time that you are noticing the ways that they take shape. That is, if you are observing the sharpness of the screen's letters, the margins, the volume's binding, or the weight of the paper, can you also be *reading*? Leah Price puts this question to us as a crucial one for the ongoing relationship between book history and literary studies. The more you are attentive to the book as an object, the less you are being carried away by its text. And Price offers the fascinating argument that most canonical realist novelists deliberately reinforced this opposition, sneering at the materiality of the book, condemning readers who care about the shallow surface of the object in favor of those who immerse themselves in textual worlds. The Victorian novel, that is, taught us to scorn book history.

<3>Price makes a brilliant case for rethinking close reading and material culture less as a question of methods to be decided by academics than as socio-cultural facts that have long unfolded in a tense, strange, and productive historical relationship to one another. Since it is texts themselves that have done the most work to persuade us to ignore books, close reading has itself helped to produce the longstanding prejudice against material culture. Thus rather than understanding book history as a humble latecomer to literary studies, trailing the essential act of reading — the book all body, the text all mind — Price invites us to face the fact that reading in the nineteenth century made a privileged place for itself precisely at the expense of the book.

<4>And the text and the book, we learn, lead very different lives. We have known for a long time that texts cannot exist or endure outside of material forms — scrolls, oral performances, paperbacks — but we learn from Price that the book has an extraordinarily eventful life quite

independent of the text it contains. It is the hectic lives of books that fill the pages of this densely researched, critically engaging, and wonderfully witty study.

<5> It turns out that there are many things you can do with a book that don't count as reading. You may be deciding whether the paper would make an effective wrapper for fresh fish, or worrying that a particular volume has passed through hands that carry some deadly disease. You may be planning to use this morally uplifting tract to introduce yourself into the house of a working-class family, or you may be considering whether to pass this newspaper on to your maid (you are done with it, but you are concerned that it will distract her from her work). You may be intending to place the book in the parlor where the vicar will be sure to see it, or you may bury your head in its pages so that you can avoid conversing with your husband. You may be planning to swear vengeance on it or to throw it at your tyrannical cousin. Price invites us to confront the book's contradictory social purposes: it can be used to block social interaction or to build social bridges. Books can be burdens imposed on you by sanctimonious others or stacks of paper ready for reuse in padding packages, wadding shoes, or even wiping bottoms. Reading, then, is only one of three major activities we perform with books: the other two, "handling" and "circulating," deserve their own careful attentiveness (7).

<6> *How to Do Things with Books* is not only jam-packed with intriguing stories about the social life of the Victorian book; it also yields lots of precious critical insights along the way, including some startling new interpretations of the *Bildungsroman*, a genre long associated with the pleasures of absorbed reading. Price invites us to notice how its most famous protagonists — Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver and David Copperfield — teach us to condemn non-readers but do surprisingly little reading themselves. Even in the scene most evocative of immersive private reading — Jane Eyre enclosed in the window seat — the protagonist is actually looking at the pictures rather than the "letter-press," and critics have never noticed that Jane insistently interrupts Helen Burns in her efforts to absorb *Rasselas*, going so far as to take the book from her hands. Later Jane will condemn St. John for an act that eerily echoes her own, as he takes a book to his "window recess" and practices the "unsocial custom to read" (qtd in Price, 81). Other people's reading gets in the way of *Bildung*, as Price notes acerbically: "when I read, it's interiority; when you read, it's hostility" (83). She observes, too, that the young protagonists of the *Bildungsroman* never buy books or even choose them; they always inherit or discover them, and so never lose their innocence by entering into grubby commercial transactions over the book as commodity. While the *Bildungsroman* teaches us to ignore the book as object, the it-narrative does the opposite: often taking the book as its protagonist, the it-narrative follows the material object's movements through the social world, as it is borrowed, ignored, sold, and even pulped. More interested in the handling and circulating of books than in the act of reading, the it-narrative emerges as a surprising precedent for the practice of book history.

<7> For readers especially interested in nineteenth-century gender, Price opens out some new lines of inquiry. She points out that in Victorian culture the text was often understood as masculine — matter for thought — while the book was frequently imagined "as raw material for women's curlpapers or pie plate liners" (10). But women were also associated with the other extreme — excessive, too passionate reading. Price links these contradictory characterizations of women readers to the feminization of literacy in an era of cheap print. In Victorian Britain for the

first time, women bought and borrowed books more often than their male counterparts, lowering literacy's social status. In cultural contexts where reading is a hard-won and prestigious skill, she argues, it is associated with men, while literacy is linked to femininity in societies "where ubiquity breeds contempt" (57).

<8>*How to Do Things with Books* sparkles with ideas; every chapter, rich with intriguing examples and counter-intuitive arguments, could have become its own book. I am much the wiser for reading it, and my relation to books will never be the same again. But let me close with a lingering methodological question which this brilliant study raises for me. As a formalist reader myself, I cannot help noticing that Price insistently returns to a single form to describe the social life of books: chiasmus. From beginning to end, it is chiasmic structures that organize almost every idea: "If oblivion to one's family can serve as a gauge for interest in a text, concentration on a book can just as well provide a yardstick for hatred of one's family" (59); "As books become anthropomorphized, servants become dehumanized" (177); "the better preserved a book, the less evidence we tend to have about the ways in which it's been used" (225). These are just a few of many examples. And if so much of Price's rich archival material is organized chiasmically — book and text, *Bildungsroman* and its narrative, men and women, bridge and wedge, absorption and repulsion — I am left wondering whether there is something about this form that is vital to book history in general, or to the Victorian life of books, or to Price's own inventive argument. Whatever the answer, it seems noteworthy that even the most dedicated scholar of material culture cannot do without form, and it is just possible, too, that formalist analysis continues to have something valuable to contribute to the history of the book.