

INTRODUCTION

Bonnie Gunzenhauser

Cultural history is littered with accounts of transformative reading experiences. From Abraham Lincoln's supposed assertion that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* effectively started the Civil War to the recent bestseller *The Book That Changed My Life*, claims for reading's power abound. This volume is born out of a desire to understand those claims more fully. To say that reading is transformative, that reading can change the direction of a culture or a life, is to assert that reading has power – but how can we gauge that power, or measure reading's impact? The question is difficult enough to answer for ourselves, about the books we have read most recently, and it becomes thornier still when we ask it about readers in other places and, particularly, in earlier times.

In the relatively new field of book history – 'book history' being a com-mo-dious phrase that includes work on print culture, media studies, and (as in this case) the history of reading – scholars have most often tried to answer questions about reading's effects by using one of two distinct (and divergent) methodolo-gies. One approach has been chiefly empirical, emphasizing specific historical moments and gathering detailed statistics about such issues as literacy rates and standards, library subscriptions, publication and sales figures, and print runs to answer questions about what was being read and by whom in a particular place and time. The other approach tends towards the theoretical, exploring how meaning is created and conditioned by a theoretical – and often largely ahistorical – 'reader'. Both methodologies have much to offer. The theoretical approach generates insights into the locus of meaning-making, the nature of textual authority and the intellectual, social and political potentialities of read-ing, while the empirical approach reconstructs specific scenes of reading with a wealth of details and historically specific data. But as the history of reading gains purchase as an established field of study, new (and newly theorized) methodolo-gies are needed. Certainly some fine work in this vein has begun to appear – the 2006 special issue of *PMLA* dedicated to 'The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature' is one recent example – but this work has tended to focus more on particular moments and texts in literary history than on questions of methodol-

ogy *per se*. This volume, by synthesizing empirical and theoretical approaches to the study of reading, and by foregrounding issues of methodology, seeks to enlarge the range of strategies and methods available for studying and writing about the history of reading.

One of the first issues reading historians confront is the question of evidence: what *is* this object of study we call 'reading'? The split between empiricists and theoreticians here shows itself once again, with empirically-minded scholars describing 'reading' in terms of statistics, and theoretically-minded ones framing 'reading' as interpretive activity. One major ongoing project for reading historians, the Reading Experience Database (RED; see Chapter 2 for additional details on the project), has begun to synthesize these approaches by answering the 'what *is* reading?' question in both quantitative and qualitative terms. RED seeks both to 'accumulate as much data as possible' about what, where and how British subjects read, and simultaneously to attend to the individual 'reading experience', defined simply (as Shafquat Towheed notes later in this volume) as 'a recorded engagement with a written or printed text, beyond the mere fact of possession' (below, p. 30).¹ RED's synthetic approach generates a body of material that represents 'reading' as both objective dataset (RED contains hundreds of recorded engagements with texts) and subjective experience (these recorded engagements are often highly personal, emotional and associative), as both collective record and individual experience. Reading, in other words, emerges a complex phenomenon – though we may not always recognize it as such since, as Leah Price notes, reading is often (especially for literary scholars) 'an activity that's too close for critical distance'.² And indeed, even the admirable synthesis we find in a project like RED raises as many questions as it answers. 'The evidence of experience', after all, as Joan Scott reminds us, 'reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems' and thus must function as 'not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain'.³ The contributors to this volume share Scott's agenda: they offer a range of methodologies to theorize, investigate and explain reading experiences. While their precise subjects vary in time and place, the work of each contributor is nonetheless informed by these central questions: how might we make sense of reading experiences in ways that enhance our understanding of what readers do as a result of their reading, and how might we speak more confidently about the roles that reading plays in a given historical-cultural moment?

The essays in Section I of this book tackle the question of evidence head-on. These three pieces explore a set of what I call 'artefactual methodologies' – approaches to reading history that focus on new kinds of artefacts and new strategies for interpreting the artefacts that reading leaves behind. Paying attention to the artefacts of reading is not in itself a new project: Richard Altick did so in his foundational 1957 book *The English Common Reader: A Social History of*

the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900, and much of the finest recent work in the field – Jonathan Rose’s monumental *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* is a signal example – is built on readers’ accounts of their own experience with texts. However, because these accounts are generally first-person autobiographical artefacts that are, in Robert Darnton’s words, ‘texts themselves, which also require interpretation’, reading historians need continually to identify new kinds of artefacts and develop new methodologies to enrich their interpretive work.⁴ It is by now a commonplace to observe that logical explanations of one’s reading and one’s reaction to it – the sort found in the working-class autobiographies central to Rose’s book – are just one kind of artefact, and that these only partially represent the full experience of readers and reading.⁵ Many reading experiences are grounded less in ideation and more in feeling – something most of us likely know first-hand, and that E. P. Thompson wisely notes when he observes that ‘people do not only experience their own experience as ideas, within thought and its procedures; they also experience their own experience as *feeling*’.⁶ So what do the artefacts of *felt* reading look like? Price notes that they may look like nothing: ‘the most impassioned reading’, she suggests, ‘destroys its own traces. The greater a reader’s engagement with the text, the less likely he or she is to pause long enough to leave a record.’⁷ But more likely, the felt dimensions of reading will manifest themselves verbally (even in the kinds of autobiographical accounts mentioned above), or behaviorally, or even, as reading historians have begun to suggest, subconsciously; by combining literary theory with cognitive science, these scholars focus on how a ‘given cultural representation’ – such as a reading experience – ‘engages our evolved cognitive capacities – the ways it builds on them and experiments with them.’⁸

Whether the reading experience in question is expressed in terms rational, emotional or deeply subconscious, the reading historian needs some kind of tangible record to use as a starting point – and most often this record takes the form of a reading anecdote. Acknowledging the rightful scepticism about the transparency of such anecdotes in ‘On the Use of Anecdotal Evidence in Reception Study and the History of Reading’, Daniel Allington suggests that reading historians approach them with a historiographical sensibility. ‘[H]istorians should ... read anecdotes’, he argues, not as factual statements but ‘as attempts to establish the meaning of past events for an anticipated present or future audience’ (below, p. 17). Allington thus challenges received wisdom about reading anecdotes: traditionally, scholarly caution about their truth-value stems from such concerns as the inevitable faultiness of memory or the exceptionalism of any reader who would record reading experiences. Allington, however, by close-reading a number of reading anecdotes, offers an additional reason for scepticism: readers often construct anecdotes to enhance (or even create) a particular representation of or identity for themselves. What appear to be natural or spontaneous

common themes in reading anecdotes – for example, what Allington calls the ‘transformation by great books’ theme in Rose’s study – may in fact be what he terms ‘generic conventions’ (below, p. 28). Reading historians, Allington argues, should focus less on the veracity of reading anecdotes and more on their structuring tropes and themes; doing so, he suggests, will enhance their evidentiary function by moving scholarly debates past questions of reliability and legitimacy – a development that will help scholars generate richer histories of reading.

In ‘Examining the Evidence of Reading’, Rosalind Crone, Katie Halsey and Shafquat Towheed (all members of the RED team) explore approaches to three distinct kinds of artefacts available in the database: diaries, marginalia and court records. In her section on diaries, Katie Halsey suggests that, while these artefacts ‘do not offer transparent access into the minds of their writers’, they nonetheless offer a glimpse into the felt dimension of reading (below, p. 32). Halsey compares the diaries of early twentieth-century merchant Gerald Moore with hundreds of others in RED to identify one major generic convention of the reading diary: namely, its tendency to demonstrate ‘vividly that the power of reading to move readers, to affect them emotionally as well as intellectually, is one of the few consistent factors in readers’ interactions with textual matter’ (below, p. 35). Rosalind Crone focuses on a more unusual sort of artefact by examining nineteenth-century criminal court records in which witnesses were compelled to provide testimony about their reading habits. Here too, Crone identifies a set of generic conventions that structure these artefacts: the court records ‘highlight patterns’ of reading, she notes, ‘drawing attention to large groups or networks of readers who clustered around specific texts or read in distinct locations’ (below, p. 44). Generic conventions are more difficult to identify in marginalia, Shafquat Towheed points out, because marginalia is such a multivalent artefact. Sometimes used as a site to work out a translation, sometimes to register a reader’s immediate reaction, sometimes to reflect deeply on a point in the text, marginalia (even within the same book) plays many roles – and this variety, Towheed argues, is part of its evidentiary strength. Within the covers of a single book, marginalia might tell us about both its reader’s personal predilections as well as about her particular interpretive community (many books have been passed around and annotated by more than one hand); considered in the aggregate (as RED affords the means to do), marginalia ‘allows us tentatively to map wider trends in reader response across time, location, gender and, perhaps most importantly, different source material’ (below, p. 39). And in all cases, marginalia reminds us that books themselves are artefacts; as Towheed puts it, ‘The history of the book is also the history of the *use* of the book’ (below, p. 36).

The notion of ‘use’ provides a starting point for Michael Adams’s methodological project in ‘Historical Dictionaries and the History of Reading’. While the common tendency is to see dictionaries as chiefly utilitarian texts (a reader ‘looks

up' rather than 'reads'), Adams argues that the lexical entries in such texts as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) should in fact be seen as artefacts of reading. Particularly since James A. H. Murray took the helm of the *OED* in 1879 and redoubled efforts to build its volunteer reading force, thousands of readers have produced such artefacts. In these artefacts, Adams argues, we find evidence for a specialized mode of reading he terms 'hard perusal', or 'a lexical explication of the text, a method of reading practised by readers for historical dictionaries but not by others' (below, p. 51). And historical dictionaries offer still more resources to the historian of reading, Adams suggests. Because the *OED* presents an implicit historical argument in each entry, and is a living document subject to continual updating, the *OED* reader (and he describes numerous devoted *OED*-readers in his essay) is necessarily an activist, engaging in 'the construction of a historical narrative enabled by the dictionary article' each time she reads an entry (below, p. 58). As such, Adams argues in his piece, both reading *for* the dictionary and reading *in* the dictionary emerge as activities the reading historian would do well to consider.

The artefactual methodologies outlined by Allington, Halsey, Crone, Towheed and Adams enrich the catalogue of potential exploratory sites that Rose outlines in his 2004 essay 'Arriving at a History of Reading', and provide innovative tools for reading historians to apply to their work.⁹ But focusing on artefacts of reading experiences is just one approach to the history of reading, as G. Thomas Tanselle points out in his review of the recent *PMLA* special issue on 'The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature'. Tanselle argues that book historians may overemphasize the artefact and the acts of 'reception and reading' that generate it; as a consequence, book historians 'frequently fail to recognize the relevance of [the] prepublication history (authorial intent and production details)' of a given text.¹⁰ The essays in Section II effectively take up Tanselle's charge. In this section, titled 'Paratextual Methodologies', Nicole Matthews and Jennifer Snead discuss how paratexts – Gerard Genette's term for the elements of a text that '*present it*, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption' – illuminate production details (Matthews) and authorial intent (Snead).¹¹ The two essays also suggest new ways that paratexts might play a generative role in histories of reading. One common tendency of book-history work is to focus on how paratexts inscribe readers and reader reaction; in *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, for instance, Janine Barchas argues that attending to 'the rambunctious materiality of eighteenth-century texts' (the advertisements, frontispieces, prefaces and inscriptions framing literary texts of the time) offers opportunities to 'breathe new life into ... literary reading'.¹² While there is much to admire about Barchas's book, this practice of imagining how eighteenth-century paratexts affected read-

ers verges on what Rose terms 'the receptive fallacy', or the assumption that our twenty-first-century literary-critical reading tracks predictably with the realities of eighteenth-century reception.¹³ Matthews and Snead, on the other hand, sidestep the so-called receptive fallacy quite neatly in their essays by considering the paratext either as a catalyst for actual reader response (Matthews) or as the formalized written response of an actual reader (Snead).

In 'Reading and the Visual Dimensions of the Book: The Popular Cold War Fictions of Helen MacInnes,' Nicole Matthews notes that prepublication details figure minimally in histories of reading in part because of limited information; publishers' archives tend to reflect a long-standing conviction that 'publishing's commercial aspects [are] less worthwhile than its aesthetic ones' (below, p. 65). However, having uncovered an unusually high level of prepublication detail about how William Collins and Sons marketed the work of mid-twentieth-century spy novelist Helen MacInnes, Matthews manages to reconstruct both Collins's initial marketing campaigns and the paratextual reframing created for MacInnes's reprint editions several decades later. A more typical approach to paratextual analysis would stop there: author photos, book jackets and publicity campaigns do, after all, provide useful information about how readers are meant to read. Matthews, however, goes further. By examining early reviews and many MacInnes fan letters, she demonstrates how both professional and common readers actually responded to these paratextual cues, and the conclusion she draws in her work with the reprint editions – namely, that 'Tracking the mutating physical forms of popular books ... offers a way of tracing emergent strategies of reading' – is a particularly valuable contribution to the historiography of reading (below, p. 69).

In 'The Work of Abridgements: Readers, Editors and Expectations,' Jennifer Snead turns to a paratext not usually thought of as such: the abridgement. Snead focuses on John Wesley's abridgements of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Henry Brooke's novel *The Fool of Quality* to argue that abridgements should be seen not as lesser version of original texts, but rather as documents that mediate 'between author and public' in ways that make them an important resource for historians of reading (below, p. 79). While Genette does not include abridgements as an example of paratext in his path-breaking book, abridgements as Snead presents them nonetheless fit his definition neatly. A paratext, according to Genette, is 'a message for which the author or publisher cannot evade responsibility,' and that necessarily asserts a certain 'illocutionary force'.¹⁴ Wesley served as publisher of the abridgements Snead discusses and accepted full responsibility for them, 'put[ting] his name to both'; furthermore, Wesley's abridgements (both the two Snead discusses and the dozens of others in his *oeuvre*) exert the specific illocutionary force Genette describes as 'intention, or ... interpretation,' reinterpreting the original sources in order to render them illustrative of Methodist

ideology and theology (below, p. 79).¹⁵ By focusing on Wesley's abridgements, Snead enlarges our understanding of how reading historians might think about paratexts in their work – and, through detailed close readings that show these abridgements as explicit and sharply focused sites of a particular reader's reaction (in the person of John Wesley), she illuminates both Wesley's work and the potential evidentiary function of abridgements.

Artefactual and paratextual methodologies both point to potentially new objects of study for reading historians. But extra-textual contexts shape readers and reading practices too; as Jonathan Boyarin puts it, 'all reading [is] socially embedded'.¹⁶ The essayists in Section III, 'Institutional Methodologies', take this notion seriously, grounding their approaches to reading in history in three distinct social-historical contexts: Shakespeare clubs in late nineteenth-century Kansas, local public libraries in Depression-era Pennsylvania and mass reading programmes in early twenty-first-century Seattle. Their contextual work responds to Roger Chartier's call to 'identify the specific dispositions that distinguish communities of readers and traditions of reading', but it also does more; by attending to the particular institutional frameworks within which these communities of readers operated, the essayists demonstrate that reading historians may wish to look well beyond readers and texts to construct histories of reading.¹⁷

In 'Women Reading Shakespeare in the Outpost: Rural Reading Groups, Literary Culture and Civic Life in America', Katherine Scheil heeds Leah Price's observation that 'the history of the book is also a geography of the book',¹⁸ and focuses on very local archives of dozens of Kansas Shakespeare clubs to reconstruct exactly what the members of these clubs read and did under the aegis of these small rural institutions. Scheil is not the first to investigate the phenomenon of the book club. In *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*, for instance, Janice Radway combines archival and autobiographical work to explore how the Book-of-the-Month Club 'may ... have succeeded in producing a peculiarly modern subject, the subject-for-the-commodity'.¹⁹ However, Radway (like many of those who have worked on book clubs) takes a cultural studies approach that focuses largely on the ways that book clubs, as institutions, interpellate their members into a particular ideology; in her account (and in these cultural studies projects more generally) readers are largely reduced to consuming subjects. Scheil, by contrast, recovers minutes, notes, letters and diaries of Kansas Shakespeare club members to describe a very different kind of book club. Eager to retain (or create) the trappings of civility and intellectual achievement in their rugged prairie circumstances, the late nineteenth-century Shakespeare Club members Scheil profiles saw their groups as engines for individual and community betterment; in these institutions, Scheil argues, 'reading and literary analysis were inextricable from community philanthropy and social engagement' (below, p. 95). By showing that book clubs are

not merely bearers of ideology but also potential incubators for civic activism, Scheil suggests ways that reading historians might rethink the relation between book clubs and readers in the historiography of reading.

Perhaps no institution is as central to the modern history of reading as the library. As Thomas Augst explains, 'libraries are places where otherwise abstract theories and historical generalizations about changes in what or why people read become entangled in the particular, immediate facts of where and how they do so.'²⁰ Catherine Turner works to disentangle some of those particularities in her essay, 'Turning Libraries into Public Works: Funding Arguments on the Local Level in Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, Pennsylvania'. In the piece, Turner explores the use-value of reading writ large by showing that two small Pennsylvania cities succeeded in securing library funds even during the scarcity of the Great Depression by framing reading 'as a public work that would allow individuals to fulfil their roles as citizens and workers' (below, p. 103). Turner suggests that reading historians might find new avenues of research by focusing less on particular readers and more on the institutions charged with articulating the social value of reading: 'If we focus on the meaning assigned to reading by the state through its power to tax', she argues, 'we avoid the impasse of trying to make generalizations about real readers' actual interactions with texts' (below, p. 105). Reading historians have long heeded certain economic realities – the price of books, for instance, or the price of paper or subscriptions – but Turner points towards additional gains reading historians might make by attending to systemic social investment in reading.

If Turner is interested in how libraries construct (and fund) mythologies of reading, Anouk Lang, in 'Explicating Explications: Researching Contemporary Reading', is interested in just how possible it is to measure the truth of such mythology, particularly when studying contemporary readers. With 'Seattle Reads' (that city's mass-reading programme) as a case study, Lang investigates whether the community-building claims made by and for contemporary mass-reading projects are justifiable, or even verifiable. Lang acknowledges that she has some methodological advantages over researchers who study historical readers: she can directly observe and even talk with her subjects, she shares their 'practices of everyday life', and she has access to a wealth of technology to provide and process data about their reading habits (below, p. 131). However, the fundamental question of whether 'the reader is changed in ways that can be traced to the text' is perhaps even more difficult to answer when studying contemporary readers, she argues, because readers are often 'better able to articulate how a text has contributed to a significant shift in belief or attitude in retrospect' (below, p. 132). The conclusion Lang draws from this – that the opacity of the reading experience, even for contemporary readers, renders the reception researcher more 'storyteller' than objective reporter – correlates neatly with Daniel Alling-

ton's point in the volume's first essay: the generic conventions that structure reading anecdotes may turn out to structure our histories of reading as well.

Given this narrative strain in histories of reading, it is a nice coincidence that writers of fictional narratives are equally fascinated by real-life readers, both historical and contemporary. In his recent novella *The Uncommon Reader*, Alan Bennett imagines the consequences of England's Queen Elizabeth II becoming a voracious reader late in life; having allowed her new-found love of novels and biographies to eclipse her love of duty, Bennett's Queen Elizabeth defends herself, explaining that reading alone allows her 'to find out what people are like'.²¹ This is a common and compelling justification for reading, surely, both for the fictional Queen Elizabeth and for readers the world over. But when the 'people' we want to find out about are historical readers – what they were like, how their reading affected them, whether their reading led them to change the worlds in which they lived – the texts to read sometimes prove elusive. The essayists in this volume chart a course towards that past by identifying new kinds of texts – verbal, visual, cultural – that might illuminate the historical reader, and they offer compelling new strategies for interpreting those texts once we find them.

Copyright