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Lydia Maria Francis. *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. x + 453 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-1949-8; \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1954-2.

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## A Lydia Maria Child Reader Reviewed

Students and teachers have much to be thankful for with the advent of Carolyn Karcher's newly compiled and well-documented collection of the works of Lydia Maria Child. This volume is a well-chosen selection from Child's prodigious production of written works comprised of forty-seven books and tracts, sufficient uncollected fiction and journals to fill one or two volumes, and her two thousand known letters. The collection successfully presents Lydia Maria Child's wide array of literary styles and social themes to the late twentieth-century audience.

Known today mainly as the author of her *Thanksgiving Song*, "Over the river and through the wood/To grandfather's house we go," Child's versatility of style and subject matter is often unknown even to the well-educated contemporary reader. For the first time, this volume of collected works will right this wrong. Known by national audiences from the 1820s to the 1870s, Child shaped the historical novel and short story as they emerged as genres and oriented them toward envisioning alternatives to racial conflict and social problems. She exposed the contradictions of sexual double standard, heralded the birth of Transcendentalism, and in her widely successful series *Letters from New York* inaugurated a new genre, that of the journalistic sketch. In her fiction she explored territory avoided by such writers as Cooper, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson and Thoreau. While inventing children's literature in the United States, she used it as a vehicle for combating racial prejudice, and her popular advice books, *The Frugal Housewife* and *The Mother's Book* are still in print and admired for their engaging tone

and practical advice.

Child brought to her audience well researched volumes in the service of the reforms she advocated in her *History of the Condition of Women* and *The Progress of Religious Ideas through Successive Ages*. As an activist as well as a woman of letters, she played a key role in the main reform movements in her age: she ardently opposed the Cherokee Removals and the genocide of the Plains tribes, for example, as well as serving in the struggle against slavery, where she made her greatest contribution.

It was in her struggle against slavery that she left her greatest legacy. Her *Appeal in Favor of That Class of American Called Africans* still maintains its power over contemporary readers, and the *Freedman's Book* is made up entirely of selections by or about people of African descent. As Carolyn Karcher attests, "the value of Child's legacy can be measured, on the one hand, by the changes she and her fellow abolitionists succeeded in bringing about—the abolition of slavery, the extension of voting rights to African Americans, and the founding of black and integrated educational institutions—and, on the other hand, by the continuing relevance of the issues she tackled" (p. 4).

The editor's introductory biographical review of Child provides the reader with insight into her life and places her work within historical context. Born on February 11, 1802 in Medford, Massachusetts as a baker's daughter, Lydia Francis' education was strongly influenced by her brother Convers, a Unitarian clergyman and later a professor at the Harvard Divinity School. While

Convers' considerable intellect was nurtured at Harvard by the Francis family's slim fortune, Lydia was sent to the frontier community of Norridgewock, Maine to learn the domestic arts at the behest of her sister. It was there that her experience of watching native American women live within a different cultural milieu led her to perceive the cultural implications of her own society's role for women. In 1828, she married David L. Child, an editor and abolitionist, whose mismanagement of finances led him to depend on Child's resourceful pen. She first wrote short stories and, following her success with *Juvenile Miscellany* and *The Frugal Housewife*, her name became a household word, and she was revered by a loyal following of readers.

Her fame and adulation were short-lived, however. After meeting William Lloyd Garrison in 1831, she devoted her life to abolitionism and, following publication of *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, was excoriated and socially ostracized for her views. In 1852, the Childs settled permanently in Wayland, Massachusetts. Among her later books were *Flowers for Children*, *Fact and Fiction*, *The Freedman's Book*, *Letters from New York*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (edited), and *Looking Toward Sunset, From Sources Old and New, Original and Selected* (edited, with contributions from Child) in 1865. Lydia Maria Child died in Wayland on October 20, 1880.

While Child's modest background sheds little light on what led to her remarkable career, it does point to the factors that positioned her as both an insider and outsider in her culture, a position which "may account for both the authority she attained as a cultural spokesperson and the critical perspective she brought to bear on society's ills" (p. 4). Karcher's biographical essay concisely outlines these successive stages of Child's career and introduces the reader to the complex motivations of this intelligent and energetic woman.

Also included as the prefratory statement is a section entitled "Suggestions for Classroom Use and the Explanation for Editorial Policy" in which Karcher explains her guidelines and goals and for the reader. The volume collects the multiplicity of Child's interests and groups them into six thematic sections which seek to present all major facets of Lydia Maria Child's career: (1) "The Indian Question"; (2) "Children's Literature and Domestic Advice"; (3) "Slavery, Race, and Reconstruction"; (4) "Journalism and Social Critique"; (5) "The Woman Question"; and (6) "Religion." Within each section, the works are presented in chronological order to enable the reader to

follow the evolution of her views. In order to illustrate Child's stylistic versatility, the selections juxtapose her short stories, letters, newspaper and magazine articles, tracts, histories, advice literature, and children's literature.

The introductory essay for each section recapitulates various facets of Child's career and sets the readings in historical and literary context. The space occupied by the antislavery section suggests Child's principal engagement with America's race problem and the central focus of her career, while at the same time focuses the attention of the reader to the continuing importance of the issue. Because of length and space considerations, some of Child's longer works were omitted; however, the breadth of unedited and annotated works which represent this collection substitutes depth of understanding in its place. For this reason, the selections collectively are very effective representatives for the new reader and provide a sense of the evolution of Child's views over the six categories of thought over time.

The first selection of the volume, *A Church in the Wilderness*, sets the stage for Child's considerable talents. Although its genre as a short story is not representative of the bulk of her work, its engaging and intimate tone captures the imagination and brings the reader vividly back to Norridgewock, Maine during the early days of Maine's frontier, when as a very young woman Child used to wander into the woods to acquaint herself with the ways of Maine's native people. From this magical tale it is an easy venture into Child's sophisticated presentation of the thorny social issues which engaged her so productively and expressively for her lifetime.

As Carolyn Karcher states in her introduction, *The Lydia Maria Child Reader* is an anthology to be used in numerous and successful ways: "to provide students with a window on nineteenth-century American culture; to immerse students on the specifics of the era's principal controversies as defined by its key participants; to pair Child with writers who took different positions on the same issues; as a supplement to more traditional literature and history courses; and to furnish interdisciplinary courses with primary documents" (p. 20). To these ends, the editor has carefully mined a plethora of material and presents an excellent representative sample of Lydia Maria Child's contribution to literary and cultural history.

Yet *The Reader* is more than a volume of the collected works of a woman heretofore buried in the historical past; it is an engaging involvement with one

of America's foremost women writers who concerned herself with the most important problems of America's culture. Even when presenting these issues to today's reader, Child's intimate tone, down-to-earth common sense, and witty humor have not lost their spark in the over one hundred years since her death. At the same time, her well-reasoned and serious arguments regarding issues that still concern us today make her work worthwhile reading to the late twentieth-century audience. Carolyn Karcher's considerable research and documentary efforts, excellent representative selection of Child's work, and careful presentation of Lydia Maria Child's life serve American scholars and the public admirably.

Note: Those interested in learning more about Lydia Maria Child would do well to consult Carolyn Karcher's masterful biography *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994. See also *Hobomok and Other Writings on Indians*, Carolyn L. Karcher, ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers the State University, 1986.

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