

# H-Net Reviews

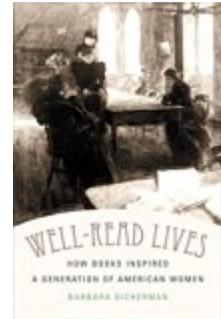
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara Sicherman. *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 380 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3308-7.

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## Literary Culture and the Construction of Female Identities

In *Well-Read Lives*, Barbara Sicherman attempts to understand how American women in the Gilded Age carved out a trajectory from “overprotected childhoods” to “lives of adventure” through the self-directed act of reading (p. 1). Her study offers several extensively researched case studies that follow the reading practices of individual women, who range from the privileged middle classes to underprivileged immigrants and minorities, and from adolescence to adulthood and old age. Sicherman traces the formation of public identities through diaries, letters, and autobiographical writings that allow these women to speak for themselves. Her work provides fascinating insights into both the transformation of American womanhood and the literary culture that simultaneously underpinned and recorded these changes.

Sicherman divides the nine chapters of her book into three sections. The first deals with patterns of reading among women in the Gilded Age. This section opens with a chapter devoted to the influence of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-69). For Sicherman, Alcott’s creation—especially the character of Jo March—allowed young female readers to imagine a different life for themselves than that of their mothers, becoming the ultimate “dream book” of the period for young girls. Sicherman argues for the possibility of a transgressive contemporary reading of the novel, highly at odds with most late twentieth-century criticism of the text (p. 16).

This chapter is followed by two further examinations

of literary culture among women in Gilded Age America. Of particular significance is the gendering of literary culture, which expressed itself not only in women’s dedication to reading, but also in the move toward diary keeping and letter writing. Reading groups took hold during this period and became a platform from which women, in self-formed communities of readers, could imagine and plan for a more adventurous (i.e., public) future. Sicherman also discusses fears that these literary outlets could become unhealthy; here, the adolescent reading habits of Alice Stone Blackwell are recounted from personal writings. Blackwell’s relationship to books was often expressed in a feverish, almost erotic, tone, prompting several parental attempts to control her reading practices.

The next segment of *Well-Read Lives* continues to explore the meanings of Gilded Age literary culture among young women by reconstructing the significance of reading in the lives of privileged, middle-class women who, to varying degrees, created public identities. First, Sicherman details the experience of the Hamilton cousins of Fort Wayne, Indiana, who valued, almost above all else, their standing as arbiters of literary culture in the community. Utilizing family correspondence, Sicherman is able to tease out the gendered meanings attached to reading in ways that both uphold and challenge several long-held critical assumptions. Tying these findings back to the development of public identities, Sicherman goes on to discuss ways in which the Hamilton women forged community ties and created public careers in fields like

medicine and classical history.

Sicherman follows with a similar examination of M. Carey Thomas, who became president of the Bryn Mawr School. Like the Hamilton women, Thomas's literary pursuits were decidedly communal. However, unlike the Hamilton cousins, Thomas's reading family was made up of like-minded friends. Known as "the Friday Night," this group of five young women met fortnightly to read, write, and debate. Sicherman demonstrates that, as the women matured, this reading group allowed for a profound questioning of the Gilded Age status quo, challenging such moral and cultural strongholds as orthodox Christianity. Interestingly, Sicherman relates that the majority of the group remained highly traditional in their attitude toward female sexuality. This exploration of the moral boundaries that these women were prepared (or not) to cross, thanks in large part to participation in the literary community of the Friday Night, provides fascinating insights into the potentialities held within middle-class literary culture.

The focus on privileged middle-class readers is concluded with an examination of Jane Addams. Unlike the Hamiltons or the women of the Friday Night, Addams developed a more private relationship with books thanks to the influence of her father, who encouraged reading major histories and political biographies. This experience of reading generated a complex distrust of culture within Addams, which Sicherman traces through her youthful travels to Europe where she was first exposed to the horrors of poverty. Her experiences engendered a conviction that one could become overly cultured—that reading could deaden one's ability to act in the face of immediate, real suffering.

In the final section of the book, which focuses on literary culture among the underprivileged, Sicherman tempers Addams's discomfort with literary culture by detailing her commitment to providing education and access to books and reading groups for the (predominantly) female visitors to Hull House, the famous settlement house Addams co-founded in Chicago. Sicherman details the evolution of literary activities at Hull House as the surrounding neighborhood shifted from poor Anglo-Irish families to non-English-speaking immigrants. While Addams remained preoccupied with her own relationship

to books, the services and socialization offered through reading at Hull House allowed many female immigrants to imagine a new life in the new world.

Building on this theme, the following chapter focuses on the plight of Russian Jewish immigrants to the United States. Besides the obvious language barrier, many of these women had to overcome religious and familial objections to the education of women. Rose Cohen is one of three immigrants highlighted in this section. While overcoming enormous odds to eventually write and publish her autobiography, Cohen encountered tensions within her family due to her participation in literary culture. Unlike the privileged readers of the previous section, immigrant women largely read to assimilate, with the aspirations opened through reading books like *Little Women* pointing toward a middle-class identity.

Sicherman concludes her examination of the underprivileged by detailing the literary life of Ida B. Wells, famous African American journalist and activist. This chapter, more than any other, details the possibility of radically divergent meanings within the literary culture of the Gilded Age. Unlike Cohen and other immigrants, Wells did not aspire to a white middle-class life; because of this, she found certain seminal texts, like *Little Women*, underwhelming. Instead, her literary activities envisioned a literature written by and for African Americans. In detailing the desires of Wells—so unlike those examined in previous chapters—Sicherman highlights both the power of reading and the developing links between this power and the self-creation of public identities among women readers of this period.

*Well-Read Lives* provides a highly accessible, engaging examination of the latent potential in the female literary culture of the Gilded Age. Perhaps most successful is Sicherman's deft tracing of the importance of this culture throughout entire individual lives. The uses made of literary culture offer fascinating insights into the transformation of women's lives into public identities. One potential shortcoming lies in the epilogue, which too briefly skims the trajectory of these transformations through to the present day, while bypassing any synthesis of her findings as they pertain to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Overall, however, this is a rewarding look into the power of reading to transform lives.

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