

Alicia Brazeau. *Circulating Literacy: Writing Instruction in American Periodicals, 1880-1910.*

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. 210 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8093-3544-2.

Reviewed by Richard Mikulski

Published on H-SHGAPE (June, 2017)

Commissioned by Jay W. Driskell

In this work, Alicia Brazeau examines the influence that popular periodicals had upon their readers during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, arguing that editors consciously constructed a readership identity that shaped the literary tastes and writing habits of their audiences. Defining literacy as the “ability to connect with a community and to perceive a purpose for their writing,” Brazeau argues that reading and producing materials for popular periodicals allowed readers to participate in a wide community of shared tastes, cultural values, and experiences (p. 22). These publications also offered a shared education that supplemented, or sometimes took the place of, formal instruction. Write-in columns and subscriber-authored pieces were an opportunity for readers, especially women, to express and share their experiences and ideas beyond the home. The editors themselves played a significant role in this process. Though each magazine had a different audience, editors constructed and promoted a literary identity for their own specific readership. They hoped this would shape the readers’ literacy tastes, consumption, and writing, with the ultimate goal that subscribers themselves would eventually contribute to the magazines. By encouraging and enabling their readers to contribute materials to popular periodicals, this form of literacy allowed readers “to reinforce

social relationships and to promote basic and advance literacy in others” (p. 8).

Central to Brazeau’s work is her concept of literacy, by which she does not just mean literary taste or general writing ability. Beyond cultural values or basic writing skills, the work focuses on “advanced literacy,” which allows readers “to participate in a community of readers and writers outlined by the magazines” (p. 8). She also makes a sharp distinction between “literate” and “literacy,” emphasizing the importance of communication over grammar or writing skill. This distinction is significant in understanding the meaning behind the subtitle “Writing instruction in American Periodicals.” Rather than teaching readers how to literally *write*, Brazeau suggests that these periodicals instructed subscribers on how to *communicate*, allowing them to take part in a larger literary community.

Brazeau examines several periodicals, which appealed to different groups of readers. The first periodical is *Harper’s Bazar* (later styled *Harper’s Bazaar*), which was popular with a younger, urban, affluent audience. The second, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, was aimed at a domestic, middle-class audience. Both were primarily magazines for women. The remaining group consists of “farm journals,” represented largely by the *Michigan Farmer*, *Ohio*

Farmer, and *Maine Farmer*. These were aimed at a rural, family audience. The periodicals in this book were chosen for their wide circulation, influence, and popularity. It is also worth noting that they are all searchable in ProQuest's *American Periodicals Series Online*, which likely played a significant role in their selection. The audiences of these periodicals varied significantly, but in each case Brazeau argues that the editors tried to construct a literacy identity that fit the social, cultural, and economic characteristics of their distinct readership. While the features of each periodical's "literary identity" differed, the editors all encouraged readers to participate by contributing and circulating of their own written works.

The chapters are organized thematically, each focusing on one of these three clusters of magazines. Chapter 1, "Literacy Identities: Defining Magazine Writers," takes the broadest approach, arguing that the examined magazines, though targeted at different audiences, each attempted to construct a literacy identity for their readers. The literacy identities differed based on social and class background, but each periodical attempted to cultivate a "magazine-approved" pattern of reading and writing practices. Chapter 2, "Buying and Selling Literacy: *The Ladies' Home Journal*," argues that the *Journal* encouraged woman to be consumers and sellers of literature. The *Journal* provided instructions on how to write for the publication, while outlining rules for what to read, how to spend reading time, and on which works to emulate. It also provided women with a publishing forum through their "Just Among Ourselves" campaign (p. 77).

Chapter 3, "Joining the Club: Clubwomen, Magazine Readers, and Scholars," continues upon this theme of community through literacy. Brazeau examines how *Harper's Bazar* encouraged women to form "Home Study Clubs," or local reading groups. These clubs were presented as a venue through which educated women could interact

and gain additional literary refinement. "For the *Bazar*," Brazeau argues earlier in the book, "the difference between 'reading people' and 'unlettered' people is not the ability to read a book, but rather the practice of following specific conventions in approaching that book and the ability to discuss that book with others" (p. 34). This definition of literacy, which emphasizes communication over actual reading and writing ability, is central to the argument of the work, making this an especially significant chapter. The chapter also examines *Bazar's* guides on how to write social letters and fashionable writing, further expanding upon the "Writing Instruction" subtitle of the work.

Chapter 4, "Special Invitation to Write: Magazine Readers as Contributors," examines farm publications, which were largely agricultural in nature and presented themselves as both popular and professional literature. Whereas *Harper's Bazar* and *Ladies' Home Journal* were meant mainly for affluent and middle-class women, the publications examined in this chapter (*Ohio Farmer*, *Maine Farmer*, *Michigan Farmer*, *Farmer's Home Journal*, *New England Farmer*, and *The Southern Planter*), targeted a broader, rural, family audience. As in other chapters, Brazeau contends that these periodicals created a sense of community, emphasizing literacy in terms of communication and community over technical skill. These publications, Brazeau argues, promoted the creation of "the farmer-writer" who shared their agricultural expertise through magazine contributions. By reading and eventually contributing to these periodicals, subscribers took part in a professional agricultural community of letters. In her final chapter, "Conclusion: Subscribing to a Professional Writing Community," Brazeau reasserts that popular magazines shaped reading and writing habits, and that subscribers took part in a wider community by contributing letters and literary pieces to these magazines. These opportunities to publish allowed readers, especially women and rural audiences, to "position themselves as pub-

lishing experts and authorities” (p. 166). At a fundamental level, Brazeau argues that “literacy” is better understood as communication and community involvement, and not simply in terms of technical writing ability. This argument is likely informed by Dr. Brazeau’s work as director of the writing center at the College of Wooster.

A strength of the work is the quality of its examples and sources, which are made available through *American Periodicals Series Online*. The database, which is remarkably expansive, allows the work to examine a wide scope of magazines and subscribers, ranging from upper-middle-class periodicals to farm publications. However, this reliance on ProQuest, without the use of supplementary, nondigitized archival materials, is also a possible weakness of the work. Magazines that have not been digitized by ProQuest, notably *Atlantic Monthly* and small regional magazines, are automatically excluded from the study.[1] This may have, in turn, shaped the scope and findings of Brazeau’s work.

This work is readable, interesting, and brief, though its short length is also a weakness. Every chapter would have been greatly improved by the inclusion of more examples from the periodicals examined. Brazeau’s argument is convincing, but more direct quotes and examples would have further supported her thesis, while also providing readers with additional interesting excerpts. The length of the work similarly prevents Brazeau from fully discussing large, recurring themes. The most notable of these is education, which is a key topic in the book. While arguing that periodicals could supplement or even substitute for formal education, Brazeau cannot provide a detailed background on the state of education at the turn of the century. This results in statements like, “formal education, especially higher education, was still somewhat limited at the turn of the century for women, persons of color, and those who simply could not afford the time or tuition” (p. 164).

The 1900 census lists a population of 76 million at a time when, Brazeau notes, there were roughly 238,000 college students (p. 1). Higher education was more than *somewhat* limited, and additional discussion of the history of education in American is needed to support this argument. Brazeau’s argument that periodicals supplemented formal education by encouraging and spreading literacy is compelling, but the short length of the monograph prevents a thorough discussion of this, and other, significant topics addressed throughout the work.

Similarly, Brazeau’s argument that popular magazines provided a literary voice to previously marginalized readers, notably women and rural populations, would benefit from greater discussion of illiteracy rates. Brazeau address contemporary fears of illiteracy, which resulted in a “national preoccupation with education,” but she does not discuss the extent to which illiteracy rates made popular publications inaccessible to large sections of the population (p. 3). In 1870, 20 percent of the total population was illiterate, a figure that only decreased to 10.7 percent in 1900. Among nonwhite populations, illiteracy rates declined from 79.9 percent to 44.5 percent over the same period. In 1900, primary school enrollment among white men and women was 53.6 percent nationally (53.4 percent males, 53.9 percent females). For nonwhites, enrollment figures in 1900 were 31.1 percent (29.4 percent males, 32.8 percent females). These figures include cities and rural areas, and all economic classes, suggesting that literacy rates were significantly lower than the average in agricultural communities.[2] While the *Ladies’ Home Journal* or the *Ohio Farmer* may have had impressive subscription numbers, it is worth stressing that their influence on literacy, advanced or otherwise, was still limited to a narrow and privileged readership.

Ultimately, the work will be of interest to scholars who study the links between readership, community, and literacy studies. Those following in the

vein of Anne Ruggles Gere's *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in the U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920* (1997), upon whose work Brazeau builds and serves as a companion piece, will be particularly interested.

Notes

[1]. Brazeau briefly cites Shirley Marchaloni's "Women Writers and the Assumption of Authority: The *Atlantic Monthly*, 1857-1898," a chapter from *In Her Own Voice: Nineteenth-Century American Women Essayists*, ed. Sherry Lee Linkon (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 3-26. No additional materials from *Atlantic Monthly* are included in Brazeau's study.

[2]. Statistics taken from Susan B. Carter et al., eds., *Historical Statistics of the United States, Volume 2: Work and Welfare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See tables Bc438-446 "School Enrollment Rates, by Sex and Race: 1850-1994" (p. 431) and Bc793-797 "Illiteracy Rate, by Race and Nativity: 1870-1979" (p. 468).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: Richard Mikulski. Review of Brazeau, Alicia. *Circulating Literacy: Writing Instruction in American Periodicals, 1880-1910*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48383>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.