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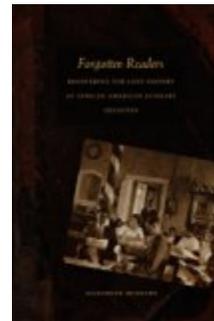
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



June Howard. *Publishing the Family (New Americanists)*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001. xiv + 336 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2762-2; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-2771-4.

Elizabeth McHenry. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies (New Americanists)*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. xiv + 423 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2980-0; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-2995-4.

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Acts of Literacy, Seen Anew

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Two eagerly awaited studies of U.S. literary culture which powerfully extend the dimensions of American Studies scholarship, June Howard's second book-length monograph and Elizabeth McHenry's first, offer exciting evidence of the vitality of studies of the history of reading and writing in the United States. Though Howard situates her work with reference to social and cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and Fredric Jameson, where McHenry more often cites historians of reading such as Roger Chartier and Carl Kaestle, both make rich and meticulously historicized discoveries which will fascinate scholars in American literary and cultural studies, while intriguing students of the U.S. family, and of literacy as a form of social activism.

Clarifying the methodological innovations central to *Publishing the Family*, Howard calls her approach a "microhistory" designed to disclose the many forces and counter-pressures which traverse a collaborative novel entitled *The Whole Family*. This anomalous text, which first appeared serially in *Harper's Bazar* in 1907 and 1908, may seem a minor belletristic lark. Yet as Howard shows, no sooner had the second installment of *The Whole Family* appeared in print than the project was embroiled in contention. Not only did individual contributors—each of

whom took responsibility for one chapter of the novel—disagree sharply over the story's premise. In addition, putative co-laborers found little common ground concerning the nature and motivations of various characters; the genre appropriate to what had been envisioned as a pleasant and amusing, rather than dauntingly conflictual, tale; or a fit ending to the convoluted plot produced by writers located quite differently amidst the literary and social worlds which co-existed at the start of the twentieth century. In and through the resultant tensions, back-trackings and short-lived "resolutions," Howard finds an all-but-articulated critique of white middle-class family life.

The utter lucidity of Howard's argument should serve as a model for future work of interdisciplinary amplitude. Yet range of research interests is only one reason to categorize *Publishing the Family* as a scholarly tour de force. Equally important, this probing, fearless study deserves the attention of all students of sentimentality and affectional acts, even as it takes up a prominent place in the toolbox of those who investigate the conditions of literary and ideological production. People trained in American Studies do not always spend time ruminating about management strategies at the best-known publishing firms, or about the relationship between a "house organ" like the *Bazar* and its parent company. Yet as

Howard shows, these things can be tremendously revealing not so much because the business of America is, as we hear so often, business, as because print culture exists under specific conditions of capital which, in the case of *The Whole Family*, tangled with competing visions of domesticity, trade, women's education, and modernity.

The profoundly eruptive ramifications of *Publishing the Family* can be derived from Howard's brilliant introduction. "Lines drawn between private and public, between culture and commerce ... project bounded entities," she charges, at one point, even as they "set the terms of connectedness, and are woven together in circuits of reciprocally stabilized instabilities with real consequences" (p. 10). This finding should stand as a key—and crucially periodizing—model for those students of culture who seek ways in which to figure out what print culture has to tell us about the era in which it was produced, rather than the anxieties of our own. Beautifully illustrated and written with unusual grace, *Publishing the Family* is a book that students of U.S. domesticity, literary culture, and/or emotional life will want to put at the top of their reading lists.

Closer to the heart of historical reading studies, but as challenging to received parameters as Howard's elegant argument, Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers* demands that attention be paid to the small, but united and purposeful, group of pre-World War II African Americans who equated literacy with activism. Central to McHenry's initiative is a deliberate and well-defended extension of exclusivist conceptualizations of what it has meant to participate in the world of print and, more specifically, belles lettres. Indeed, one of the major gains of her project is enhanced comprehension of the goals of those "race" men and women who taught that the assured wielding of elevated language comprised a form of political agitation. This form of agitation may seem trivial. Yet it proved capable of nurturing solidarities among people who were socially marginalized by white supremacist policies, fostering "uplift" programs with strong links to citizenship claims, and resisting the dictum that informal education was tantamount to ignorance and illiteracy.

Challenging assumptions about African Americans' practices and institutions of reading, writing, and educated debate, McHenry sheds new light on texts as familiar as David Walker's "Appeal" and Jean Toomer's *Cane*. More broadly suggestive, though, is her call for scholars to move away from "the idea of a monolithic black community" best represented by the social history of the enslaved and/or poor, to "replace it with a more accurate

and historically informed understanding of a complex and differentiated black population" (p. 14). This reconfiguration echoes Howard's call for a testing of current taxonomies, the better to work out more illuminating insights. Yet for McHenry, the goal is reconsideration of "what has constituted resistance for African Americans given their diverse experiences" (p. 15). Representative of this move is a gender-based challenge to the oft-quoted truism that the period just before World War I constituted the "nadir" of the African American experience. Equally interesting is the potential for further research embedded in McHenry's call to heed the reading associated with "nonacademic venues like churches, private homes, and beauty parlors" (p. 10), and in her massing of evidence that the antebellum African American press did far more than fight against slavery. It is easy enough, now, to query the efficacy of optimistic paeans to the development of a "literary character" and the merits of "literary activism." Yet *Forgotten Readers* makes an insightful case for valuing the activities of groups such as the African-American Female Intelligence Association, according to its founders' sense of the possible, and for spending time scrutinizing Oprah Winfrey's much-maligned Book Club. McHenry shows, for instance, that a genealogy can be traced between that "imagined community," the one fostered by Frederick Douglass's *North Star* before the Civil War, and the "Saturday Night Club" cherished, generations later, by relatively privileged African American book-lovers in Washington, D.C.

A final thought: despite the impatience with which I, for one, awaited these two books, I want to commend Howard and McHenry for foregoing the urge to publish articles which could have done little more than sketch mini-versions of complex ideas or, worse, scant historical context. I was much edified by the essay Howard did publish, in *American Literary History*. But I gained so much more from the final version, when I read it as the culmination of a multiply traversed "microhistory," that I want to take this opportunity to lament the pressure scholars come under from bean-counting "productivity" mandates. This pressure is not confined to junior scholars. Yet since it generally weighs most heavily on the untenured, I was especially pleased that McHenry found a way to defend the integrity of her project. Would that more first books were as weighty and bountiful! And would that people in all the fields connected with American Studies were able to find ways by which to ease the imperatives which lead so precipitously toward disturbingly slender work from people writing to the ticking of tenure-and-promotion clocks.

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