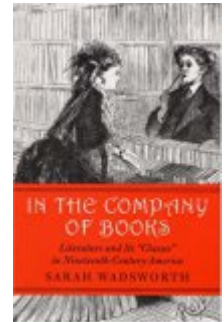


Sarah Wadsworth. *In the Company of Books: Literature and Its "Classes" in Nineteenth-Century America.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006. xiii + 278 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55849-541-8.



Reviewed by Donald K. Pickens

Published on H-Ideas (March, 2007)

Before directly commenting on Sarah Wadsworth's fine and insightful book, a few remarks regarding historical context might be in order. In 1976 Henry F. May published *The Enlightenment in America* in which he observed that an aspect of the Enlightenment he named "didactic" endured well into the nineteenth century. Its basis was the idea that there was a given rational order available to the individual's understanding. This didactic enlightenment also formed philosophical support for the spectator view of knowledge. This natural order harmonized with an innate moral order and a social order based on an individualistic ethos. These three orders dissolved under the pressures of the twentieth century. They did survive temporarily--helped in no small part by Scottish moral philosophy led by Adam Smith, the essence of the laissez-faire ideal. Fragments of the three orders have surfaced from time to time in the current cultural (and political) wars of 2007.

In addition, the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States experienced the growth of democracy and nationalism, often resulting in some sort of complex synthesis. The technology of

printing rapidly aided the rise of mass literacy. For liberals and left radicals this process was celebrated; conservatives and radicals of the right (reactionaries) considered literacy a dangerous thing. Under the rubric of industrialization and urbanization, "culture" became "popular culture" and the city became a menacing home for the "lower orders."

In such a context what was the function of literature? Was it to instruct, to enlighten the gentle reader, lift him or her morally in the manner of the American Tract Society and similar organizations? Or was literature meant to amuse and appeal to the base desires of the common reader?

Assistant professor of English at Marquette University, Wadsworth suggests answers to those questions. And her analysis is judicial. Fortunately she does not deconstruct her subject; rather she grounds her narrative in solid literary historical materials. Her book is a key addition to the *Studies in Print Culture* and the *History of the Book* series. Her thesis is that the nineteenth-century literary marketplace was segmented and increasingly became specialized, as authors and editors ex-

plored how marketing strategies would or could increase sales. The truth was that, from hack's turning out of penny dreadfuls to Henry James's exploring the social and psychological aspects of the international carriage trade, authors wanted to make a living with their words and ideas and yet produce something of enduring artistic merit. It is the classic irony of the romantic artists being true to their art, yet achieving recognition for their work. (The realist would say it happens only after they are dead.)

By the 1870s, the book market fragmented. Reader interest, class, level of education, gender, and stage of life all contributed to new marketing of the print culture. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and Henry James made their appearances and let it be known that their opinions mattered, both literarily and monetarily. Hawthorne's sentiments are well known: he did not appreciate competition from female writers. Twain struggled with questions on how to sell his books and whether they were serious tomes or books for the juvenile reader. Twain struggled with the issue and he tried his talent in writing sequels. Today, of course, some writers produce sequels without end in some formalistic fashion. Having created Huckleberry Finn, one of the great moral and ethnic characters in American literature, Twain did not know how to end Finn's story. The money prospects were good, but various factors prevented Twain from achieving the greatness of his first novel. William Dean Howells, in the center of the genteel literary scene in Boston, had several sage comments on the market situation. His own literary production revealed a novelist who wanted sunny and bright stories, but also recognized and wanted to be part of the coming realistic and naturalistic era.

One of the delightful surprises of Wadsworth's text is her analysis of Louisa May Alcott's career. Alcott was more than the sweet narrative that is *Little Women*. This is no criticism of the novel, but a recognition that Alcott, more than

Twain, was creatively able to move in this segmented market, producing sequels that sold (p. 46). She knew her readers and, like the other literary artists discussed in *In the Company of Books*, Alcott wanted to write beyond the social expectation of the market.

Wadsworth's treatment of the connotation of "high brow"/"low brow" is balanced. There was a "near obsession with the cultural status of books, reading, and various types of readers" (p. 98). Publishers overran the market with cheap material. Critics claimed "cheap," in both senses of the word. By subscription and by a series of volumes such as "Blue and Gold," the coffee table book made its appearance. Some of these (and it is true to this day) were to be seen but not read. By century's end the door-to-door subscription had come to the end. The most successful example of that marketing device was Twain's help in selling U.S. Grant's account of the Civil War.

Wadsworth's provides an excellent addition to the scholarship regarding the history of the book and reading. I want to end this review with a personal observation, which I think will illustrate the soundness of Wadsworth's analysis. Is reading still important? And who is doing the reading? Years ago at a college "far, far away in another galaxy" (not the University of North Texas), I asked my students what they read on a regular basis. The answer was the *TV Guide*. I quit asking. Fast forward to the present and I am standing in a book store that also sells all kinds of magazines with subjects such as guns, ammo, bikes, health, etc. Given the nature of American capitalism, someone must read or buy such stuff. Next I am standing at the check-out line at the grocery store and I am surrounded by "revealing" accounts of the misbehavior of the famous. (They are famous because they are famous.) Babies and babies appear to be the standard fare. Somewhere Henry James weeps.

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Citation: Donald K. Pickens. Review of Wadsworth, Sarah. *In the Company of Books: Literature and Its "Classes" in Nineteenth-Century America*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

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