H-Net Reviews
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In *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City*, Frank Felsenstein and James Connolly provide an in-depth analysis of the circulation records of Indiana's Muncie Public Library from 1891-1902. The authors share their discoveries from the "What Middletown Read" (WMR) database (`http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr/`), which "includes approximately 175,000 individual loan records and constitutes the largest body of data about American library borrowing patterns during this historical period" (p. 3). Through their investigative study, the authors show readers how the WMR database exists as a unique primary resource for review of the social, political, and historical development of a library in its community. However, *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City* not only chronicles the development of the Muncie public library system and its role in the cultural development of its patrons, but also reveals the significance of libraries as community institutions that preserve history and document public life. Felsenstein and Connolly's work further demonstrates the importance of print culture history and guides readers through the value of exploring the use of digitized collections such as the WMR database.

The book is arranged into two sections. Part 1 provides an historical overview of the city's industrial development, its print culture, and how its public library evolved. The first chapter of the book offers a discussion on how the gas boom industrialized the city, which in turn contributed to the development of its educational institutions. The following chapters in this section provide a thorough discussion of the development of the library system in this community and how its expansion contributed to the development of its print culture. Part 2 presents a closer examination of the various patterns that emerge through a more detailed analysis of the individual and group reading habits of Muncie's population. In this section, the authors examine the records to discern the reading experiences of different demographic groups within the community and compare the shared reading experiences of individuals associated with organized groups in the community, such as the various women's reading societies and reform organizations. Through these observations, it is easy to see how patterns emerge from various population subsets (school children, business leaders, and white-collar/blue-collar readers). This section is also particularly useful in showing how the information from the WMR database can be used for research and further inquiry.

An epilogue provides an overview of additional research being conducted with the database information and the connections being made with the use of other resource materials. One of these studies involves GIS mapping "the spatial distributions of the residences of the library patrons" to "create sociocultural visualizations of the city's demographic divisions" (p. 253). This sub-study revealed that the socioeconomic divisions "mirrored the cultural life of the city's readers" p. (253). The book's appendix provides a description of the WMR database, how it is organized, and what types of information researchers can access. It is written as a guide to the searchable fields in the database and provides sample searches that can be done. The appendix also explains how the database was created and how the library staff transferred the records

into searchable content. The amount of work to organize this project is impressive. This section proves useful to any other researcher interested in modeling this project. It also reveals that the project is a dynamic construct, as it continues to be improved for greater access and searchable content. The appendix alone is useful to read for anyone interested in constructing a similar digitalization project.

To validate their inferences made through the examination of the circulation records, the authors parallel their analysis of the records with additional primary resources from print culture, such as individual diaries, meeting minutes, newspaper reports, and other local history documents, to build connections between the library records and actual events in the community. While some critics may note the limitations in this study, Felsenstein and Connolly do well in explaining how studying the reading habits of individuals and groups provides a rich understanding of print culture's role in the social and emotional aesthetic of a community. The library becomes a significant "social space" that connects its community through their shared reading experiences. The authors demonstrate the value of a library's role in preserving public history.

Readers from every discipline will find merit in Felsenstein and Connolly's research because of its interdisciplinary analysis and replicable methodological approach. The authors tell the readers a story about the library's evolution, its patrons, and in essence, the community of Muncie by identifying patterns in the circulation records related to specific demographic populations in the community. For example, individuals interested in American literary history gain keen insight to the records through examination of the American writers and poets most read during this period. Seeing that Horatio Al-

ger stories were heavily circulated in this collection bears significance in the cultural history of the "rags to riches" themes in American fiction. Education researchers may find interest in the authors' analysis of what school children read. Historians can examine the reading experiences of certain prominent citizens and society reading groups such as Muncie's activist women. The authors demonstrate clearly numerous ways in which a database of this sort can identify information regarding a wide range of subjects related to cultural and public history. Analysis of the demographics of the library's readership and what books they valued offers a unique perspective on the shared experiences of the community. Examining reading patterns revealed through the circulations provides additional insight into the emerging middle class in the community. Granted, it may be difficult to identify whether the circulated books were actually read by the patrons, but that is not the issue to consider. The number of times a book circulates in a collection demonstrates its measurable interest within its reading community. Hence, a book that circulated numerous of times, regardless of the demographic of its readers, reveals its impact in shared reading experiences of that given community. The authors do address such issues within respect to the limitations of the database throughout the second section of the book and later in the appendix, where they discuss how the database was created.

Felsenstein and Connolly tell several stories in this book, which makes it a good read for any audience. This book reinforces the value of print culture because it shows how a historical community reveals itself through its inhabitants' reading experiences. The authors' intent to inspire further research using such resources is successful. The book is intriguing because it makes one realize how what he or she reads characterizes meaning and minds-et within a greater collective community.

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