Writing to his publisher Ticknor and Fields in 1866, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow declared that he did not want a forthcoming edition of his poetry to be illustrated. He stated, “I should be better pleased if there were to be no engravings ... I fear and tremble. Bad Pictures are so bad. Can you not possibly do without?” (p. 241). Longfellow’s pleading tone suggests the fraught marketplace of nineteenth-century books, as well as the tension between writers and illustrators. This anecdote is one of many behind-the-scenes stories in Georgia Brady Barnhill’s history of the expansive world of book publishing in America. *Gems of Art on Paper: Illustrated American Fiction and Poetry, 1785-1885* is a significant contribution to book history and to our understanding of the nascent art scene of the period.

Barnhill’s first chapter, “Ways and Means of Publishing Illustrated Poetry, 1785-1820,” looks at the rare practice of publishing illustrated American poetry books in the United States between 1785 and 1820. A small proportion of all published American verse—only about seventy volumes—was illustrated, which suggests that the return on investment for the publishers was insufficient to warrant illustrations. Barnhill separates the first chapter into sections on publishers, authors, illustrators, and engravers. Throughout the text are examples of book illustrations, providing a sampling of the visual culture associated with the nineteenth-century reading experience.

The second chapter, “Gems of Art for the Parlor Table,” examines literary annuals, which were published in series as opposed to single publications, such as later gift books. Barnhill notes that literary annuals peaked in popularity in the 1840s, when there were thirty publishers vying for readers. Literary annuals were a boon for artists, who...
found steady work illustrating the volumes. Because there are so many extant literary annuals, Barnhill chose representative examples for her analysis. This wide-ranging chapter covers the people who created these annuals (publishers, editors, artists, and engravers), new printmaking processes, the circulation of plates, and the critical reception of the books. The chapter examines the challenges facing authors of literary annuals; sometimes, for instance, authors were asked to write a story to accompany an illustration (rather than the other way around), a challenging proposition, and one that often ignored the original artist’s intention. It was especially difficult for authors to compose literary texts to accompany landscape images, leading to a divide between the literature and the image. Landscapes were also problematic due to the small scale of these books; larger format books, such as Nathaniel P. Willis’s American Scenery (1840), could include more detailed landscape illustrations. Eventually genre illustration replaced landscapes in popularity.

The illustrators of American literary fiction are the subject of chapter 3, “The Rise of the Illustrator.” Barnhill divides the chapter into sections on David Claypoole Johnston, Hammatt Billings, F. O. C. Darley, Augustus Hoppin, and Thomas Nast. Her subject is too vast to include all illustrators (Barnhill points out that the American Antiquarian Society alone holds 1,200 titles). She also provides the context of reading habits in the early 1800s by examining the prevailing negative attitude toward novels (which shifts to a greater respect by the 1850s). The market for illustrated books expanded in this period; by 1859, illustrations were plentiful, a great contrast to the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. Barnhill concludes with the assertion that these illustrators were “innovators in the book arts,” stating that “their talent and entrepreneurship changed the face of book publishing forever” (p. 205).

Chapter 4, “Artists and the Gift Book, 1840-1885,” pays close attention to shifts in fine printing, as wood engraving began to replace steel engraving, with the exception of limited editions, and photography came into play in the period before the Civil War. The new genre of gift books brought art to readers of poetry, even as less sophisticated literary annuals were decreasing in popularity. Barnhill refers to gift books as “essentially museums on paper” (p. 208). She concludes, “Thanks to [the] talent and professionalism [of artists, engravers, lithographers, and plate printers], Americans developed a taste for fine art, and many of the illustrations they savored are indeed gems” (p. 275).

The story of these illustrated books is the story of art dissemination in the early United States. For this reason, the book should be of interest to art historians trying to understand nineteenth-century tastemaking among the American middle class. Barnhill calls early American books “portable museums,” an apt description of how these books functioned in American culture, introducing “thousands of readers to the fine arts” (p. 114). In her conclusion to chapter 2, Barnhill asserts that literary annuals “inspired national pride in American landscape and creativity” (p. 131).

Barnhill shares her vast knowledge, acquired over decades of working with these books and their illustrations as a curator at the American Antiquarian Society, in a readable and documentary manner (Barnhill also usefully includes an appendix, “Illustrated Editions of Poetry Printed in the United States, 1786-1820”). Because of the sheer number of illustrated books, in-depth analysis of singular books, artists, or images is not possible. For instance, Barnhill mentions an illustration, titled “Laughing Waters, which appeared in the literary annual The Iris: An Illustrated Souvenir for 1852 (1851) alongside a poem by Mary Eastman. According to Barnhill, “The image is a hunting scene, and the poem foresees the time when Native Americans will disappear to make way for white settlers. Queen Victoria believed it to be ‘the prettiest book she had seen from Amer-
This non sequitur begs for a deeper analysis of the cultural and social context of Manifest Destiny, which is not possible given the large scope of Barnhill’s project. In the introduction, Barnhill informs the reader that the focus of her book is not aesthetics; indeed, there is not much text-image analysis. In addition, Barnhill does not provide in-depth analyses of illustrations or the content of the literature they represent. Barnhill’s contribution is not a close reading of text and image but rather an overview of illustrated American books, which is an excellent foundation for future scholarship. Gems of Art on Paper joins other recent books, such as Megan Walsh’s The Portrait and the Book: Illustration and Literary Culture in Early America (2017), in examining the intersections between visual and literary culture in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America.

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