ForeWord Reviews

In the Company of Books: Literature and Its "Classes" in Nineteenth-Century America

Sarah Wadsworth
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The injunction not to judge a book by its cover perhaps became a truism because the tendency to judge books by their covers—by their bindings, sizes, editions, illustrations, colors, paper, and point of sale—was indeed a habit of mind in nineteenth-century America. This volume surveys the book-publishing climate from the 1830s to the turn of the century and finds that judging books by their covers enabled an important line of communication between producers and consumers of books. An assistant professor of English at Marquette, Wadsworth's background in the book trade serves her well. Her study demonstrates how market-conscious strategies of publishers, authors, and editors targeted specific audiences, created new specialized audiences, and anticipated existing audiences' tastes and expectations.

There are complications to Wadsworth's major premise that "culture literary culture) was a product, a construction, of the book." Elsewhere she writes, "As authors and publishers became attuned to new readerships, they sometimes fashioned innovative subgenres with which to address them and respond to their needs," a formulation suggesting that cultural preconceptions constructed books. Two mutually reinforcing processes are at work, clearly, and Wadsworth's study amply illustrates this feedback loop.

By setting literary texts in their original contexts, Wadsworth helps demystify some of the canonical texts and authors it examines. After World War II, New Critical practice characterized literary texts as ahistorical icons that spoke truth for all times and conditions. Closer scrutiny to the historical settings in which well-known writers worked, however, reveals the degree to which the political, social, and economic conflicts of *their* times, not all times, speak through the texts.

Wadsworth explores the realities of nineteenth-century publishing with interesting results. Louisa May Alcott plotted stories for a female audience that had become the dominant force in the American literary marketplace. The stories by which Hawthorne became famous in the twentieth century grew out of his attempt to market a different kind of children's story to a new audience children) with growing purchasing power. Henry James closely followed popular writing and appropriated the lucrative women's travel genre for his own aesthetic purposes.

Twain admitted he never intended his work for educated audiences but for the profitable subscription market in the hinterlands instead. Wadsworth attributes the well-publicized controversy over Twain's ending of *Huck Finn* to the difficulties of "reconciling text, topic, audience, and genre" necessary for financially successful publication.

Wadsworth makes clear that the emergence of a national literary culture in the nineteenth century was the product, ironically, of a deliberate specialization of literary genres and market segments. In the era of publishing covered by this study, there were more readers, more books, and an increasingly complex commercial network for bringing the two together.

Vince Brewton