

Book Traces: Nineteenth-Century Readers and the Future of the Library

By Andrew M. Stauffer

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A study of the physical impact readers have on texts, whether it be annotations, inscriptions, their own poetical contributions, or even remnants of flowers and plants, *Book Traces* offers a somewhat novel, but important, approach to book and reading history. Yet it also looks to the future: early on in his introduction, Andrew Stauffer makes the case for *Book Traces* functioning as, among other things, a defence of ‘the value of the physical, circulating collections of nineteenth-century volumes in academic libraries’ (3). He adds that it is ‘the vulnerability of those printed books – both their material fragility and their institutional precarity in the digital age,’ which underpins the contributions he hopes ‘to make to the history of reading and library policy’ (ibid.). It is difficult, then, to miss the irony in the fact that this review is being carried out via e-book, circumstanced by the global Coronavirus pandemic. However,

the electronic nature of the text (coupled with the excellent user interface provided by Ebooks.com) does not detract from what is a thought-provoking and vital study in historical reading and personal editing practices. Most importantly, Stauffer uses this study to mould a thesis as to the future of non-rare collections which are held within libraries and archives, encouraging us to ‘*open every book* [...] before print collections are stored away and managed down for good’ (133).

Despite this somewhat hyperbolic call-to-archives, Stauffer is not a literary Luddite in any sense; indeed, as he notes, were it not for access to e-books such as ‘Google Books, HathiTrust, and large-scale genealogical sites like Ancestry.com [...] the task of unearthing histories’ behind discovered annotations would have been ‘too daunting’ (25). The theme of discovery, especially the idea of ‘guided

serendipity' (3), resonates throughout Stauffer's introduction, and the five chapters which follow. Drawing initially on Pierre Foucault and Alan Liu, Stauffer's introduction not only positions his study as a vital contribution in literary scholarship, but also to memory, cultural and historical studies. Each chapter adopts a thematic case study, and while Stauffer maintains that he is not attempting to offer a comprehensive examination of nineteenth-century marginalia, annotation, or the ephemera discovered inside books, he does succeed in opening a window onto such practices among 'primarily female, middle-class' white Americans (19-20). This scope is not accidental: as Stauffer explains, just as 'all libraries and archives have an element of randomness,' so they also 'reflect the structures of power – economic, cultural, linguistic, racial, sexual – that determined what would not be preserved, what was excluded, what was passed over, and what was not passed on' (133). Of course, this is not an earth-shattering revelation: anyone familiar with nineteenth-century literary studies will recognise the influence that Charles Mudie's circulating library, for example, had on defining cultural standards.¹

Stauffer does, however, bring a fresh perspective to reading habits of these 'white, upper-middle-class families' (ibid.), and the opening chapter, taking collected editions of Felicia Hemans as its primary focus, provides a perfect opening for the discussion on 'marginalia, sentimentality, nostalgia, and poetry [...being]

wound inextricably together in the nineteenth century' (16). Given that Hemans is recognised as a poet 'working within a Christian framework,' who continually 'shapes a language of endless longing and appeal directed towards a variously named divine order' (35), the nature of readerly responses that Stauffer documents are not unexpected. In poems which deal variously with 'God, heaven, the virgin, departed spirits, mother, home, and love,' many of Hemans' readers in the mid-nineteenth century regarded her texts as quasi-scriptural and when 'parted from a loved person through death or absence, find themselves in prayer amid her lyrics' (35). Perhaps the most powerful example of this is the identification of a 'poem written in pencil on the rear free endpaper' of an 1834 edition of *The Poetical Works of Mrs. Felicia Hemans* (24). Identifying the same hand on the title page of the book, where the inscription 'Ellen Pierrepont / 1846' appears, Stauffer (and his team of graduate students) delve deeper into this poem and Pierrepont's annotations. This allows Stauffer to posit conclusions as to the motivating factors behind certain annotations, and while, unavoidably, some of these interpretations are speculatively subjective, they do underline the central argument that literature, and poetry especially, was a dynamic medium in the nineteenth century. By analysing texts rich with marginalia, as opposed to the pristine, rare copies normally reserved for special collections, Stauffer ascertains that we may 'begin to see

1 For an excellent evaluation on Mudie's library, see Katz, Peter J., 'Redefining the Republic of Letters: The Literary Public and Mudie's Circulating Library' in *Journal of Victorian Culture* 22:3, 2017.

nineteenth-century sentimental poetry through the eyes of those to whom it most frequently mattered, those ordinary readers whose reactions shaped the way poetry was written and used throughout this bookish century' (42).

'Gardens of Verse', the book's second chapter, examines the nineteenth-century practice of inserting flowers between the pages of books, an act which Stauffer notes: 'shaped the writing, publishing, and reading of verse as parts of a continuous network of interaction' (47). 'The pressed flower,' it is reasoned, 'assumes an emblematic, lyrical status in its own right, in dialogue with the poetry on the printed page and with the structure of the book in which it was placed' (50). This chapter offers an intriguing perspective on the dynamics of textual interactions, not just between readers and texts, but between readers, texts, authors and publishers: 'poets wrote knowing that these practices were part of the field of reception; publishers and illustrators designed books that called them forth and echoed them' (48). This is evidenced by the taxonomy of 'Anglo-American sentimental flower books' that are listed on page eighty-four, which indicate the popularity of such texts throughout the century (particularly in the Victorian era). As may be guessed, Wordsworth's collections are popular destinations for flowers stems, petals and leaves, yet Stauffer recognises that there is a more powerful significance than simply sentimentality at play: 'vitality and death, preservation and loss, beauty and decay: botanical material plucked or gathered and then placed in books by readers incarnates some of the same contradictory impulses that organised nineteenth-century

poetry in the Romantic tradition (63).

In the case studies presented in chapter three, Stauffer turns to examples which 'all involve at least two hands: they were each inscribed by a different pair of lovers, with marks of flirtation, longing, affection, and loss, in explicit dialogue with nineteenth-century poems that engaged their attention' (83). Annotative conversations are presented as nineteenth-century social-media forebears, especially in the example which closes the chapter, taken from a copy of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Poems and Ballads* (1891), which belonged to a Jane Chapman Slaughter. Here we have a number of poems annotated by Slaughter and (apparently) her one-time lover, John H. Adamson, who the title page suggests was the book's owner before Slaughter. The marginalia reveal the intimate communication between Slaughter and Adamson, as well as later entries when Slaughter returned to re-evaluate her previous thoughts. For Stauffer, such examples strike at the heart of one of *Book Traces'* aims, as they illustrate the power of books as cultural and historical artefacts, 'as layered sites of production' (111), capable of providing 'epiphanic moments of reading and recognition' (90).

Considering the importance of texts as material objects continues into the following chapter, 'Velveteen Rabbits: Sentiment and the Transfiguration of Books'. Here, Stauffer looks to move 'beyond poetry to think more broadly about investment and damage in the realm of books, and about the implications of Romantic modes of object attachment that have shaped our bibliographic inheritance from

the nineteenth century' (114). Stauffer presents a strong case for not only the preservation of non-rare books in libraries, but also calls for a re-evaluation to the rationale traditionally applied when libraries are selecting books for their own collections (140). He also returns to his opening gambit concerning the premise of 'guided serendipity', recognising that 'librarians rightly object to fantasy narratives of serendipity and discovery, in which researchers elide the work done by library professionals in acquiring, cataloguing, preserving, and making accessible materials' (141). However, Stauffer's study should not be misconceived as an attack on libraries in any sense; rather, he offers a challenge to libraries, students and readers, to rethink what texts may offer, other than simply just their printed content.

The accelerated changes in libraries brought around by the pandemic of 2020/21 means that the challenges Stauffer highlights will require even closer consideration and scrutiny. *Book Traces*, at the very least, offers us a platform to begin thinking about these.

Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2021 (ISBN 9780812252682), 288 pp.