

REVIEW

LEAH PRICE. **How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain**. Pp. ix + 350. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. Cloth, £19.95.

In a century ‘puzzling out the proper relation of thought to things’ (p. 2), how does textual content relate to its container and storage mediums: paper and ink, bindings, covers, and wrappers? This is the topic of Leah Price’s study. It is dense, original, and very important. It adduces a huge range of examples of how ‘books’—to use a general term for printed leaves gathered together in some format or other—circulated as material objects through Victorian Britain. It supplies acute close readings of particular moments in texts that foreground issues about the status, condition, usage, and circulation of printed sheets, whether newspapers, leaflets, tracts, or volumes. Price’s basic argument is that physical books play many roles: as shields against as well as prompts to cognition, recognition, introspection, and social interaction; intact, as missiles and interior décor; disjunct as paper for parcelling cheese, supplying insulation, and furthering hygiene; and recycled from worn clothing as vendor’s stock for everything from flypaper to pulp. A further question she raises is why writers conjure such a rich array of means for representing the handling of print (including funny cartoons which enliven Price’s pages), and so few terms to image the act of reading (p. 7). Price’s work asks how historians of the book can ‘disentangle reading from handling’ (p. 257).

The upshot of these considerations is a critique of the valorization of textuality as the source of interior, authentic selfhood, and a recovery of the stories of how marginalized groups, such as working-class males, illiterates, women, and children, ‘remained sensitive to the material affordances of books and, therefore, to the stories in which books themselves figured as heroes’ (p. 16). This recovery exercise evidences the ‘antiquixotic paradigm... [one] that values bibliographic or social surfaces over linguistic or psychological depths’ (p. 67).

The introduction explains that this monograph grows out of the author’s training in ‘reception history’ (p. 7): Price materializes what is received. It is not the book as secular or sacred scripture but as tangible product whose history she tracks. And her key move is to think about ‘nonreading’ (p. 8), about books as objects to be displayed or disregarded or destroyed rather than as engines of mental, emotional, spiritual, or economic transformation.

Thus, chapter one addresses various kinds of evidence for displacing reading. Price substitutes ‘metonymy’ for ‘metaphor’: ‘the dethronement of reading requires an assault upon metaphor’ (p. 23). She discusses not what intellectual and emotional events might occur in reading (events that often leave no material traces), but what the metonymy of adjacency, that is, ‘handling’ material texts, discloses. The Victorians may have been bibliophilic, but like other kinds of infatuations, love was often aligned with anger, disdain, violence, and abandonment.

Chapter two instances three fault lines in the use of material printed matter: one between the allegedly ephemeral newspaper and the more permanent bound volume, another between the use of each to screen off the handler from others, and a third between the presence of print material and the holder’s absence of mind. Newspapers conceal males; books, females. Anthony Trollope and George Eliot provide ample testimony to these

gendered Victorian strategies for deploying the ‘repellent book’ (p. 45). These differential practices provoke a continuing rebuttal to Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined world’: handling print is not a consensus-making activity.

Chapter three shifts from putting up print defence networks to tearing them down, interrupting supposed reading. These assaults may be quite physical, as in throwing books or breaking into another’s absorbing reading, but may also be the result of inattention, dreaming, substituting oral narratives for written ones, imposing detested reading in schoolrooms, or substituting snacking on coffee-table floss. This chapter engages a very long, observant reading of the relationship between David Copperfield and Dora, arguing that the midcentury bildungsroman pretends to offer a hero shaped by books, but instead presents an author as an object resembling a book. Price notices how David is himself written upon by many others who inscribe on his body his identity: the sign ‘HE BITES’ and the bruises the schoolmaster inflicts define David. The argument then scotches the Victorian notion that auto-didacticism leads to success. ‘As the plot [of *Copperfield*] turns a child who is acted upon into an adult who acts, its trope shifts from metaphor (a child [or childish adult] who resembles a book . . .) to metonymy (an adult who makes one). As a result, *David Copperfield* turns only belatedly into a proto-Smilesian account of self-help’ (p. 106). This is, for me, the most compressed chapter; I haven’t yet mastered the connections between the so-called ‘absorbent book’ of the chapter’s title and the brilliant discussion of David’s being written upon (a kind of ‘absorbent book’) as prelude to writing himself—in both senses of that reflexive intensifier.

Price then moves from book as barrier to book as bridge (p. 14), highlighting the parallel between bibliophilic life writing and book history in their shared interest in the circulation of things (p. 107). Chapter four delightfully reconsiders the eighteenth-century ‘it’ narrative, classically embodied in the *Adventures of a Guinea* (1760–65) that proved so instrumental in getting *Middlemarch*’s Tertius Lydgate to think about the circulation of blood. All kinds of materials narrate their stories in the Victorian era. Many of these ‘it’ narratives strive to convert their possessors: the book as agent was a conception enthusiastically endorsed by religious societies. Another consequence of ‘it’ accounts was to assimilate the written-upon body to the anthropomorphized volume.

Chapter five opens part two, about bookish transactions, and therefore starts by recognizing the book as ‘burden’: junk mail and gratis copies of improving material that pile up as waste paper. Moreover, higher-class volumes such as the gift book often intrude, unasked for, unwanted, unread, into the household’s furnishing, even when the Good Book itself is proffered. This chapter thinks through the whole notion of books as gifts inaugurated by Natalie Zemon Davis. It also contrasts agents of conversion to bildungsroman, surprisingly claiming that autobiographies often confess an indifference to, even a repugnance about, the material containers of text.

Exchange continues to be the subject of the sixth chapter, which considers the book as ‘go-between’ (p. 175). But here the social dimension receives renewed attention. How maid and matron deal with one another’s reading material, how print products are marketed to economic tranches in different formats, and how books are valued either as virgins never circulating (or prisoners pent in glass-fronted cabinets) or as beloved objects circulating through generations of hands each leaving its trace (or as nasty soiled annotated and dog-eared scraps), all are considered. In these latter chapters Price’s argumentation eases up; or maybe it is just that readers like me, caught unaware by the issues introduced at the beginning, are by now learning to think about paper and print as matter that matters, and for which dust has such affinity.

The last chapter takes readers to the ultima Thule of material culture: the book as scraps. Still valuable, as Mayhew's paper dealers testify; still useful, for stuffing trunks or wiping arses. When paper was taxed and valuable, it had a history. Should it continue to narrate one in our time? '[H]ow far downstream,' Price asks, 'should reception theorists venture: to the archive, the depository, the Dumpster' (p. 219)?

My greatest anxiety about such a path is that the larger part of what makes a book valuable for me is and always has been how much it moves me, how much its content works on my mind and emotions, no matter what material instantiation I'm handling. Broken-backed 'perfect bindings', heavily underscored crib-notated text books, Agatha Christies read to tatters by vacationing houseguests: none of these objects bespeak waste to me, nor is their destination the trash bin. They are essential physical and mental furnishings.

Price's fascinating stories about book materiality tend to be structured around oppositions: the material object (text plus all that supports it, from glazed covers to animal skins) versus whatever the text itself might be conceived to impart in reading; the letter versus the spirit, or the print product versus its 'content'; the circulation of books as generally a scene of competition (between genders, demographic groups, social and economic classes, masters and servants, etc.) rather than inspiration; and end stages as allowing for reconstitution rather than re-creation. Some, Price notes, enjoyed reading butcher's paper; three decades ago I read an article written by a British dietician who insisted that fish and chips was the best balanced diet in the world, as long as the product was wrapped in newspaper so the trace minerals in the ink were digested as well.

Any kind of visual consumption is beyond Price's material interest, so she doesn't deal with book design, types, imprinting, illustrations, or even deckle edges that look and feel like the pressed vegetable matter that constitutes paper. Nor does she have space or time to look at the longer history of books and reading, though she is persistently thinking about the electronic platform of the present and future. Not that the material book doesn't still have sales appeal. Perfumers are marketing scents reminiscent of books—the good kinds, wafting odours of leather and glue, not mould and worms—as aphrodisiacs and olfactory prompts to commercial transactions. There are more kinds of material traces of the book even than this most impressive and excitingly provocative investigation can encompass.

Leah Price has challenged every book historian, librarian, and reader of secular or spiritual scripture to think through the object we fondle or maul and the ways in which it circulates in whole and in pieces through our home and global economies. In odd ways her book responds to the de-materialization of text through electronic alternatives; it does so by thinking through not how books impart knowledge, inspiration, imagination, escapism, or psychic and sexual release, but how they are objects materializing and dematerializing in space and time. That leaves their intangible effects necessarily untouched. I'm ambivalent about the value for contemporary pedagogy of teaching books only as objects. But there's no doubt in my mind that this is a potent intervention in the study of material culture. No one who cares about books should miss handling *and* reading it.

ROBERT L. PATTEN *Institute of English Studies, University of London*
doi:10.1093/res/hgs111