

## Reading, Handling, Throwing: Rematerializing the Book

LEAH PRICE, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012), pp. 360, cloth, \$29.95, paper, \$24.95.

In the extraordinary documentary film *Waste Land* (2010), artist Vik Muniz chronicles the lives of the “pickers” at the Jardim Gramacho—the world’s largest garbage dump, located outside Rio de Janeiro—as they sift through trash in search of objects to recycle. Occasionally, they find books. For some pickers, books are pathways to knowledge, valued for their content. In the midst of organizing the pickers into something like a union, Tiaõ (Sebastiao Carlos dos Santos) discovers Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, bearer of indispensable strategic advice, and rescues other tomes for a library serving impoverished local families. For others, books are valuable because they can be sold to a recycling plant, providing the picker with a little money and reducing, if only by a fraction, Rio’s mountain of garbage. Both groups of pickers, the readers and the recyclers, would make exemplary readers of Leah Price’s *How to Do Things with Books*—indeed, they could be its subjects. Price’s exhilarating work investigates the usual separation of “text” from “book,” intellectual inspiration from quotidian object, insightful reader from mere handler. Living outside the traditions that, Price argues, feed these oppositions—Platonic and Cartesian philosophies that privilege mind over materiality, educational institutions devoted to conferring cultural capital, and, of course, Victorian canonical fiction that sacralizes interiority—Rio’s pickers would perhaps be more able than educated readers to notice the vital, engaging stories of books as objects that have been overshadowed by our deification of the text.

As Price asserts in characteristically pithy prose, “Victorians cathected the text in proportion as they disowned the book” (4). To preserve the text’s transcendent ability to cultivate deep, self-knowing subjects, they disavowed the physical substance and multiple uses of its delivery system—the book itself. Price dislodges reading from its unexamined throne, upending the hierarchy that privileges mental engagement over “things” that can be “done with books.” Simultaneously, she displaces “the self-made reader,” a phantasmatic ideal of liberal selfhood (think *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, *Maggie Tulliver*) that comes nobly into being through reading. These values are so ingrained that we hardly question them, perpetuating, without critically examining, our Victorian heritage.

*How to Do Things with Books* displays the virtues of a flexible, integrative method as it engages the history of the book and of reading, technological developments in production and especially distribution, literary history, and textual analysis. Its argument is wide ranging, subtle, inventive, and consistently surprising. It is divided into two sections, “Selfish Fictions,” in which books serve the (sometimes dubious) needs of the individual, and “Bookish Transactions,” in which they trace and reinforce social networks. Within these broad categories are discussions of both canonical fiction by Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and Wilkie Collins and popular genres such as the religious tract and the prize book. Price also dips briefly into a host of other texts, literary, popular, and scholarly. The result is an erudite and dazzling project, full of lively detail, thick with references and allusions, puns, paradoxes, aphorisms, and reversals. While a literal-minded critic might point out that such a brilliant text will inevitably eclipse its physical container, attractive though it is (and the cover is certainly stylish), no one could wish its claims were any less compelling.

“Selfish Fictions” examines encounters between texts and books and between readers and users, demonstrating how canonical novels construct these central oppositions. In Trollope, rude characters use books as barricades, keeping others—especially spouses—at bay. Novels condemn such characters for misusing sacred texts as physical objects, especially since they are seldom actually reading. A character type that Price persuasively establishes as part of the novel’s text-centered thematics—the non- or pseudo-reader—returns throughout *How to Do Things with Books* to highlight the text/book divide.

In contrast to this “repellent” book, Price posits the “absorbent” book—the book that consumes a character’s attention, cultivating the rich interiority that makes a protagonist. Price’s deconstruction of the bildungsroman as an ur-text of this cultural story is among the sharpest and most original sections of *How to Do Things with Books*. As she notes, these novels repeatedly stage encounters between introspective children in the midst of imaginative self-enlargement and cruel adults (or older children) who interrupt them—often by hurling a book, as if, by supplanting the inspiring text with the physical object, they can return the child to the degraded state of a mere corporeal being. Price is unsentimental about this confrontation, which she sees as a genre-defining convention designed to valorize disembodied reading over the physical act of handling. The bildungsroman reproduces its own values by urging us to identify with the child and disidentify with the brute who looks at a book and sees a brick, teaching us not only what we should and should not do with books but the *kind* of person we should be: a reader.

Against the bildungsroman and its idealized version of reading, Price positions a motley crew of foils: the religious tract, the prize book, the family Bible, the first-person book narrative, even the rags and papers that compose the book and decompose when its career as a text is at an end. Unlikely subjects of analysis, they open an alternate universe in which circulating, handling, distributing, holding up, discarding, and tearing apart replace the peaceful solitude of reading. Jousting with more high-minded texts, their lively presence makes *How to Do Things with Books* read like something of a novel itself—perhaps a Dickens novel, bringing forth a cast of colorful, argumentative characters from disparate walks of life. Their tales restore the visibility of the book-as-object, obscured by the priority of human heroes and the ascendance of the text: in another aphorism, Price notes that “David [Copperfield] develops a *Personal History* (as the full title of the novel has it) at the expense of his books’ being stripped of one” (125). In contrast, Price offers the book-narrator, descendant of the eighteenth-century “it-narrative,” who provides first-person accounts of its adventures: circulating and becalmed, clean and dirty, cherished and abused. This transitional chapter redirects our attention from the more familiar story of human interiority to a different set of narrative conventions in which the book itself, as a material object, is the protagonist.

The second section, “Bookish Transactions,” discloses the stakes of this reorientation by demonstrating how the circulation of book-objects, particularly in scenarios of forced reading, reinforces social hierarchies. The master-servant relationship determines and is affirmed by the books that servants are and are not allowed to read or to handle, while the ritual of reading aloud enacts gender and generational control. In an extended analysis, religious tracts function as a particularly illuminating counterexample to the disembodied text and the humanistic lessons of the bildungsroman. Here Price turns squarely to the commercial history of the book, examining pricing strategies, paper quality, cover design (or lack thereof), and distribution networks. It is impossible to do justice to this dense analysis, but perhaps the most significant takeaway is that these tracts do everything wrong. They

foist themselves on unwilling readers, they invite their own repurposing as trash because of the cheap price required for circulation among the poor, they make no promise of freedom or social mobility but signify instead the subordination of their recipients as lower-class sinners or racial others in need of salvation. In fact, they represent the very opposite of the “bookish liberalism” enshrined in the bildungsroman, in which treasured texts foster personal growth (150). In a move characteristic of this quick-footed argument, Price first contrasts the religious tract to the prize book, bound for maximum visual impact and apparently dedicated to the recognition of a special individual—and then demonstrates that, because the prize book was so consistently bestowed on poor students whose families could not afford their own libraries, it condescendingly marked the recipient’s inferiority as it changed hands. In this respect, unlike the bildungsroman but like the religious tract, the prize book “contradicted print’s claim to individualize its users” (164).

*How to Do Things with Books* ends with a bravura account of Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*. Not only do the poor use books for decidedly unintellectual purposes, such as wrapping fish; they also rediscover the text in this humble function, choosing cheese wrapped in discarded verses, for instance, in order to acquire something to read. The literary yearnings of these informants, no less than their resourcefulness, appeal to Price. Though their desire for the text might seem to undermine her argument, it is more accurate to say that Mayhew’s informants do not bother to segregate text and book as thoroughly and hierarchically as their betters, neither privileging nor disdaining one pole of the book’s history over the other. The dramatically different material context of the Victorian poor, like that of the Brazilian pickers, breaks down traditional configurations of value. Their even-handed model of bookish engagement, from text to thing and back to text again, is a fitting resting point for Price’s revisionist analysis.

This summary can hardly convey the detail, wit, richness, and rhetorical sophistication of Price’s argument. The double reverse of the religious tract and the prize book described above is only one of many occasions when Price uncovers layer after layer of significance. These moves can be dizzying until Price reintegrates them into her larger claims. In its sheer sweep of references, *How to Do Things with Books* is equally impressive. A single page can invoke communications theory (Robert Darnton; Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker), literature (*David Copperfield*, *Jane Eyre*, Trollope, and William Makepeace Thackeray), the history of reading (Roger Chartier), thing theory (Arjun Appadurai), and the history of science (Bruno Latour, Sherry Turkle) (131). Like the book’s rhetorical panache, these switchbacks can feel digressive, making it difficult to see in any detail how these approaches intersect with Price’s work. Price seems rather disdainful of thing theory, for example, though some of its arguments would seem to contribute to her assumptions by emphasizing how objects change status as they change hands. It would be too strong to call this observation an objection, though, for Price’s ability to merge quick takes and big ideas is one of the book’s signature strengths.

Other moments in *How to Do Things with Books* gave me more pause. At times, my well-socialized reader-self resisted Price’s thorough demystification of content and reading. There is no doubt that many of her observations are eye opening: like Trollope’s antisocial husbands, many favorite bildungsroman protagonists are not actually reading when they pick up a book. Why do we assume they are cultivating a rich interiority when they are merely woolgathering? As Price implies, this go-to interpretation—that any thoughtful protagonist within spitting distance of a book must be an avid reader—is surely part of the literary

imaginary of the English professor. Reclassifying these beloved figures of identification as nonreaders deepens our understanding of the operations of the bildungsroman. But then again, sometimes these characters *are* reading. Jane Eyre knows her Roman history, which provides the vocabulary to politicize her position in the Reed family. If the actual scene of reading is not depicted, must we assume that it never takes place? (Furthermore, why does looking at images not count, as when Jane examines *Bewick's Book of Birds*, one of Price's examples of nonreading?) And Maggie Tulliver devours *Imitation of Christ*, searching for holiness (though much good it does her). Again, Price is brilliant, identifying Maggie's narcissistic appropriation of the text as a mirror of herself, achieved by denying the book's passage through other hands before it comes to rest in her own. But we might ask if *Mill on the Floss* is as thoroughly implicated in the mystification of reading as Price implies. Does it not recognize and even critique Maggie's self-absorption, establishing the groundwork for Price's argument in the limitations of its dreamy heroine? *How to Do Things with Books* disenchants the bildungsroman in illuminating and necessary ways, but I occasionally wondered if the objects of its critique were not more self-aware than its analysis allows.

These moments do not call Price's argument into question; they urge us to rethink familiar genres, explore new ones, and enlarge the scope of our investigations. Reading *How to Do Things with Books*, I felt a bit abashed by my focus on content alone; surely the book requires a more imaginative, less insular response. But then, retreating with it into my study at least in part to avoid my husband, who had committed the domestic sin of forgetting to call the cable company, I felt a little more in tune with its expansive reach. And when I noticed a flyer advertising a local Internet service provider hooked to my doorknob, I found myself remembering the analogy Price drew between the distribution networks of Victorian religious tracts and contemporary junk mail. Thanks to the dynamic relations this work sets in motion, the reader may find himself or herself in the position of Jane Eyre, struck metaphorically, if not literally, by the materiality of the book. *How to Do Things with Books* compels attention from us not only because of its intellectual brilliance but also because it goes to the heart of our own practices.

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