



**NEW  
DIRECTIONS  
IN BOOK  
HISTORY**

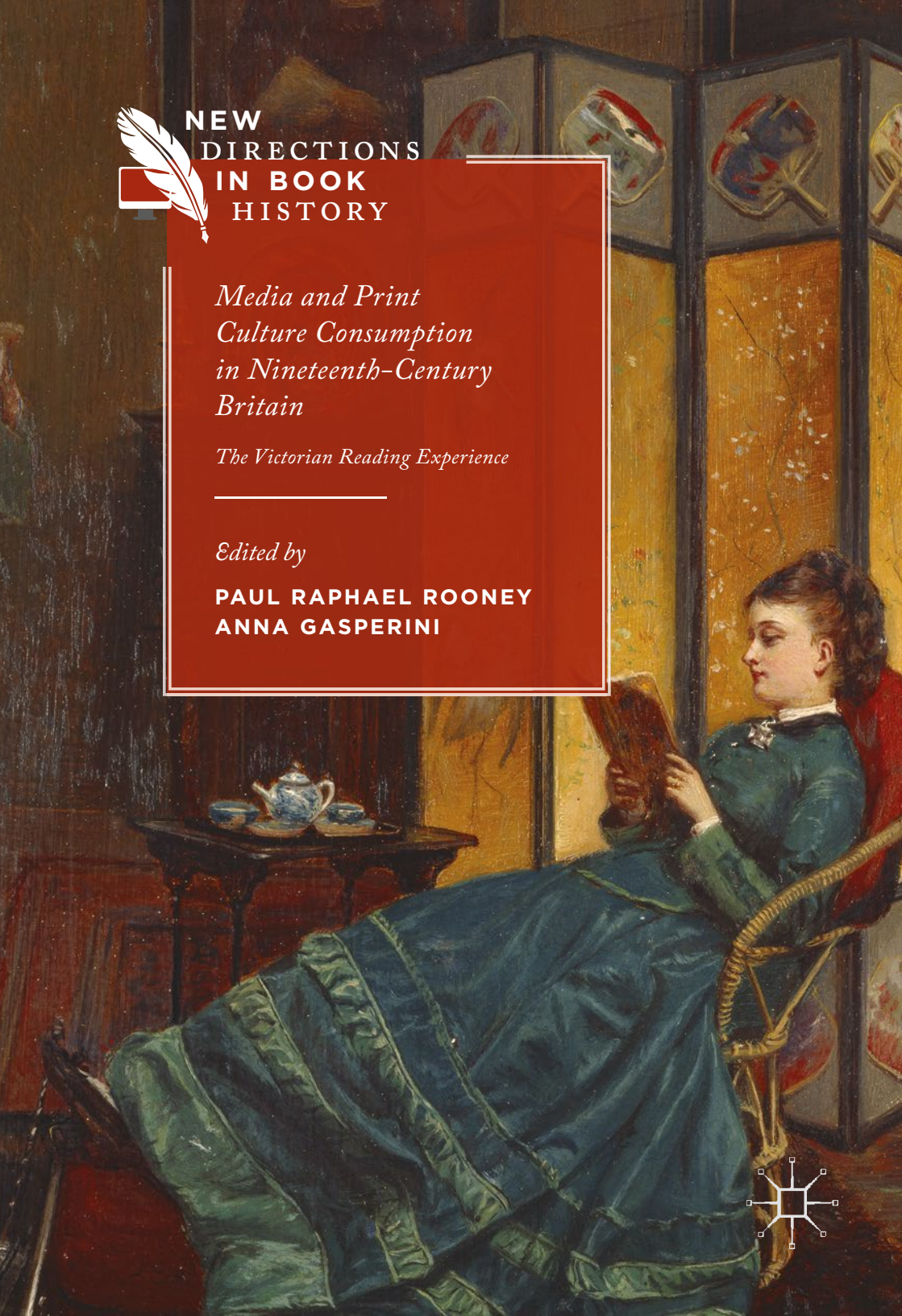
*Media and Print  
Culture Consumption  
in Nineteenth-Century  
Britain*

*The Victorian Reading Experience*

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*Edited by*

**PAUL RAPHAEL ROONEY  
ANNA GASPERINI**



# New Directions in Book History

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Paul Raphael Rooney • Anna Gasperini  
Editors

# Media and Print Culture Consumption in Nineteenth- Century Britain

The Victorian Reading Experience

palgrave  
macmillan

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## Introduction

*Paul Raphael Rooney and Anna Gasperini*

In opening a study of the history of nineteenth-century reading, a useful point of departure is perhaps the cartographical metaphor that Richard D. Altick employed in introducing his field-defining scholarly enterprise, *The English Common Reader*.<sup>1</sup> Such a concept, like much in that foundational study, remains a vital and apposite way of approaching research on this topic. Accordingly, where once the map of the nineteenth-century reading landscape charted by book historians constituted little more than an incomplete sketch that delineated some of the area's principal landmarks, the accumulation of a critical mass of scholarship on this subfield within the past two decades has contributed to a decidedly clearer (but still by no means complete) sense of the breadth and variety of the Victorian reading experience. Thus, this collection has the advantage of emerging at a moment when it is feasible to examine this period's readers and their reading from the kinds of standpoints that would not have been possible for the initial wave of scholars piloting this recovery endeavour. Accordingly,

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framing our enterprise within the parameters sketched by Robert Darnton in his seminal 1986 examination of the history of reading, it is questions of why and how that will concern the essays featured in this collection.<sup>2</sup> First, we wish to probe the reasons why nineteenth-century audiences consumed reading matter. Additionally, the macro- and micro-analysis case studies that essayists present look to juxtapose their reconstructions of these motivations with the actual dividends that consumers likely realized from their temporal, monetary, and mental investments in these acts of reading. A parallel and ancillary objective also informs this dimension of proceedings. While it has absolutely been our editorial intention in determining the composition of the volume to reflect the plurality and diversity of the period's reading landscape, achieving comprehensiveness was not one of our objectives and arguably would be foolhardy even to attempt. Rather, we have particularly looked to illuminate areas of the period's reading not yet comprehensively explored. Correspondingly, the collection's second core concern looks to spotlight the heretofore little-examined question of how nineteenth-century readers conducted their reading when such consumption of print culture texts was framed by kindred contemporaneous encounters with content emanating from other media. In foregrounding this latter strand of enquiry, it is our wish to explore the viability of studying nineteenth-century reading in conjunction with affiliated activities like listening and viewing so as to acquire a more complete sense of cultural consumption during this time.

The 2011 three-volume collection of essays, *The History of Reading*, edited by Shafquat Towheed, Katie Halsey, and W.R. Owens, in many respects represented the culmination of the vision that Darnton had charted in his 1986 meditation on the viability of documenting historical readers' activities. Commendably ambitious in its scope and coverage, this monumental piece of scholarship casts a wide geographical and chronological net in its exploration of audiences' consumption of reading matter. The reflections on the methods one can adopt in studying reading and in the accumulation and interpretation of evidence of this activity, which the editors advance in opening each of the trio of volumes, along with the strategies modelled by the prodigious body of contributors offer a blueprint (and indeed a veritable smorgasbord of approaches) for future work on the subject. In our exploration of Victorian reading, this collection also subscribes to the idea of methodological eclecticism and making use of a multifarious body of evidence that Towheed and Owens espouse in opening the first volume.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, one of the key points of departure of the contribution to the field that we as editors wish to register originates

in an observation offered by Towheed in his introduction to volume three that emphasizes that ‘reading does not (and has not) ever existed in isolation from a variety of other different forms of communication’.<sup>4</sup>

In zeroing in on the Victorian period, this collection follows in the footsteps of two other recent edited volumes of note. Matthew Bradley and Juliet John beautifully capture the joys and challenges of this kind of scholarly enterprise in the wonderfully self-reflexive evaluation offered in the introduction to their 2015 volume, *Reading and the Victorians*, which frames this kind of research as an exercise in ‘reading the Victorians reading’.<sup>5</sup> Granted, a certain proportion of the volume’s coverage does orbit somewhat conventional territory in the kind of subjects foregrounded. However, the Bradley and John collection also pursues some pioneering avenues of enquiry featuring scholarship like Simon Eliot’s illuminating essay on the impact of lighting on readers’ experiences, Stephen Colclough’s revisionist take on Mudie’s role in furnishing Victorian readers with their reading matter, and Rosalind Crone’s social network analysis of data harvested from that magnificent boon to the historian of reading, *The Reading Experience Database*. It is our particular intention to expand further the horizons of the field with this collection with the kinds of topics and questions we spotlight. Beth Palmer and Adelene Buckland’s 2011 *A Return to the Common Reader: Print Culture and the Novel 1850–1900* frames itself as ‘fruitfully complicating’<sup>6</sup> or engaging in a disaggregation of the portrait of the Victorian reader that emerged from Richard Altick’s magisterial and trailblazing 1957 *The English Common Reader*. This is an enterprise in which the collection admirably succeeds. While a relatively compelling case is articulated for the key premise and resulting subject emphasis of the Palmer & Buckland collection, which contends that the ‘novel [is] the form that can reveal most to us about the conditions and concepts of reading that operated in the Victorian period’,<sup>7</sup> *The Victorian Reading Experience* aims to reflect the eclecticism of nineteenth-century audiences’ reading matter by also considering the consumption of factual writing, drama, and song alongside the novel.

### THE FRUITS OF READING: THE RATIONALE DRIVING VICTORIAN AUDIENCES’ PRINT CONSUMPTION

But suppose we first ask, quite simply and candidly, What is the object of our reading?—to answer which simple-looking question would perhaps to some people be a puzzle indeed. Reading, to some people, is a mere pass-time, a mere kill-time, we might call it. [Haultain offers a lengthy anecdote about



‘a portly matron’ he supposedly encountered on a train who confessed to a particular fondness for reading love stories—an appetite he deems entirely legitimate and harmless in a person of her maturity] Youth should read—What for? Surely to settle a creed, or at least to discover grounds for believing few things credible, to form ideas, or to give reasons for lacking them, about the constitution of the world and its relation to its Maker, to gain estimates of philosophy, and science, history and art; to learn something of man, of nature, and of human life; to obtain relief from care or recreation from toil; to quicken our perceptions of beauty; to make keen our conceptions of truth; to give clarity to thought, and learn expression of emotion; to plumb the deeps of friendship and take altitude of love; to study character as depicted by those who could read it; to watch how great lives have wrestled with problems of life; to set us standards and samples of nobility; to ‘cheer us with books of rich and believing men’; to seek solution for those doubts which come when intellects of different calibre and conviction clash; to find assuagement for the pangs which pierce sundered hearts; ‘to maintain around us the “infinite illusion” which makes action easier’; to ‘stir in us the primal sources of feeling which keep human nature sweet’; to ‘familiarize ourselves with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence’.

Arnold Haultain, ‘How to Read’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (February 1896), pp. 249–50.

Arnold Haultain’s wide-ranging inventory of the prospective gains that he perceived as arising from youthful Victorian audiences’ engagement with reading matter points towards the myriad of motivations that could conceivably lead readers of any age, gender, or class to acquire and consume print culture objects. Haultain paints a tremendously rich tableau and the essays featured in this collection will spotlight a number of the principal advantages that particular audiences were likely to hold up as the desired outcomes of their reading. To that end, a number of common themes run through our contributors’ reconstructions of these experiences.

Firstly, the belief that reading could stimulate one to become a better person intellectually or morally and perhaps in turn even serve as a catalyst for professional or socio-economic advancement is a principle that Barbara Leckie and Lauren Weiss examine. Leckie’s chapter considers the readership of what was perhaps the archetypal and still most widely-known work of Victorian improving reading, *Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles. Leckie focuses on the kinds of reading strategy Smiles’s book sought to foster across audiences’ wider navigation of the reading environment and also profiles the historical readers likely to have engaged with this work upon its original publication but who have yet to be the subject of sustained

examination in scholarship on Smiles. By contrast, Weiss's chapter is an enterprise in recovery that sets out to retrieve the consumption history of an important but now less widely considered class of nineteenth-century edifying reading matter: the manuscript magazine created and consumed by mutual improvement societies. Focusing upon a Glaswegian example of this kind of group, Weiss tracks how reading was undertaken within this kind of communal context and highlights the stimuli that lead such coterie audiences to consume these varieties of text.

Secondly, the sense that investing in the consumption of reading matter would furnish a lens through which one might interpret, frame, or indeed 'read' one's everyday experiences within various different spheres is an idea that Katie Garner, Anne Humpherys, Ruth Doherty, and Caroline Bressey, all explore in the context of a diverse array of print culture texts. Garner's revisionist take on the nineteenth-century readership of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* presents a challenge to the conventional conception of this medieval literature text as a work intended for a predominantly male audience. This essay spotlights a noteworthy and substantial female Victorian readership of the tale for whom it furnished a worldview and model of behaviour to which they could aspire. Humpherys's examination of the cheap reprint series publishing ventures of John Dicks also sets out to reframe received thinking about historical audiences' consumption of content repackaged in new and affordable formats. This Dicks chapter underlines how the paratextual material and series configuration of titles in the firm's collection furnished consumers of the series with a decidedly eclectic conception of what constituted legitimate culture. Such heterogeneity had the potential to affirm the tastes and preferences of audiences who sought a more varied diet of reading that comprised both the usual class of 'standard' works alongside more obviously 'popular' content. History of reading scholarship routinely foregrounds the target readership demographic of a particular category of reading matter. Caroline Bressey's chapter treating the late nineteenth-century British anti-racist periodical, *Anti-Caste*, offers an excellent counterpoint to this by exploring why many black British readers of the time did not engage with the kind of publication that featured content that had potential to speak to their experiences of racial discrimination. Doherty's chapter takes as its focus a cultural phenomenon, which was arguably one of the bestselling and most widely-read titles of nineteenth-century fiction, *The Mysteries of London* by G.W.M. Reynolds, and spotlights one particular keystone of the works. Doherty demonstrates that in addition to the entertainment a

work of this kind might ostensibly furnish, Reynolds's expansive narrative offered the implied audience of *The Mysteries* a template that they could utilize to interpret and conceive of their everyday experiences of living amidst the urban environment.

Thirdly, the practice of reading for pleasure, diversion, or literally as a pastime (as touched on by Haultain in the context of the mature lady fond of reading love stories whom he apparently encountered during a train journey) will of course figure in any examination of the Victorian reading experience. Chapters by Paul Rooney, Kate Mattacks, Isabel Corfe, and Marie Léger-St Jean all engage with various permutations of print culture encounters that were rooted in audiences' use of reading as a recreational or leisure activity. Focusing on the particular example of the late-Victorian sensation novel, Rooney explores specific intra-media consumption strategies that audiences enlisted to augment the pleasure derived from their readership of ephemeral varieties of light fiction. Similarly, Mattacks's essay on Victorian theatre writing examines the allure of the playtexts of works of contemporary drama circulated in the T.H. Lacy Acting Editions series. These volumes granted readers who were not theatre practitioners access within the medium of print to entertaining cultural matter otherwise only to be encountered within the playhouse. Thus, audiences had the potential to enjoy in their own time and space a genre of writing that would not only amuse but also as Mattacks shows, had the potential to precipitate a process of reflection on the reading process itself. Corfe's examination of Victorian street ballad literature tackles a similar kind of domestic readership. This chapter's discussion seeks to reconceptualize the locus of the appeal of this print culture genre for its historical audience by demonstrating that its allure was significantly more multifaceted than merely satisfying a supposedly debased appetite for tawdry tales of violence. The gratification that a print culture artefact could yield obviously did not manifest in a uniform way for all readers. Léger-St-Jean's chapter on penny dreadfuls and their visual co-texts engages with this sense of diversity from the standpoints of socio-economic difference and reading ability by juxtaposing the consumption of reading matter from this stratum of the reading environment by the young Robert Louis Stevenson and two less advantaged East London boys.

As editors, we are of the view that the sorts of case studies and questions our contributors explore no doubt merit consideration in themselves and have the potential to advance scholarly discourse about the individual topics examined and the larger issue of the intended outcomes

of Victorian readers' consumption of print. Additionally, it is our aspiration that the research featured will potentially offer a methodological model for future work on the history of reading within a nineteenth-century context and across the field more broadly. Thus, in curating the scholarship featured in the volume, we have looked to emphasize the merits of pursuing a hybrid or blended approach that draws on and appropriates strategies from both the theoretical and the empirical sides of the methodological divide that Bonnie Gunzenhauser cites as one of the defining factors of this discipline.<sup>8</sup> While we have not opted to structure the collection's ten chapters in quite so formal a manner as the tripartite methodological toolbox, comprising artefactual, paratextual, and institutional approaches, that Gunzenhauser's collection showcases, there are a number of distinct commonalities and strands in the strategies that our contributors bring to bear on the topics they examine. First and foremost, each essay is defined by its use of a composite approach. For instance, Leckie, Garner, Corfe, Rooney, Bressey, Doherty, Humpherys, and Léger-St-Jean all mine extant historical or anecdotal sources such as journalism, criticism, life writing, and literature that attest to the motivations underpinning audiences' consumption of reading matter and then fuse this brand of analysis with discussion of the artefactual or material remnants of this reading. A number of contributors including Garner, Rooney, and Doherty enlist fictional representations of reading often extracted from literary sources that they consider alongside authentic or factual accounts. Given that this is one class of evidence that *The Reading Experience Database* precludes, it is important to weigh up our usage of this kind of data. The insights one can procure here no doubt rank below those combed from historical sources. However, as the chapters in question demonstrate, the sorts of avenues that literary sources open up can prove quite fruitful to study the larger question of why audiences read. A related issue is the thorny question of theory. While few if any scholars of reading would advocate a return to the ahistorical obtuseness of reception study, we wish to suggest it would be foolhardy to dismiss entirely the potential for theory that is deployed judiciously and in a historicized way to advance our understanding of this activity. Therefore, Weiss, Mattacks, Rooney, and Doherty all adopt a framework that combines systems such as folk stylistics, thing theory, and ideas of the cross-media with discussion that is attentive to the bibliographical coding and socio-cultural context of the particular reading matter spotlighted.

## FRAMES OF READING: CONSUMPTION OF PRINT AMIDST THE WIDER MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

This volume's second thematic current or strand of enquiry originates in the editors' wish to delineate new potential avenues in which the field of readership studies might proceed. In keeping with our previous discussion of the place of theory, this should not be read as an effort to swim counter to the largely post-theoretical current of present-day waters but rather an effort to mine and repurpose the past so as to plot future new directions. Thus, building in part upon the concept of the horizon of expectations as formulated by Hans Robert Jauss that offered a theorization of how audiences make meaning when undertaking acts of reading, five of the volume's essays look at an aspect of Victorian reading that we might broadly conceive of as the frame of reference. Understandably, given the philological origins of Jauss's reception scholarship, criteria like genre, forms and themes, and register of language were the pivots of the model of enquiry his work prescribed.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, this project's efforts to illuminate the interpretative fabric of Victorian reading experiences approach this idea from a different perspective that is informed by more recent work on the cross-media. Specifically, our contributors turn their attention to the wider nineteenth-century media climate in order to shed light on the ways in which Victorian readers' exploits in the print media environment were conditioned by contemporaneous contact with cultural content encountered in other media. Accordingly, this is an enterprise first and foremost concerned with reconstructing the convergences that surrounded particular acts of reading when encounters with print intersected with other modes of entertainment or knowledge transfer like viewing or listening. While the case studies featured focus in the main upon literary works, we would suggest that there is wider relevance to this examination of pan-media 'reading'. Thus, in larger terms, it is also an effort to probe how the figurative conceptual spaces delineated by Victorian reading were mediated or conditioned by the period's cultural and commercial milieux. The volume's discussion zeroes in on three major domains.

Firstly, the rich cross-fertilization between the Victorian novel and theatre of the period is an issue that has elicited increasing attention from scholars of Victorianism in recent times.<sup>10</sup> For the most part, questions of cultural production have been to the forefront of this research. In an effort to counter this comparative marginalization of the consumer, chapters by Paul Rooney and Kate Mattacks approach this topic from the perspective

of Victorian audiences whose reading was conditioned by the two cultural spheres. The particular lens that each essay employs reflects the distinct disciplinary backgrounds of the two scholars. Mining both conventional theories of adaptation and repurposed ideas of the cross-media originally articulated with reference to the present-day media environment, Rooney considers the representative example of the late-Victorian popular fiction of Fergus Hume. Historical readers' encounters with this novelist's output was conditioned in a distinctly intra-media mode of consumption that encompassed both the print media incarnation of Hume's writing and the adaptations of his work dramatized for the stage. Consequently, the sort of cultural experience furnished was one where the frame encircling the act of reading this sensational literature could owe much to visuals, dialogue, and orchestral music encountered within a performance medium of stage melodrama. Addressing the subject from the standpoint of theatre and performance studies, Mattacks explores the circulation and readership of print media renderings of playtexts in the Victorian period so as to illuminate some of the potential crossovers between the act of reading and the experience of taking in a stage performance. This chapter focuses in the main on the genre of sensation drama and the circulation of this kind of content in Lacy's 'Acting Editions' series. Mattacks demonstrates the potential for such reading matter to precipitate a process of meta or self-conscious reflection in the reader about the defining characteristics of the printed medium through which this literature was accessed and the impact occasioned by cultural matter encountered in interconnected media.

Secondly, Isabel Corfe foregrounds a related medium in her chapter looking at mid-nineteenth-century consumption of street ballad literature. Corfe spotlights the experiences of less privileged readers capable only of expending a modest outlay on their reading matter whose engagement with the textual content diffused in this genre of cheap printed matter intersected with and was framed by oral culture and song. Corfe argues that the inherent scope for amateur musical entertainment, which was often mounted in communal settings that existed at the frontier between the domestic and public, was amongst the principal criteria that led consumers of street ballads to acquire these items of reading matter. Challenging the prevalent impression of these objects that emphasizes their propensity for dealing in grisly and violent subject matter and partial resemblance to the modern tabloid press, this chapter contends that judgements on the perceived singable properties of these sheets was paramount in shaping consumer choices in this sector of the print marketplace. The ways in which these print culture

exploits were framed by oral and/or aural stimuli that played upon audiences' musical awareness and appreciation of popular song is at the heart of Corfe's discussion. Her chapter profiles the strategies that ballad sellers employed to disseminate this material, the circumstances of consumers' acquisition of the artefacts in public spaces such as town centres, and the subsequent consumption of this content in communal or familial settings.

Thirdly, the potential for visual media that were exhibited in public spaces (and particularly within the urban environment) to frame audiences' reading is an analogous issue that both Ruth Doherty and Marie Léger-St-Jean examine. Doherty positions G.W.M. Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* within the context of contemporaneous public entertainments that exhibited advancements in urban mapping and microscopy. This Reynolds-focused chapter spotlights this juxtaposition to demonstrate the affinity between the experience of reading the verbal text of a prodigious print culture phenomenon like *The Mysteries of London*, which sought to document contemporary city life, and encounters with kindred visual-based content. Doherty illustrates how the Ordnance Survey mapmaking initiatives and Polytechnic displays of the magnifying potential of the microscope also yielded an illuminating representation of the topography and hidden depths and layers of the metropolis. Much the same as Corfe, Doherty also sets about recovering the performative dimension associated with the consumption of this print culture content and posits that the representation of the urban that emerges with Reynolds's capitalization on these convergences had the potential to stimulate both the private solitary reader and the auditor exposed to this material as it was read aloud. There was an inclusivity to the latter class of cultural experience, which meant it could involve in the reading process individuals whose literacy was not particularly advanced or those who had missed out entirely on the opportunity to learn to read. Léger-St-Jean takes as her focus this specific nineteenth-century constituency. Concentrating on a similarly inexpensive variety of print culture, the penny dreadful serial, this chapter zeroes in on an anecdote of juvenile London East-End readership. Documented by James Greenwood in *Saint Paul's Magazine*, this particular reading experience was set in motion by the act of decoding or 'reading' the woodcut cover visuals that the local area's newsvendors exhibited in their shop windows with a view to drumming up interest in the latest numbers of the weekly penny narrative. Gazing upon the illustrations stirred the two young boys (one illiterate and the other semi-literate) to acquire the verbal content of the instalments to satiate their appetite to clarify their

conjectures about the highwayman's adventures, which reputedly drove the impoverished youths to theft to muster sufficient funds to purchase a copy of the printed matter. Léger-St-Jean juxtaposes these boys' experience of reading illustrated advertising matter with the reminiscences that Robert Louis Stevenson shared of his youthful forays into similar window-shopping territory, in order to attest to the distinct classes of visual-verbal convergences that existed in this period.

In tackling questions about reading that revolve around issues of the sort examined by Rooney, Mattacks, and Doherty, which are not necessarily as simple as who read what book during which particular moment in time, it is not always possible to root all of one's inferences in evidence that is entirely anecdotal, historical, or empirical. Thus, we would suggest that a comparatively more speculative brand of enquiry, which naturally uses as its point of departure the extant, accessible evidence of reading, but also has recourse to perspectives and frameworks derived from more theoretically inclined branches of scholarship is often a necessary first step in beginning to recover experiences where consumption of print culture converged with other media. On the other hand, even when seemingly abundant quantities of evidence on a particular kind of reading matter lie at the scholar's disposal, it may not necessarily be the case that unmediated access to these readers' histories emerges as a result. Corfe's essay on street ballad literature is an excellent example of this methodological and evidentiary dilemma. It offers an examination of a genre of print culture defined by its veritable ephemerality where scholars' present-day sense of readership of the form owes much to factors beyond our control. While there is little doubt that the revisionist objective that underpins the chapter is capably and convincingly achieved, Corfe is also attentive to the fact that the conclusions presented emerge from *extant* data whose precise composition is a product of the principles and ideals of the individuals responsible for compiling these collections. Reflections of this kind that weigh up the kinds of evidence that we as scholars of print culture and historians of the book can legitimately employ in turn also calls forth the question of the relationship between the study of reading within book history and the treatment of this topic in the wider field of literary studies. Chapters by Doherty, Rooney, and Mattacks all grapple with assorted permutations of this issue. Unsurprisingly, given the literature background of many scholars who work in this field, the rich vein of material culture scholarship in Victorian studies, along with the prevalence of research on the readership of literary texts in the wider history of reading



domain, we wish to suggest that there are reasonable grounds to query the scope for (and indeed wisdom of) imposing a hard and fast distinction between the two areas. It is interesting to note that two of the more significant works of scholarship that one might conceive of as bookending the study of Victorian reading to date—Amy Cruse’s *The Victorians and their Books* (1935) and Leah Price’s *How to do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012)—were each replete (arguably in very different ways) with material that spoke to both communities of scholars. It is our hope that the essays featured in *The Victorian Reading Experience* will achieve a similar bilingualism.

### CONCLUSION

In the spirit of that philosophy, there is perhaps merit in concluding these opening remarks and ushering in our assembled contributors’ chapters by reminding our readers of two notable moments that occur in George Gissing’s 1894 novel, *In the Year of Jubilee*—a work where individuals are quite literally defined by the reading matter that they consume. We would suggest that these particular episodes illuminate a great deal about the practice and politics of reading in Victorian times and specifically in the context of the two questions that this collection explores. First, the inadvertent meeting between the novel’s heroine, Nancy Lord, and Lionel Tarrant, the young gentleman to whom she is drawn, at the circulating library of the seaside town where she is vacationing prompts the young woman to alter her initial intentions to acquire a novel for light reading in favour of borrowing a volume of lectures on scientific subjects. Her choice elicits incredulity and bemusement on Tarrant’s part. As Nancy is conducting her business at the library, two of her fellow female customers seek the aid of the library attendant in their quest for ‘a pretty book’,<sup>11</sup> which serves as a source of amusement to Nancy and Lionel. Thus, Nancy’s change of mind, Tarrant’s bemused reaction at her choice of book, the other women’s enquiry, the couple’s derision at what they witness, along with Tarrant’s subsequent claims to have abjured any interest in reading matter like the volume of lectures (articulated when he and Nancy have left the library), all reveal a great deal about what audiences then and now seek to derive from the act of reading. The second episode of note also involves Nancy but this time the young woman is in conversation with another possible suitor, the less genteel advertising agent, Luckworth Crewe. Over the course of the pair’s first sustained encounter at the titular Jubilee celebrations, Crewe offers Nancy an extended explication on the