

**Leah Price, What We Talk About When We Talk About Books:
The History and Future of Reading**
(New York: Basic Books, 2019), 214 pp. US \$28; CAN 36.50\$
(Hardback) ISBN 978-0-465-04268-5

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Ouvrer ensemble. Les rouages collectifs dans la chaîne du livre
Working Together. Collective Mechanisms in the Book Circuit

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RACHEL HARRIS and/et PHILIPPE RIOUX

Leah Price, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books: The History and Future of Reading* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 214 pp. US \$28; CAN 36.50 \$ (Hardback) ISBN 978-0-465-04268-5

Given its title one might assume that this book would provide an introductory narrative on the historical development of reading, along with insightful opinions on its likely future in a digital world. Histories of the field can take many forms—showing reading as a powerful and positive force for personal fulfillment and social change or, alternatively, as a disruptive activity creating social and personal chaos. Various studies have envisaged futures ranging from the conventional to the fantastic. This book's dust jacket blurb assures potential readers that the study focuses on the scarcity of "evidence that books are dying," and on the "scant proof that a golden age of reading ever existed," as readers have always "skimmed and multitasked." Price argues that every criticism made of today's digital world has previously been made of the print world.

The actual focus of this book is, however, rather more complex. With an introduction, conclusion, and six chapters, it presents a potpourri, a miscellany, of loosely connected thoughts on aspects of the history, lore, and practice of book culture. The three operational premises of the book are sound: text and copy (container) are not the same and must be distinguished, the role of books and reading can only be understood within social contexts, and opinions and evidence about book culture both within and between historical periods are frequently contradictory. With these premises in mind, a great deal of interesting and thought-provoking factual material, interpretation, and opinion is provided. The problem for this reader is the material's very loose and fluid structure. The chapters have titles that are singularly unrevealing with introductions that give little indication of what will follow. Within chapters few, if any, subheadings are given or divisions noted. The trees are constantly overwhelming the forest!

To give a sense of the book's range, one might consider some of the topics included in each chapter. Chapter one, "Reading over Shoulders," deals with topics such as Quiet Cars on trains, text versus copy, changing formats and their frailty, and counting bibliographical items for scholarly or commercial purposes. Chapter two, "Real Life of Books," compares the interpretative approaches of Elizabeth Eisenstein (misspelt "Einstein," 70) and Adrian Johns, the death of print, slow reading, borrowing, buying, Dickens having few novels in his collection, the fluidity of manuscripts, print, other media presentations of text, and the history of paper. Chapter three, "Reading on the Move," deals with where one reads, and combines reading and sales with other activities. It also includes a section "Interleaf: Please Lay Flat" where sentences flow from left to right of each open page – verso to recto (110-117)! Chapter four, "Prescribed Reading," talks about books and reading as therapy, bibliotherapy, and the dangers of reading. Chapter five, "Bound by Books," considers social insistence on reading, book mobiles, reading groups, reading activists, and books as alternative to Ritalin and Valium. The conclusion, "End Papers," holds that one technology rarely supersedes another. Canadian content appears in Chapter four when Alice Munro is mentioned in relation to prescribed reading.

This book is intriguing and frustrating, insightful and baffling. Saving graces include detailed footnoting and a reasonably good index. There are no illustrations. Graduate students in book history programs may find it more helpful than general readers. The author is Leah Price, Distinguished Professor of English, Rutgers University, and Founding Director of the Initiative for the Book. Her previous publications include: *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture* (2017), *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012), *Unpacking My Library: Writers and Their Books* (2011), and *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* (2000).

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Nicolas Valazza, *La poésie délivrée. Le livre en question du Parnasse à Mallarmé*, Genève: Droz, coll. «Histoire des idées et critique littéraire», 2018, 336 p. ISBN: 978-2-600-05894-0

La poésie «délivrée» dont il est question dans le livre de Nicolas Valazza est celle qui a existé hors du livre, par manque de