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TEACHING THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE BOOK

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In 529, the Order of St. Benedict in Italy organized the first known scriptorium, establishing a pattern of copying, disseminating, and storing manuscripts. In the tenth century, Persian scholars created and transmitted handwritten works, preserving many manuscripts in local mosques. In 1967, staff at Shanghai's Xujiahui Library prevented the Red Guard from breaking in and burning its books. In that same year, African-American library patrons successfully challenged Alabama public libraries for the right to read, urging lawmakers to desegregate library buildings and compelling local officials to issue library cards to everyone, regardless of their race.

Each of these examples represents an individual glimpse of what I regard as the history of the book, comprising not just its development as an artifact, but also its history in a particular time and place, influencing and influenced by the social practice of reading, and the social institution of the library. In each of these examples, books become a representation of something else—in the case of the Xujiahui librarians, a counter-revolutionary force to Mao's Zedong's totalitarian regime; in the case of African-American library patrons, a democratic right that should be freely available to all. Books, then, become objects intimately connected with the people who read and collect them.

So, while teaching book history as the story of its development as an artifact is undoubtedly important, placing that history more prominently within the social contexts of reading and libraries seems crucial to one's understanding of book history, since books are both the continuing means of social practices (such as reading), and since they comprise larger social institutions (such as libraries) intrinsic to such practices. In the course of this essay, I will examine how studying the history of the book within these contextual frameworks allows one to gain a greater understanding of the book not only as an artifact, but also as a form of technology that continues to evolve and to influence both the social practice of reading and the social institution of the library. This approach to book history pedagogy also, I believe, reveals the ways in which the book's social histories inform its present status and its importance for the future.

Forming the basis for my pedagogical approach are two texts that promote a kind of historical interdisciplinarity: Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading* (1996), and Jonathan Rose's speech, “From Book History to Book Studies” (2001). Manguel's book examines the history of reading in various cultures and time periods throughout the world, exploring topics ranging from the development of silent reading, to the history of eyeglasses, to

women's reading groups in ninth-century Japan and nineteenth-century America. While Manguel's book does not exhaust these topics, it does provide a fairly broad scope of the history behind the act of reading, connecting it with the development of writing and the codex, the history of publishing, and library history.

Jonathan Rose's article, in which he describes his vision for future book history programs, also advocates an interdisciplinary approach; in his article, he states, “We [as book historians] cannot go it alone. We must think in broader terms; we must reconceive our scholarly work as part of a larger academic project. I propose that we bring together, under one interdisciplinary umbrella, specialists in book history, printing history, the book arts, publishing education, textual studies, reading instruction, librarianship, journalism, and the Internet, and teach all these subjects as an integrated whole." While Rose's vision is certainly ideal, it points to the necessity for a greater interconnectedness in the humanistic curriculum—and by extension, closer alliances among teachers in the humanities.

Armed with these ideas and ideals, I set out to teach “The Social History of the Book” last fall. The class itself was offered as an undergraduate-level class in the General Education department, and I proposed and taught it for three reasons: (1) because I was curious to see if anyone would take the class; (2) because I was (and am) drawn to the interdisciplinarity of book history—not just its connections with art, technology, history, and literature, but also its connections with reading and libraries; and (3) because I wanted to understand more fully what I lacked in my own education as a literature scholar and librarian: a history of the book that incorporates a history of the people and institutions bound up with it. I faced the added challenge of getting to teach the class only one time, and therefore felt even more obliged to cover the histories of books, reading, and libraries.

Given my desire to survey all of this in four months, I chose Manguel's book as the primary source for my class, and divided the course into four sections: Writing, Reading, Libraries, and Prophecies. Part one (**Writing**), introduced the course with a history of the book as it relates to, and grew out of, the development of writing. Part two (**Reading**) explored the histories of reading and communities of readers in various cultures over time (e.g., reading practices, censorship, and other related issues). Part three (**Libraries**) looked at the history of libraries as they related to the history of the book, as well as the physical structure and function of libraries. Part four (**Prophecies**) considered where the book, the library, and reading were headed in terms of form and function, given the development of online texts and digital libraries.

On paper, my course looked great, neatly divided into four sections, with clearly (if broadly) defined parameters. In reality, my students and I just glanced the surface of each of these areas, and our discussions continually referred back to previous readings and anticipated future ones. In spite of (or because of) the fact that I got precisely what I wished for—a greater education in book history, with the added bonus of enthusiastic students—I developed some strategies to give a shape to the seemingly endless connections we began to make.

The first strategy I adopted was to keep methodology and theory to a minimum, especially since I was teaching undergraduates. For example, to acquaint my students with book history methodology, I gave my students overviews of various approaches—analytic and descriptive bibliography—and a few essays by Robert Darnton, Walter Ong and Roger Chartier, with only the faintest whiffs of Barthes and Foucault. This is not to suggest book history methodology or theory is unnecessary—for example, Chartier's extenstive study of literacy rates in 18th-century Europe, and Darnton's essay in which he lays out some directions for studying the history of reading are two foundational works in book history. However, including other sources (the more “popular” works of Manguel and Nicolas Basbanes) is also crucial to a fuller understanding of book history as it connects with reading and libraries.

Which brings me to my second strategy: using fiction, history, memoirs, and even works of art, in addition to more “standard” book history texts. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Richard Wright's account of obtaining a library card in the segregated South both resonated with my students, particularly Nafisi's account of her literature class putting *The Great Gatsby* on trial for immorality. Also, since much of book history is bound up with art, using images—the British Library's “Turning the Pages” Collection and images from ArtSTOR—can be extremely helpful in showing students a digitized copy of Gutenberg's 42-line Bible or a Chinese woodblock.

A third strategy that draws on Jonathan Rose's vision of book studies is to call on other people's expertise by getting historians, literary scholars, journalists, and librarians to co-teach (or even guest-teach) a class. In this particular course, the university library's archivist taught one class about the rare books in the university library's special collections; on another occasion, the electronic resources librarian taught a class on the connection between institutional repositories and digital libraries.

The fourth, and last strategy, is to get feedback on the class from the people who are taking it, well before the course ends. This was, perhaps, the most important plan I used when shaping this class, because it allowed me to address what the students wanted (within reason) while taking stock of our course—both the actual course and our journey through it—while there was still time to make necessary changes. I did this by conducting a midterm evaluation, eliciting anonymous assessments from students halfway through the semester about different aspects of the class, including its readings. One common complaint referred to the amount of reading (what's new), but many comments referred to the *kind* of reading—that is, my students wanted fewer histories of printing in medieval Japan, and more histories about African-Americans' struggle for the right to read, as well as more personal accounts and memoirs of reading. Thus, with some adjustments in assigned readings, my class changed from “The Social History of the Book,” to “The Social History of Reading as it Relates to Books and Libraries.” And it was, quite frankly, all the better for the change, since it allowed my students and I to engage more directly with the ways in which books continue to influence the social practice of reading, and the social institution of libraries.

An essay on families in 18th-century England reading aloud to each other informed our discussions about the current popularity of book clubs, and how reading is as much a communal act as it is a solitary one. Historical accounts of forbidden reading material for young girls in colonial America gave us insights about ongoing censorship of books for young adults. We also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of online reading—elided in the 2004 NEA study measuring the supposed decline in literary reading—and how online reading has merged with writing to form the "communal books" of blogs and wikis (from “the Death of the Author” to “Everyone's an Author”).

As for libraries, essays on the popularity of free subscription libraries and public libraries in United States showed my students (nearly all of whom are from the U.S.) why they associate public libraries with democracy. Learning about the fate of books and libraries during China's Cultural Revolution, or about African-American's attempts to gain the right to read, revealed how libraries (and books) can become sites of political and ideological conflict. Finally, Basbanes' chapter on the demise of thousands of books at the San Francisco Public Library astounded and enraged my students, revealing their respect for the object as much as the idea of a book, as well as their beliefs about the mission of a public library.

One final advantage of studying book history within the contexts of reading and libraries is that this approach can reveal insights about the book's present and future status as a technology—using the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “technology” as a practical art. The most important thing it reveals, I think, is the fact that the book as a physical object will continue to endure. I say this not only as a starry-eyed book lover and librarian, but also as a user of many practical arts. That is, discovering the ways in which people have read, collected, and stored books over the centuries—and by books, I include scrolls, manuscripts, codices, electronic books—reveals that technologies do not merely supersede one another in the way that, for example, software programs do. Gutenberg's famed invention did not signal the death knell of manuscripts, any more than the World Wide Web killed the book. Moreover, newer technologies pattern themselves after older ones: online readers scroll down a web page or flip the pages of a virtual book, and many text block designs of current books are modeled on manuscript design.

Teaching the history of the book, then, becomes teaching the histories of the book—its connections with the histories of reading, writing, and libraries, and its connection to a particular place and time, as well as its relation to art, literature, and history. One of my students from last semester said it best, when she held up a library book said, “I'm starting to get an idea of all the people behind this book: it's not just the author now, but the editor, the

publisher, the cataloger who decided how to describe it, the reference librarian who helped me find it, and the last reader who read it, because they wrote in the margins." *That*, for me, is the history of the book.

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