



The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home

Abigail Williams

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A vivid exploration of the evolution of reading as an essential social and domestic activity during the eighteenth century

Two centuries before the advent of radio, television, and motion pictures, books were a cherished form of popular entertainment and an integral component of domestic social life. In this fascinating and vivid history, Abigail Williams explores the ways in which shared reading shaped the lives and literary culture of the time, offering new perspectives on how books have been used by their readers, and the part they have played in middle-class homes and families.

Drawing on marginalia, letters and diaries, library catalogues, elocution manuals, subscription lists, and more, Williams offers fresh and fascinating insights into reading, performance, and the history of middle-class home life.

The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home Details

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Author : Abigail Williams

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From Reader Review The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home for online ebook

Eustacia Tan says

I borrowed this book because... why wouldn't I? It's about books, which is one of my favourite things.

To be clear, this is not an easy read. It's about the ways people read in the 18th century and it's written in very dry, academic language. I almost stopped several times because of the language and the only reason I continued reading was because of the subject matter. To be fair, the fault is mine for assuming this would be an easy read.

The book covers 8 topics:

1. Reading aloud (the primary way people read then) and what that meant
2. How the act of reading was part of social life
3. How books were read
4. How people managed to get their hands on books
5. The pervasiveness of poetry
6. The difference between reading aloud and acting and what that meant
7. How people viewed fiction
8. How people viewed religious and scientific works.

I mentioned that the language was very academic and dry, but the subject matter is really interesting and I picked up a lot of interesting facts. For example, people used to read parts of books rather than from cover to cover, which explains the structure of older books.

And in the section on the novel, it is written that 'the novel might be seen as the antithesis of sociable reading' and so communal reading was encouraged to negate the 'isolating' effects of the novel. This second point was quite surprising to me because the novel is seen as helping to develop empathy nowadays, not encouraging people to become isolationists.

Oh, and if you're a fan of Jane Austen's Mansfield Hall, you'll enjoy the chapter on acting vs reading aloud because it helps to explain why it was so scandalous for the young people in the book to put on a play.

Overall, if you're interested in reading about reading and/or the history of reading, you should pick up this book. The style is a bit intimidating (I probably need a few more reads to properly get everything!) but the information is fascinating.

This review was first posted at Inside the mind of a Bibliophile

Mary Catelli says

All sorts of eighteenth century reading. Works on elocution, lewd anecdotes to the Family Editions of works from Shakespeare onward, the problems with selling Shakespeare plays that hadn't actually been acted for over a century, the dangers of eyestrain and how having someone read aloud could protect your sight, reading associated knickknacks, and more.

Thomas says

A fascinating look at how and what people read in the 18th century - and how books/texts functioned in domestic life. Clearly written and blessedly jargon free for an academic work. The stuff about reading aloud was interesting as audiobooks have become a greater part of my reading diet in recent years and it is noticeable how much better 19th century fiction "reads" aloud than many contemporary novels (Dickens is great to listen to if you're hunting for a roadtrip audiobook). I like history of reading books as a sort of interested amateur, so I can't really comment on any of the more detailed claims that are made, but I enjoyed it (even if I found it a little repetitive at times for my "interested amateur" level of curiosity).

Kris Lundgaard says

Deliciously eye-opening.

Edward Sullivan says

Drawing from such sources as marginalia, diaries, letters, library catalogues, elocution manuals, and subscription lists, Williams explores how shared reading shaped the lives and culture of the time and offers insight into how books were used by their readers. A fascinating, insightful, enjoyable history.

Rhiannon Johnson says

Not exactly an "enjoyable" read but definitely informative.

Linda says

A requested Christmas present book, I finally picked this up and read it and it was very enjoyable. As a librarian who has always loved to read aloud (and given many opportunities as an elementary school librarian) I often notice when reading aloud is part of a story (thinking now of the Ingall's family in The

Long Winter when they make a stack of periodicals last by only reading one episode of a serial story every day). In this very readable history, Abigail Williams seeks to extrapolate the reading habits of the English during the 18th century from the huge amount of written evidence left behind. Using inventories, commonplace books and letters, the author introduces us to the way people of different walks of life were able to enjoy written material in the many forms produced during that century.

Susan Carlile says

Nicely organized introduction to what it felt like to be a reader in the UK in the 1700s. Fascinating accounts of reading aloud at home and how people fell in love with books in social settings. When a study like this is written for the 21st century, Goodreads will be part of our story. I am intrigued with the overlaps between our time and theirs...both the similarities and the differences.

Karen says

I requested The Social Life of Books from my library because a review I read mentioned something that intrigued me. By the time it showed up, I'd forgotten why I'd wanted to read it. But no matter. If you don't have an inherent interest in the history of reading and books or in how people lived in the eighteenth century, this is not the book for you, and you can stop reading this now. I, having both, loved it. It's a work of literary sociology, and so it privileges the general over the specific, and eccentric, but it provides an interesting overview of the enormous importance of books and reading in this century. Williams likes to talk about people "consuming" books and "deploying" the fact of their reading, which reinforces the sociological emphasis.

To some extent, I loved learning about a world in which people read all the time and reveled in discussing what they'd read. Unfortunately, had I lived in that happy time, I'd have had to spend a lot of time sewing and avoiding the "imputation of pedantry." Though much is taken, much abides.

Alex says

This looks fun! Williams says that within a family, the patriarch was in charge of buying books and of reading them out loud to his family. "Books had an aura of hierarchy and patriarchy: the parson in his pulpit, the politician at the dispatch box, the professor on the podium, paterfamilias in his armchair." No wonder Samuel fuckin' Richardson happened.
