

citations suggest. Yet those teaching classes on either the region or American communal utopias should find this summation a good starting guide for students to learn the basics, and to locate possible points of entry to further study of any one of the groups discussed.

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### *Well-Read Lives*

#### *How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women*

By Barbara Sicherman

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Pp. 380. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

With its focus on Gilded Age literary culture, Barbara Sicherman's *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women* beautifully evokes a world in which women read to construct identity and build community. In the process, they also found paths to meaningful civic participation in the Progressive Era. The book is organized into three sections: the first establishes the context for young women's reading during the second half of the nineteenth century, the second examines the role of reading in privileged women's lives, and the third provides insights in the reading lives of women without privilege. Portions of these elegantly written essays have appeared previously as articles or book chapters, yet when read collectively they represent a significant

contribution to the history of print culture in America.

Sicherman's careful examination of the role of books and reading in the lives of novelist Louisa May Alcott, Bryn Mawr president M. Carey Thomas, and Hull House's Jane Addams illustrates how reading propelled them beyond the gender norms of their era to lives of public achievement. Of particular interest to Hoosier readers is a chapter devoted to the Hamiltons of Fort Wayne, whose class standing gave them easy access to a wide array of books. Steeped in a print-based interpretive community, the Hamiltons read passionately, played word games, and created entertainments based on their favorite literary themes and characters. Emerging from this context, Edith subsequently became well known as

a scholar of classical civilization and author of several significant works, among them *Mythology* (1942). Also a voracious reader, her sister Alice moved to Jane Addams's Hull House before becoming the first woman professor at the Harvard Medical School in 1919.

Historically, elite women have often preserved their reactions to books in diaries, correspondence, and autobiographies, but reconstructing the reading habits of working-class women and racial and ethnic minorities presents more of a challenge. Like their counterparts in the privileged classes, Polish immigrant Hilda Satt Polacheck, Jewish immigrant Rose Gollup Cohen, and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells left autobiographies. Sicherman's close reading of Polacheck's *I Came a Stranger* (1989), Wells's *Crusade for Justice* (1970), and Cohen's *Out of the Shadow* (1918) results in a diligent reconstruction of how these women read for personal and civic empowerment. One cannot help wondering, however, about the role of reading in the lives of women who lacked the resources to capture, let alone preserve, their experiences in print.

In an epilogue, Sicherman observes that today's proliferation of

reading groups affirms the continuing popularity of reading among women, but unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, busy twenty-first-century female readers use book clubs less as "a launching pad for public activities" and "more like places of refuge" where they can reconnect with one another (pp. 255-56). As Sicherman shows throughout this invaluable monograph, Gilded Age women used books as vehicles for moving from highly gendered private spaces into lives of public service. Reading with both emotion and purpose, the women of ambition and accomplishment she portrays drew insight and inspiration from the predominantly male role models they encountered in print and ultimately inserted themselves into history for others to read.

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