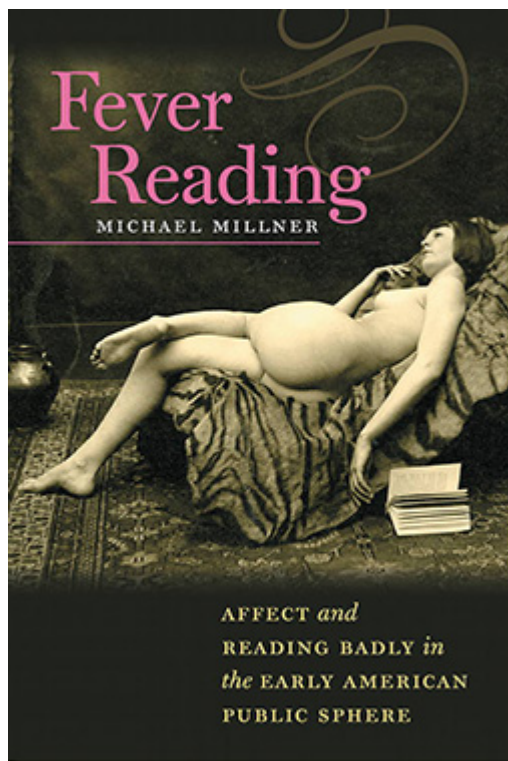


Bad Books, Good Citizens

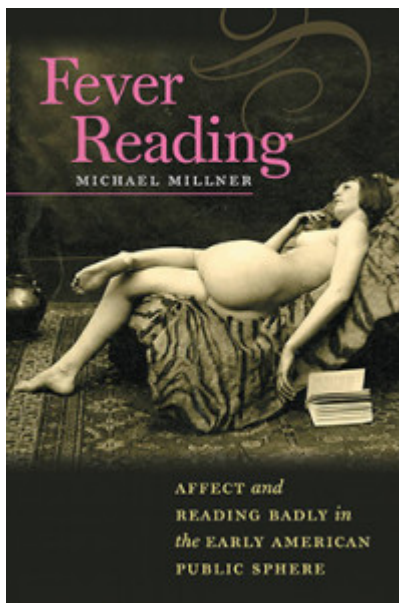


Michael Millner's *Fever Reading* begins with the appealing idea that it "seeks to understand the meanings of reading badly" (xiii). This is a wonderful hook for an academic audience. Most of us have had to squelch feelings of being bad readers—we don't finish books, we prefer the sexy or the scandalous to the important, we struggle to stay awake for work we know to be theoretically interesting (in both senses). At the same time, we know what *good* reading is: critical, objective, knowing, questioning. Millner's examination of nineteenth-century American reading practices looks at texts that solicit emotional rather than rational responses, those devoured with feverish absorption. Such, alas, is not generally the problem with our academic practices, but the central question still appeals: can bad reading, in fact, be good political practice?

About readerly practices and their relationship to politics there is, as Millner demonstrates in this deeply researched study, much to tell and much to learn. Those of us who have engaged with histories of readership are well aware that our available scholarly models are insufficient. Theories of reading have often been a bit like theories of economics, in which rational actors respond in predictable ways to literary stimuli. More recently they have tended instead toward a model of resistance, as if every reader were always subverting hegemony even while consuming its products. The former category emphasizes reading's role in what Jürgen Habermas called rational-critical discourse, while the latter privileges unruly, embodied emotions. Millner attempts a new structure of analysis that bridges these poles. To Habermasian public-sphere theory (in a nutshell, the idea that print culture enabled political progress

via reasoned debate), Millner adds theories of affect. In particular, he engages William Reddy's theory of "emotives:" verbalized emotions that we use to navigate the varied stimuli of our lives. Millner argues that we need to understand readerly emotion as a critical reading practice in order to grasp what it meant and means to participate in the American public sphere.

Fever Reading is divided into two parts, with the first laying out the book's theoretical foundation and the second offering up archives for analysis. The first section gives an overview of classic public-sphere theory and some of its revisions, and deploys period texts to show that eighteenth-century authors agreed with Habermas that good reading is characterized by "critical distance (rather than the immersion and attachment characteristic of, say, popular forms of religious reading or pornographic reading)" (9). Less familiar to scholars of early America may be the review of scholarship on emotion—or "cogmotion," as some cognitive scientists apparently call the nexus of thinking and feeling. Where literary criticism tends to interpret emotion as always either "symptomatic" or "strategic," Millner says, the "experimental sciences" suggest that emotions "are a form of perception, even a form of critical thinking" (15-16). This is the theme to which Millner returns throughout the book: reading that looks thoughtless, indulgent, or prurient should be understood instead as potentially critical practice and as meaningful (if not necessarily effective) participation in the public sphere.



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The second part of the book addresses three categories of text that have typically, Millner claims, been excluded from public-sphere theory: the obscene, the scandalous, and the religious. "What could be more antithetical to distanced, discussion-oriented, autonomy-creating, and reflective public-sphere reading than absorptive, addictive, and secretive pornographic reading?" he asks, ventriloquizing an imagined tribunal of public-sphere theorists (72).

Millner's answer, based on readers' "double experience" of privacy and publicity, is not groundbreaking (72). Instead, as he freely acknowledges, his work joins an ongoing scholarly effort to revise the public sphere away from its rational-critical basis. Without such revision, Millner explains, "Habermasian public-sphere theory is not particularly helpful in understanding the public sensorium of modernity" (73). With it—if the "rational-critical public sphere" is understood instead as the "affective-critical public sphere"—we may develop a model that describes not only American history but also the global present, transcending Habermas's extremely narrow (Western, middle class, implicitly white and male) formulation (144). "If there is an existing public sphere that extends beyond pockets and enclaves to reach something like a majority, it is characterized by sensation and emotion, not critical reason," he concludes (146).

Millner's substantive contribution toward this lofty goal is in assembling his three archives of marginalized literature. In his chapter on obscene literature, he carefully reconstructs what this category meant in nineteenth-century America by scrutinizing arrests for obscene publication. The titles mentioned in arrest reports lead him to two bodies of literature. The first, the "sporting press," consisted of newspapers like the *National Police Gazette*, which ran from the 1840s through the 1870s, and shorter-lived but more expressively titled papers like the *Whip*, the *Flash*, and the *Broadway Belle*. These papers presented a veneer of public-mindedness while they reveled in "prostitution, celebrity, deformity, the criminal underworld, murder, and beautiful and battered bodies" (76). The other category, "obscene novelettes," rose to prominence in the late 1840s and 1850s, as the newspapers cleaned up under official crackdowns. Millner offers examples from this genre that place public figures in compromising positions, as in the anonymous *The Amorous Intrigues and Adventures of Aaron Burr* (Millner labels it a "porno-bio" [88]) and a scene from George Thompson's *The Countess* in which the heroine seduces Harry Rush, rakish son of Benjamin. By putting public life and obscenity into conversation (criminal or otherwise), this literature generated its own structure of reading. It focused on current events and political figures, emphasizing "a simultaneity of information and readership"; it also positioned readers as participants in an anonymous community (81). So far, the structure of reading matches that credited with creating publics in classic public-sphere theory. On the other hand, the politicians who appeared in these works were not debating policy but vomiting drunkenly or visiting brothels. The news "isn't offered for analysis, interpretation, or critical reflection as much as it's presented to elicit reactions we usually associate with the body: disgust, loathing, exhilaration, thrill, arousal" (81). The readers become observers and critics of society through their visceral reaction to texts.

Millner shows that his second archive, scandal texts, gained new importance in the mid-nineteenth century. While print has perhaps always been used to tell secrets and lies about people, it was in this period that scandal became "mediated." It moved, as a concept, from society whispers into printed pages, and print became a creator (rather than a spreader) of intrigue. Scandal looks

like “the public sphere gone bad”: “Instead of truth and agency, the scandal sphere seems to offer little more than highly manipulated spectacle meant for easy consumption; it is often perceived as a product of the culture industry masquerading as news and information” (95). This perception is more or less what Millner demonstrates in the course of the chapter. The highly popular *Awful Disclosures, by Maria Monk of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*, for example, claimed to draw aside the pious veil of a religious institution to reveal an abusive brothel. It inspired a bevy of “refutations, refutations of refutations, sequels, and copycat books” (110) that, taken together, relegate the concept of reliable narrative to the realm of naïve illusion. Scandal literature suggested secrets everywhere; it also represented the power of print media to create intrigue where there might have been none to discover. Participants in such a culture could hardly expect to weigh evidence objectively and come to rational conclusions. Instead, they had to feel their way between trust and mistrust. Here Millner notes that affective reading is not always a liberating alternative to the detached kind, and it might not yield political effectiveness. “This situation isn’t necessarily one to celebrate. It is simply a reality. In a society of complex decision-making processes, democracy is grounded, not on communicative reason, but on some of the most fundamental feelings of trust and mistrust that may be circulated through the media” (118-119). The conclusion is commonsensical, especially when we think about our own media culture, but it is nevertheless refreshing in a field that is often tempted to view non-normative public engagement as progress.

The final category is evangelical texts, designed to move the heart rather than engage rationality. The Second Great Awakening promoted images of embodied reaction, as converts wept, babbled, and collapsed under the influence of spiritual fervor. This doesn’t at first look like a rational-critical public sphere, but readers of these texts debated and questioned what they read according to public-sphere norms. Millner presents a fascinating archive of these practices: the notes of colporteurs who distributed Bibles and tracts in the New Jersey Pine Barrens in the 1840s. They recorded useful numbers—how many people had Bibles, how many read them, how many accepted tracts—as well as pithy anecdotes about cantankerous villagers (one “‘can scarce buy rum much less a bible’”) and, of course, much weeping (124). Tears produced by religious reading are, as Miller notes, a cliché of the genre, but he offers a compelling interpretation. Readers approach the texts as part of the public sphere, subjecting them to analysis and debate. At the same time, the religious works point to an absence: rituals and meaning lacking in secular life. The crying—the distillation of affective response—is a critical response to the public sphere itself.

The (good) reader who finishes Millner’s book is left convinced that emotional response is an element of public-sphere participation, and a necessary topic for further study. His evidence makes clear that when literary historians postulate either ideal or subversive readers, we miss the many more varied and complex responses solicited by texts, and so fail to understand the ways those

texts operated in the world. The frustration with this kind of work is acknowledged by Millner: we can deduce structures of reading from texts, but the experience of the individual reader—the heart of the matter—will always elude us. (A few readers made records of their reading experiences, but these are vanishingly rare and by nature atypical.) Still, Millner’s careful analyses represent a significant step toward understanding reading cultures generally, that of nineteenth-century America in particular, and our own media moment. Perhaps the “experimental sciences” will one day offer tools that let scholars peer into the minds and brains of readers past. Millner shows what they have to offer literary history in the present: a set of concepts that enables a scholar to revisit an outmoded construct, take up the trusty tools of archival research and close reading, and begin to rebuild it.