

Jenny McPhee

The (Imagined) Woman Reader and Male Anxiety

Recently, in *The New York Review of Books*, Elaine Blair wrote, "Our American male novelists, I suspect, are worried about being unloved as *writers* -- specifically by the female reader. This is the larger humiliation looming behind the many smaller fictional humiliations of their heroes, and we can see it in the way the characters' rituals of self-loathing are tacitly performed for the benefit of an imagined female audience." The novelists she uses to illustrate her trenchant and entertaining theory are Michel Houellebecq, Gary Shteyngart, Sam Lipsyte, Richard Price, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace. She sees their fiction as a reaction to their immediate predecessors -- John Updike, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth -- dubbed by Wallace as the "Great Male Narcissists." The Contemporary Male Novelists, asserts Blair, are neurotically conscious that the contemporary Female Reader -- who, the statistics prove, keeps publishing economically afloat -- finds the near-total self-absorption of the GMNs repugnant: for the FR, Wallace imagines, Updike is "just a penis with a thesaurus." The CMNs fear the FR is no longer willing to interpret rampant misogyny as searing self-portraits of mangled masculinity, but rather as just more misogyny and who needs it? Their livelihoods threatened, the CMNs are doing the utmost in their narratives to tell the imagined female reader that they are at least hyperaware of their own utter self-absorption. So nowadays "female characters get to remind the hero that he's a navel-gazing jerk, but most of the good lines, and certainly the brilliant social and psychological observations, still go to the hero."



Male anxiety about the woman reader is as old as reading itself. In Belinda Jack's new book *The Woman Reader*, she meticulously explores the manifestation of this anxiousness historically. Some men encouraged and cultivated their women readers: Ovid created characters such as Byblis and Philomela to show his empathy for the female plight. Others, such as Lucian and Juvenal, wrote biting satires expressing their disgust for literate and intelligent women. During the Reformation, Luther, Calvin, and John Knox "all corresponded extensively with well-read women, whose knowledge of letters and tracts exerted significant influence on the reformers' positions," especially regarding what women should and should not be allowed to read. Rousseau, in his *Émile: or, On Education*, wrote that women should read and "cultivate their minds" but only enough to please their husbands. The eighteenth-century writer Samuel Richardson had an extensive female readership and kept up correspondence with them, often asking for their input and opinions. "My acquaintance lies chiefly among the ladies," he wrote, "I care not who knows it." William Makepeace Thackeray condemned Richardson as an inferior writer of "sentimental twaddle," read only by "old maids and

dowagers."

In our time, the complex anxiety the male author feels vis-à-vis his female reader reentered popular consciousness with Jonathan Franzen's *Oprah* fiasco when Franzen, upon the publication of *The Corrections* in 2001, expressed in an NPR interview his misgivings about a future appearance on Oprah Winfrey's show, her audience almost entirely comprised of women: "So much of reading is sustained in this country, I think, by the fact that women read while men are off golfing or watching football on TV or playing with their flight simulator or whatever. I worry -- I'm sorry that it's, uh -- I had some hope of actually reaching a male audience," i.e., the legitimate and legitimizing male audience he imagined was enjoyed by the GMNs and all the literary luminaries before them. Upon the publication of his next book, Franzen buried his disdain for his imagined female readers deep in his pockets and eagerly appeared on *Oprah*. Yet this powerful economic force of female readers has not altered the great disparity in publication between men and women writers; sadly, the VIDA Women in Literary Arts statistics continue to prove this year after year. The legitimizing White Male Standard Approval Franzen desires maintains its iron grip on all of us.

A comprehensive history of women's literacy, Belinda Jack's book begins with the Mesopotamian poet Princess Enheduanna -- born some sixteen centuries before Sappho and the first author in human history to sign a piece of writing -- and ends with a discussion of Azar Nafisi's 2003 bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, a text demonstrating that male anxiety over what women read continues to extend to the political sphere. Jack's tome overflows with revelatory information about women both as actors and the acted upon in the development of female literacy. Among countless examples: records show that of the 185 scribes for the Babylonian city-state of Sippar between 1850 BC and 1550 BC fourteen were women; writers from the early Middle Ages -- Hrotsvit, Hildegard, Dhuoda, etc. -- assumed increased literacy would soon allow women to fully participate in public roles despite customs and laws dictating otherwise; Renaissance women were active in the book trade running printing presses, publishing houses, and bookshops; in early modern England women who wrote or spoke publicly were associated with harlotry. The Earl of Rochester declared: "Whore is scarce a more reproachful name, / Than poetess." Though increased literacy led to great personal freedom for many women, the rising power of the press was generally used as a force of repression; "most books, however different their format, upheld the idea that women were inferior, physically, intellectually, morally and spiritually."

Jack consistently illustrates how the woman reader "is also a striking invention of the male imagination, a crucial aspect of men's desire to worship or condemn the mysteries of the 'opposite sex.' For a long time the woman reader was more often an idea or a symbolic construct rather than real, during stretches of history when few, if any, women were literate." This eroticization of the woman reader is most vividly expressed in men's visual representations of women reading -- of which there are vastly more than of men reading. "Women readers," Jack notes, "have long been associated with sexual illicitness and moral degeneration, and male readers with power and authority." Mirroring the Madonna-or-whore dichotomy, the woman reader is either represented by a chaste, virtuous, and contemplative

woman -- e.g., a beatific Virgin Mary reading a book of hours (this detail never mentioned in the Bible) while the angel Gabriel tells her of her impregnation by God -- or by a more explicitly sexualized woman. In Pierre-Antoine Baudouin's painting *The Reader* (1760) a woman, her face dreamily ecstatic, is draped over a chair in her boudoir, an open book by one hand, her other hand under her skirt. In Antoine Wiertz's 1853 painting *The Reader of Novels*, a voluptuous female nude lies engrossed in a copy of *The Three Musketeers* while a little devil creeps up on her. And there is that fabulous 1954 [Eve Arnold photograph](#) of Marilyn Monroe in a bathing suit reading Joyce's *Ulysses*. Whether virginal or wanton reader, the images express deep male anxiety over his own sexual obsolescence: the book threatens to replace the penis. Ultimately, the control of women's education and reading by men is an attempt to control women's sexual desire.

Blair describes a scene in Richard Price's novel *Ladies' Man* in which the protagonist fears his girlfriend's lack of sexual interest in him is due to her having an affair. But when he finds her masturbating with a vibrator, he plunges into an existential crisis. Price composes a veritable aria on phallogocentrism sung to his imagined female reader: "I was worried about some guy screwing La Donna and my real competition was Everready. Fuck it. She wanted to play around? Then me too. I was wasting my time with her. I was at the peak of my manhood. And I was good. And I wasn't just saying that the way every guy says it. I was goddamn good. And I was big. I was good, big, and the best."

Given such male anxiety around the written word and its dire consequences for women, it is tempting to advise the male writer he might try approximating his imagined female reader to a real woman reader, but then again, as Price reminds us, the real thing isn't always better.

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