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Review: Old Books & New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture by Leslie Howsam

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**Old Books & New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture** by Leslie Howsam. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 111 pp. ISBN 0-8020-94384-4

As a subject of study, the history of the book has shown tremendous growth within academic circles in both Europe and North America over the past thirty years. During this time, it has expanded to consider printing as a technology of communication and explored the reader's role in this development of "print culture." From classics such as Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (1979) and Roger Chartier's *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* to more recent texts such as Adrian Johns' mammoth *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (1998) and Ronald and Mary Saracino Zboray's *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People's History of the Mass Market Book* (2005), the study of book and print culture has developed into a rich and significant field of study. In response to this growth, a number of universities in the United Kingdom and North American have added departments and programs of study that focus specifically on book history and print culture.

For those new to this field, Howsam's *Old Books & New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture*, provides a useful introduction as it identifies the three disciplines—history, literature and bibliography—that have traditionally focused on the study of the book and print culture. It provides a concise introduction to the context in which these disciplines approach their study of the book and also identifies some of the recent interdisciplinary studies and trends that have added new depth to the field. It is structured as both an introductory volume for those students just beginning their investigation of the field, and as a review essay for the specialist audience who may be more concentrated in one of the three fields. Using examples drawn from scholarly works in these three fields, Howsam's work illustrates both the unique strengths (and limitations) of each discipline, and the manner in which interdisciplinary approaches (such as those involving reception theory, creation of knowledge and sociology of texts) are changing the face of traditional book and print culture studies. The author also concludes that there is a need for mutual respect (which has often been missing) between these disciplines if they are to advance this field of study.

Howsam's first significant task is defining book and print culture. She then provides thoughtful commentary on each of the three disciplines—literature (with its focus on texts and criticism), bibliography (with its focus on the book as a physical object) and history (with its traditional emphasis on aspects of agency, power and experience)—but admits that her strengths lie in the historical

approach. A useful diagram in chapter two illustrates how the three disciplines overlap and the types of works that have sprung up between them.

Having established the intellectual makeup of these disciplines, Howsam then delves deeper into her primary question: what is the book's place in history? To do so, she looks at models of the book in history, concentrating on one of the seminal models in the field—Robert Darnton's "Communication Circuit" model (1982)—and summarizing the each discipline's response to this classic model. The responses from bibliography, literary studies and history (of science in this case) not only showcase each discipline's intellectual and methodological strengths and weaknesses in action, but also illustrate the interdisciplinary overlap that Howsam is so eager to establish.

The meatiest portion of the book, however, is reserved for the question which one assumes that Howsam is most directly interested in herself: where is *the book* in history? As she notes ironically, "In the material sense the book is of course everywhere in historical study, but *the book* in the sense of being a vehicle for thinking about the past is just coming into its own" (p. 46). Here the author illustrates the difficulty that many historians have had in conceiving of the book as something that has a history like a nation-state or a social phenomenon such as capitalism. In examining some of the recent scholarship in this area, she suggests that the book has been a victim of its own "ordinariness" despite the fact that it is a medium whose conventions have changed dramatically over time. The most intriguing portion of this section is her analysis of how time, place and change over time—common elements in historical studies—become problematic in the examination of book and print culture. An interesting proposition for further historical study here is Howsam's suggestion that historians of the book utilize methods more common to literary scholars (in examining works of fiction) and transform them into new methods appropriate to the study of non-fiction works. Thus, for example, the study of authorship changes to a focus on composition or inscription, and that of readership to a study of reception.

In her final chapter, Howsam examines one of the more enduring issues to arise in the study of the book's place in history, and one which has taken on special significance in the age of the Internet—the mutability of texts, prints and reading. Its selection (among the many important research tangents within book and print culture) for discussion is not surprising as the idea of the fixity or mutability of text, is one which has led to some of the most spirited (if not fierce) debates between its various adherents in recent years. In providing examples of recent studies from the fields of bibliography, history, and textual studies that address the shared acceptance of the malleability of texts, the author is eager to note that these works "exemplify the way in which the literature of studies in book and print culture draws upon, and engages in debate with, adjacent disciplines" (p. 72).

The strength of the book lies in its conciseness in illustrating the major intellectual strains involved in the study of the book, and presenting in a seamless fashion some of the major studies that have addressed these strains as well as the criticisms engendered by these approaches. One might be tempted to criticize the author for certain biases, but she freely admits that as a historian, she has taken a decidedly historical stance in her own work, and is thus somewhat biased in favor of this approach (hence her focus on “the book’s place in history”). In addition, the book’s focus primarily on the “western book” is a limitation, but is one that is clearly identified by the author in her opening remarks.

Although Howsam succeeds in providing a fair and even-handed treatment of each discipline’s contribution to the study of the book, her flaw might be in that in trying so hard to be fair, she does not submit any of the approaches to a deeper critical analysis. Still, she is seeking to create harmony between the approaches, and searching for new methods and techniques in interdisciplinary approaches that will allow scholars to probe deeper into the book’s place in history. Her suggestion, and it is not necessarily a bad one, seems to be “Can we all just get along?” Mutual respect between the disciplines will go a lot farther in advancing this field of study than any kind of petty prejudices between historians and bibliographers over what kind of work is really considered “historical.”

Finally, a minor technical complaint can be lodged against the author’s choice to provide end notes instead of footnotes (she remarks on this in the introduction, saying she did not want to overburden the text)—but as the nature of the book is a bibliographical essay, it is sometimes confusing (for the non-specialist) to determine which particular author or essay is being referred to in the text without constantly referring to the back of the book. Yet this is a minor complaint in an otherwise seamless compilation of authors and their ideas that will certainly provide food for thought for both the specialist and the newcomer just becoming aware of this rich and rewarding area of study.

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**Reviewer**

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