



The Woman Reader

Belinda Jack

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This lively story has never been told before: the complete history of women's reading and the ceaseless controversies it has inspired. Belinda Jack's groundbreaking volume travels from the Cro-Magnon cave to the digital bookstores of our time, exploring what and how women of widely differing cultures have read through the ages.

Jack traces a history marked by persistent efforts to prevent women from gaining literacy or reading what they wished. She also recounts the counter-efforts of those who have battled for girls' access to books and education. The book introduces frustrated female readers of many eras—Babylonian princesses who called for women's voices to be heard, rebellious nuns who wanted to share their writings with others, *confidantes* who challenged Reformation theologians' writings, nineteenth-century New England mill girls who risked their jobs to smuggle novels into the workplace, and women volunteers who taught literacy to women and children on convict ships bound for Australia.

Today, new distinctions between male and female readers have emerged, and Jack explores such contemporary topics as burgeoning women's reading groups, differences in men and women's reading tastes, censorship of women's on-line reading in countries like Iran, the continuing struggle for girls' literacy in many poorer places, and the impact of women readers in their new status as significant movers in the world of reading.

The Woman Reader Details

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From Reader Review *The Woman Reader* for online ebook

Girl with her Head in a Book says

This was Book-Love at first sight. A book about the history of reading from a female perspective. I was at the fabulous West End Lane bookshop in West Hampstead, one of my all-time favourite bookshops and although it usually takes me an absolute age to decide which book to pick in, this time I was at the till after barely completing the first page. This is a true Book to Treasure. In *The Woman Reader*, Belinda Jack chronicles over forty centuries of reading and the many, many challenges to female literacy over time. The book is packed with fascinating anecdotes and the voices of women since what seems like the dawn of time join Jack in a chorus of shared passion for reading. From the outside, a history of the woman reader appears such a strange topic - reading itself is such an internal activity and then to separate out the female experience appears difficult, but Belinda Jack's book underlines time after time the anxiety and controversy which female literacy has caused. A woman who can read can take on the world.

Unlike other histories, Jack is not writing a book that builds to a positive finale. The struggle for female literacy continues; in the final chapter, Jack discusses Malala Yousafzai who was shot in the head by the Taliban for campaigning for female educational rights and even as I am writing this, in Nigeria over two hundred school girls were kidnapped from their school by the group Boko Haram which objects to women being educated. I have mentioned more than once that I am a feminist, I have also mentioned that I have taken a fair amount of abuse for owning up to this. When items like those appear on the news, the mind boggles about those who claim that feminism is responsible for the world's problems - if you are pro-human, then you should be pro-feminism.

Malala Yousafzai

Repeated studies have linked literate mothers with lower infant mortality - Global Giving has the campaign The Girl Effect, fighting for female education with the tag-line 'Save a Girl, Change the World'. Studies have repeatedly shown that an educated girl will provide a financial return to her family of between 10 and 20 times as much as a man with an equivalent level of education. The World Bank has named girls as the 'world's greatest return on investment' and as Global Giving remarks, the question is not so much, 'Why girls?' as it is, 'Why wait?' Female literacy gives women the power to shape their own destinies, to choose their own path, challenge the status quo but most importantly, it means that they can break free of ignorance. I remember the passage in *A Christmas Carol* where the Ghost of Christmas Present introduces Scrooge to the offspring of poverty, Want and Ignorance, warning Scrooge that Ignorance is by far the more dangerous. He was right.

Belinda Jack begins her history looking at cave paintings, women were involved in their creation judging by the size of the hand prints. The existence of images to be decoded pre-dated the invention of written language. Neanderthals read notches on bones which for them contained meaning, primitive man read picture messages on leather and bark. The idea of having one's head in a book did not arrive for centuries. Still, the first known author of any written work was in fact a woman, Princess Enheduanna. She lived in 23000 BC, making her the earliest poet in human history, her influence was felt in poetry for around five hundred years. *The Woman Reader* is crammed full of fascinating nuggets such as this, meaning that despite its in-depth detail, it remains a compulsive and often inspiring read.

For my full review:

<http://girlwithherheadinabook.blogspot...>

Maxine says

As author Belinda Jack shows us in her book, *The Woman Reader*, the evolution of women as readers has been a long and uneven one. There is little known about the earliest women readers and most of what is known is due to women's own records of what they were reading. Not surprising, most early women readers were from wealthy families. However, what is surprising is how many of these early readers taught their sons and their daughters to read, recommended reading lists even as these children became adults thus, in many cases, influencing the ruling of nations, and, in several cases, set up schools for poor girls and women. What is also surprising is how often these women wrote to refute some male writer who claimed women should not be allowed to read due to their 'weaker minds' and how often other male writers wrote in support of women's literacy.

The discussion of female readers inevitably leads to discussions of what they read, to women as writers, and, after the advent of the printing press, women as publishers. She also discusses the rise of literacy among women, not only in the upper classes, but in the middle and working classes as well which led, inevitably, to the publishing of books aimed exclusively towards them. This was especially true of the novel which, from its earliest beginnings seemed to be more popular with women than men.

This also led, inevitably, to much discussion about the dangers of reading of anything not religious and/or morally instructive on the 'weaker' sex and the fears that indiscriminate reading would lead to bad marriage choices, possibly madness, but, perhaps worst of all, women's ability to lead fulfilling solitary and sexual lives without the need of a male figure to guide them. The book is illustrated and there is one marvelous picture from the 18th c. of a nude woman reclining on a couch, book in hand, while in the shadows a little devil, adds more books to the pile beside her.

Jack points out how even female authors like George Eliot felt that much of what was being written for women was bad for them and that novels should always and only reflect real life. Writers like Dickens were considered lesser talents whose writing was suitable only to entertain chambermaids. I will say here, I found Ms Jack's use of this term to describe, I assume, working women an odd one but it is interesting to note that by the middle of the 19th century, literacy among working women was so widespread that books were being written for them and they were being released in serialized form so that they could afford them.

My only real criticism of this book would be about the last part concerning the 20th and 21st c. Perhaps because of the huge amount of materials available to women, she chose instead to discuss the effects of the rise of TV, movies, and the internet on reading; some, to most of us, obscure women's reading groups; and the publishing industry itself. Among some rather glaring omissions are the popularity of 'chick lit' and YA urban fantasies aimed at the young woman market and the widespread use of ebooks (I found the second somewhat ironic since I read this on my Kobo) and books written exclusively for paperless reading.

Still, in *The Woman Reader*, author Belinda Jack gives a fascinating picture of women as readers and, by extension, writers from our earliest portraits of women drawn on cave walls right up to the present. Although, it is mainly concerned with women in western cultures, there are some interesting references to Asian women readers as well as modern women readers in less liberated societies like present-day Iran. It is well-researched, well-documented, and beautifully illustrated and would be a great addition to the library of anyone interested in the history of women or reading or both.

Jenny McPhee says

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 *Emile: 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.

Shirley says

I think I wanted a different book.

This isn't a bad book really but I got quite frustrated with it, I wrongly assumed a greater scope on the history of women readers and started this with gusto. I'm afraid I got bored of the earlier history, lots and lots about the bible. Interesting enough at first but then it started to grate on me. Still I stuck with it waiting to get to the "good bit" the 20th century woman reader. And after more reading about the bible, nuns and the advent of the printing press (actually quite interesting) I flicked ahead and realised everything I wanted to read about was in one chapter, the last.

This was when I gave up, if I heard the bible mentioned one more time I would scream. So I read the last chapter and quite enjoyed it but I was left wanting to know so much more!

More about the internet and how tv affects our reading habits as women please? Does the work of vida affect how women read? What about the seventies and feminism? That must have affected our reading habits right? Feminist publishing companies like virago, I'm sure that the majority of their readers are probably women. How about two world wars? The jazz age, all of these things must have had some affect on us and the types of books women read and also write (it's probably too hard to disentangle the reader from the writer)

We get a touchstone on feminist theory in universities, oh what a great chapter that could have been! Let alone a chapter on blue stocking. Also talks about world literacy and how girls and women are often the ones getting left behind would in my mind have made a great chapter in itself.

So after all that I'd say if you go into this not wanting as much of the later history then this book would be really interesting. But if like myself you want more on the 20th century then maybe not, and if the author would like to write a follow up focusing more on the latter then I would most defiantly read it!

Nicole says

This book wasn't terrible, but it was terribly boring. I stuck with it all the way through, from the saga of Hilga, who read both the books available in Carolingian Europe, through the story of the modern-day *Causeries du Lundi*, North America's most snobby and elite book club. I kept thinking it would get better, because, women and literature, right?

I like both women and literature a lot, but it turns out that the academic study of the two together is deadly boring. The book wasn't without interesting nuggets, but at times it felt like a roll call of every woman who ever learned how to read over the course of 2000 years. It doesn't help that the author is English, and assumes a much greater familiarity with Tudor court intrigue and the course of the Protestant Reformation that most Americans possess. Well, more than I possess, anyway. Some overall points were interesting, but most of the experience of reading it made me feel like I was in college again, slogging through dense, dry prose that reached deep into historical arcana to make critical points.

Now that I have finished it, I am glad I know the things I now do about women's literacy rates, and the changing nature of what has been considered proper reading material for women through the centuries. But the journey was rough going. If this sounds like a subject you are really interested in, I wouldn't discourage

you further from picking up this book. Everyone else...do yourself a favor and read *The Book Thief* again.

Evelyn Morgan says

I found this book to be thorough and a little interesting. Ms. Jack examined the reading and writing habits of women since reading began. A little too thorough most of the time. I wouldn't recommend it to any one other than those seriously interested in a lot of minute detail of women's reading history.

Adele Symonds says

This is an obviously extremely well researched book detailing the history of women as readers and writers from pre-BC right through to current times. It details the growth of education for girls and the popularity of reading groups through the ages. There is much detail about the types of censorship which were tried in different countries and continents, the political ramifications and the literacy levels throughout the times along with the types of books which were being read by women and how we know what they were reading.

It contains many quotes from books through the times, from controversial books to books by women authors and poetry, alongside illustrations and photographs which add to the interest of the book.

As a history of women readers this is very comprehensive and surprisingly easy to read as it is written in a conversational style. It is easy for history books to be dry and dull but Belinda Jack has managed in this book to explore her topic in a very accessible way which keeps the readers interest throughout.

I highly recommend this book to anybody who has a love for reading.

Star rating 5/5 – extremely interesting.

Chloe says

A good history of women's reading which was at times interesting, but the style of writing often lacked any wit or warmth, and seemed to skim over huge swathes of history without any real points being made. Several times I was left with the impression that the author was showing off how much research she'd done without thought for her own readers. The first half of the book really needed a good editor to weed through the pointless and repetitive anecdotes about nuns. By the time I got to the latter half of the book, my brain was so hollowed out by the author's dry voice it became a bit of a marathon, which was a shame as the subject matter was much more interesting. Would have been better if the first half was significantly shorter, or if the sections were grouped into topics rather than written chronologically.

Pat says

Interesting, but a bit scattered, general, and not as academic as I hoped for. Odd that *Tale of Genji* isn't discussed until long after its composition, and Murasaki isn't mentioned at all--surely she was a reader, too.

Far more about British readers/ writers than anyone else; chapter on American attitudes is very general. Too bad Jack couldn't explore the ways in which ereaders keep private what one is reading (which is one reason romance readers were early adopters); after all, a woman might be reading something scandalous! without everyone else knowing! and without being chastised for it! The horror!

Girl with her Head in a Book says

This was Book-Love at first sight. A book about the history of reading from a female perspective. I was at the fabulous West End Lane bookshop in West Hampstead, one of my all-time favourite bookshops and although it usually takes me an absolute age to decide which book to pick in, this time I was at the till after barely completing the first page. This is a true Book to Treasure. In *The Woman Reader*, Belinda Jack chronicles over forty centuries of reading and the many, many challenges to female literacy over time. The book is packed with fascinating anecdotes and the voices of women since what seems like the dawn of time join Jack in a chorus of shared passion for reading. From the outside, a history of the woman reader appears such a strange topic - reading itself is such an internal activity and then to separate out the female experience appears difficult, but Belinda Jack's book underlines time after time the anxiety and controversy which female literacy has caused. A woman who can read can take on the world.

For my full review:

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Charlotte says

'The Woman Reader' by Barbara Jack traces the history of women's literacy, both reading and writing, from the earliest records to the present day. It's a truly gripping story which encompasses all of gender history; because the way that women have been able to express themselves in reading and writing has had profound echoes on everything they were able to accomplish. Jack presents countless examples of women who re-wrote the rules on what women were allowed to say in public – amazing women who stood up against people who tried to define them in one particular way.

There was one woman in particular who stood out for me. She was Christine de Pizan, whom Jack describes as 'an important type of woman reader who emerges across time and space. She read and was shocked by her reading, and wrote to encourage other women to read, and through their reading to counter sexual prejudice.' Christine is only one example of inspirational women who used literacy to create progress, and learning to engender understanding.

I've written more about Christine de Pizan in my blog:

<http://historyhistoria664.blogspot.co...>

Nathan Zalf says

Please note that this book was won off of GoodReads giveaways: History is filled with rich and life changing moments. Sometimes they are very memorialized like Confederation while others are lost and forgotten. Belinda Jack's 'The Women Reader' spotlights the struggle and journey of the fight for the privilege that

women earned to get the opportunity to read which ultimately allowed them to learn from the information they read and teach others. The story takes you to the very core and beginning of this issue and descriptively yet intriguingly and interestingly makes you not want to put this book down but continue reading it to the very end. It truly is something that you should put on your reading list because you will learn from it and look at reading from a whole other perspective from the one that you have now. On the contrary this book is densely packed with a lot of information which may not be for everyone and may want you to stop reading it mid-sentence.

Julia says

I received this from the Goodreads First Reads program last year and after reading it for a while I put it aside with the intention of coming back in a few months. However, since it's been close to a year since I last picked it up, I have decided to shelve as DNF.

The concept of this book is great. It's a history of women's literacy throughout history from Ancient Babylon and Greece through the present. (I got partway thru Chapter 7 which was around the 17th century IIRC.) However, it didn't hold my attention as much as I expected. This is partly due to the writing style, but mostly due to my lack of reading non-fiction. This isn't a novel, so I shouldn't expect it to flow like one.

The writing is very dense. The author has new facts and new names in almost every paragraph. These are meant to illustrate the different ways that women were involved in reading or writing. (The first few chapters focus more on women writing than on women reading.) But because there was SO much information, the theme was diluted. Although I celebrate that research is being done on Women's History, at times this was TMI.

The sections that I read included women's role in religion (primarily but not exclusively Christianity), reading as a way of defining women's role in the household, the difference between literacy for the aristocracy in Europe vs the middle classes, the purpose of women's education, and debates between male and female writers.

I think that if I were in academia I would appreciate this book much more.

Tintaglia says

Alla fine del 1700, l'illuminista (si noti bene...) Sylvan Marechal presento un Progetto di legge per impedire alle donne di imparare a leggere: troppo deboli di mente e spirito, non era necessario - anzi, era nocivo - che avessero i mezzi per imparare, studiare, e competere.

Il buon Marechal (che sfortunatamente non vide messi a frutto i suoi saggi consigli) era però l'ultimo di una serie di pensatori che in qualche maniera, per tutta la durata della Storia, hanno tentato di impedire l'accesso alla cultura, inferiore o superiore, delle donne; e che, per tutta la Storia, sono stati sconfitti.

L'autrice ripercorre la storia della lettura al femminile, che avesse come centro l'apprendimento o il puro piacere delle storie, dalla preistoria in poi: e ripercorre le difficoltà, gli usi, le lotte che in ogni tempo e in ogni Paese sono state affrontate per affermare un diritto - di più, una necessità.

Leggere è conoscere, conoscere è potere.

Bebe (Sarah) Brechner says

Excellent scholarly study of women and reading, starting from the earliest times and dwelling significantly on the middle ages. I was pleased to see some coverage of Asian, Jewish, and Muslim women readers, though these areas definitely need more exploration. The emphasis is on European and especially the British Isles, with finely detailed information culled from many archives and original documents. This is the most comprehensive study on Western women readers up to the 19th century. After that, the expansion was so rapid and widespread that it would take a couple of more volumes to adequately cover. Therefore, the last few chapters are unbalanced in coverage, but importantly touch on female literacy in contemporary culture.

We still need a definitive work on American women readers. The next to the last chapter "Nation Building" certainly highlights the significant and unusual progress by American women very early on in this area, but a separate work is needed. American women were the leaders in public education, the establishment of public libraries, and literary clubs. It is a most extraordinary history that must be covered.
