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# Review of Books for Idle Hours: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the Rise of Summer Reading by Donna Harrington-Lueker

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*Books for Idle Hours: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the Rise of Summer Reading*. By Donna Harrington-Lueker. (Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019. Pp. xiv, 229. \$90.00 cloth. \$29.95 paper.)

Summer reading might seem like a light topic for a scholarly monograph, but in *Books for Idle Hours* Donna Harrington-Lueker shows that summer reading has been serious business for a century and a half. With its project of "trac[ing] the cultural and commercial genesis of today's summer reading in nineteenth-century print culture" (3), *Books for Idle Hours* is a fascinating study of a distinct but largely overlooked body of nineteenth-century American

fiction and the authors, readers, publishers, and economic and social conditions that gave rise to it.

Among the many strengths of *Books for Idle Hours* is its range of methodological approaches, which conduce to a complex and multifaceted account of summer reading. Defining summer reading as both product and practice, Harrington-Lueker organizes the book topically, beginning with a wide perspective on nineteenth-century leisure and then drilling down to focus on specific authors, texts, and reading communities. Following an initial chapter that examines the broader cultural forces that promoted domestic tourism, the remaining five chapters take up the business of seasonal book publishing in the latter half of the nineteenth century; the definitive literary genre central to summer reading; physical sites of summer reading; and large-scale movements for serious summertime reading and the institutions that fostered them. Of particular note is a brief section on the summer leisure of middle-class African Americans, which paves the way for future research. With its array of bibliographic, historical, literary, and cultural approaches, *Books for Idle Hours* effectively brings together book-history methodologies that are more typically contained within discrete studies of authorship, publishing, reading, and reception.

In attending to summer reading as a product, Harrington-Lueker examines a host of archival materials to reveal the strategies publishers used to offset the traditional summertime sales lull. In a concerted effort to reclaim the summer months from the fiscal doldrums, some of the most influential publishers reframed the season as one with distinct audiences and geographical markets, preferred types of content, and unique reading practices that could be met and further cultivated through coordinated editorial strategies and marketing campaigns. Well-supported and convincing, the book's principal argument—"that between 1865 and the early 1900s, in the face of a dramatic rise in domestic travel and tourism, U.S. publishing houses sought ways to redefine the otherwise slow summer publishing season...with light leisure-time reading" (3-4)—demonstrates how the publishing enterprise repositioned reading matter that was "light" in both substance and heft as refreshing, genteel, and, for the most part, feminized.

To complement the chapters on leisure, tourism, and publishing history, Harrington-Lueker devotes two chapters to the rise of a new genre that quickly became a staple in the publishing world—what Harrington-Lueker terms the "American summer novel," defined by its "summer settings and summer experiences" (62). Supplemented by enumerative appendices, these middle chapters analyze the conventions and "cultural work" of the American summer novel, which Harrington-Lueker sees as constructing "liminal spaces—places of transition and release—in which issues of nation, social class, and gender are explored and expanded, subverted and reshaped" (12). In the mainstream, Harrington-Lueker finds, "the summer novel became a space in which [women especially] could experience, however vicariously, the freedoms summer offered while still being assured that marriage, family, and hegemonic masculinity remained" (63). Yet the flexible conventions of the genre also allowed for considerable variation that could accommodate darker, more challenging visions. In a chapter devoted entirely to William Dean Howells, who made something of a specialty of the genre, Harrington-Lueker examines Howells's testing of the boundaries of the American summer novel as a vehicle for social and economic critique before returning to the genre's more familiar—and more conservative—conventions. In addition, a substantial discussion of Louisa May Alcott's

lesser-known sensation fiction demonstrates how Alcott "uses summer settings at American resorts to explore a satumalian world of female passion and sexual agency" (71).

Shifting to summer reading as practice (that is, a set of literacy practices and rituals with ties to summertime), Harrington-Lueker devotes the remaining two chapters to the "places and spaces" of summer reading-resorts, hotels, and vacation homes, as well as the outdoor spaces and casual furnishings designed to incorporate books and reading into nineteenth-century versions of the summer "stay-cation." The book's scope is sweeping here, taking in resort bookstores and libraries, reading groups, and even entire movements (specifically, Chautauqua assemblies and the reading circles of the Catholic Summer School of America). The variety of source material the author taps is correspondingly impressive, encompassing architectural plans and catalogs, library records, summer school programs, and more. Here and elsewhere, through examination of letters, diaries, inscriptions, and other traces of historical reading experiences, Harrington-Lueker incorporates the responses of actual summer leisure-time readers-mostly, white, middle-class Americans, although the book attends to African American study groups as well.

The book's interest in the idea of diverse readerships brought together into an "imagined community" of temporally-bound leisuretime reading gestures toward a more ambitious claim: namely, that summer reading "complicates the idea of a stratified literary field, flattening literary hierarchies with an appeal that crossed class lines" ( 10). By extension, it sparks further questions about how, or whether, readers truly connected through reading across class lines and the extent to which summer reading served (and serves still) as a potentially democratizing force. In a brief epilogue in which she considers recent debates about the omission of writers of color from lists of recommended summer books, Harrison-Lueker emphasizes that "if nineteenth-century summer novels are ephemeral markers of their time and place, . . . the commercial and cultural rituals of summer reading that took shape around them more than a century ago remain" (180). If the capacity of summer reading to bridge social divisions in the nineteenth-century US remains an open question, the epilogue to this fine study conclusively shows it to be a particularly timely one for readers, reviewers, and publishers today.

*Sarah Wadsworth is a professor of English at Marquette University. She is the author of IN THE COMPANY OF BOOKS: LITERATURE AND ITS "CLASSES" IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA (University of Massachusetts Press, 2006) and coauthor, with Wayne A. Wiegand, of RIGHT HERE I SEE MY OWN BOOKS: THE WOMAN'S BUILDING LIBRARY AT THE WORLD'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).*