

Frank Felsenstein, James J. Connolly. *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015. 304 pp.. \$28.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-62534-141-9.

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Published on H-SHGAPE (June, 2017)

Commissioned by Jay W. Driskell

In their introduction, authors Frank Felsenstein and James J. Connolly present their aims for the book: to describe the evolving culture of print and to explain the origins and demonstrate the value of the What Middletown Read database. Felsenstein and Connolly created this database from the circulation records of the public library in Muncie, Indiana, from 1891 through 1902. The database includes demographic information and what books were checked out and provides clues about why borrowers chose certain books, the relationship between readers and the library, the nature of the public library as an institution of reading, and the culture of print in a rapidly industrializing community. The authors use the information in the database to view Muncie as a microcosm of reading patterns in a growing industrial city in the Midwest, following the lead of sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd, who used Muncie as a case study of the average American small city.

The authors have a strong grasp on both the merits and limitations of the database. Though the database shows which books were checked out by whom, people often checked out books for others, or borrowed each other's cards. Circulation records do not indicate whether the book was actually read, how the book was read or used, or how the reader reacted to the text. The records

also cannot take into account reading materials available from sources outside the library, so the library records only account for a portion of the reading habits. Nevertheless, Felsenstein and Connolly are able to use these records in order to provide a rich interpretation of the reading habits of Muncie's library patrons.

The introduction mainly discusses the database, the chapters in part 1 discuss the city of Muncie and the library, and the chapters in part 2 focus on the interpretation of reading habits. Throughout each chapter, the authors situate reading choices and the library within larger social contexts, reminding readers of the ways in which books and the library intersect with socioeconomic status and social identity. A study of the demographic information in the database shows that borrowers were typically middle-class white women and children. The library interior was "a quasi-domestic space, defined largely by the presence of women and children and the relative absence of men ... as well as the presence (and absence) of particular sets of people" (p. 55). Felsenstein and Connolly note, "the Muncie Public Library was not designed to reach out to [the black] segment of the population" as neither the board nor users saw them as potential readers (p. 140). Industrialization created a growing middle class who used reading and education as a means of

upward mobility, while members of the upper class bought the books they wished to read.

Chapter 2 focuses on the development of the library in its early years and its representation of Muncie's intellectual progress. The authors discuss many of the individuals who became involved in the library, from the postmaster who received permission to buy books and add them to the collection, to the library board which had the final say on which books were bought. As was the case with many libraries at this time, the books the board wished to buy and those the borrowers wished to read were not always the same. The board wished to buy only morally upstanding books with a Christian ethos. Readers, however, demanded popular works of fiction. Limited funding meant a reliance on donations, which created less control over the collection, and popular demands often conflicted with the board's desire for moral improvement of the mind. In 1890, the board made the only recorded attempt to police the content of the books in the library. The Committee on Improper Books was formed to investigate the collection and the three-month inquiry yielded eight books. There are no records indicating which titles were deemed improper or what was done with them after the investigation.

Chapter 3 puts the library in the larger social context of reading. The library provided not only books, but also magazines and journals for its readers and Muncie was never short on newspapers printed in town. These materials offered citizens the opportunity to comprehend and engage with the world beyond the limits of their community. Newspapers, especially, connected readers to the larger cities by printing the latest news, ads reflecting trends, and reports on the world outside Muncie. Although readers received newspapers, books, and magazines from other sources as well as the library, "this collection of books and the institution that housed them allowed members to imagine themselves as part of this broader

social unit defined by shared values and a common fund of knowledge" (p. 94).

In part 2, the authors delve into library use and the history of reading, using the library records and the What Middletown Read database. Chapter 4 explores two broad patterns of reading: the massive circulation of children's literature and female readers from white-collar households. The rising number of book borrowings suggests home reading was a prized activity for both individuals and groups. Felsenstein and Connolly argue that women found reading to be a social activity, which often began in the nursery. Women would read aloud to their children, "judging by the books that were borrowed and by the borrowers themselves," gathered around a single light source (p. 100). The act of social reading led to women joining clubs in which to discuss the books, which the authors discuss in depth in chapter 6.

The authors study patterns of borrowing in order to discuss reading as a whole. Only scattered material was checked out regarding social issues, while fiction and children's literature were much more widely borrowed. Literacy was seen by the middle classes as the most basic stepping stone for personal or social advancement and fiction often reinforced this notion. Books were an essential tool for moral improvement and books with biblical humility mixed with recipes for upward mobility were sought by many readers. These books taught that honesty, hard work, and optimism could triumph over adversity, giving downtrodden readers hope as well as characters to emulate. Juvenile fiction was also read by adults learning to read, accommodating the reading needs of a larger audience.

An essential role of the library was that of education. There was a shared mission between the library and the schools and the library provided a space for children to do their homework. The authors also explore the relationship between the Women's Club of Muncie, reading habits, and so-

cial activism. The club was devoted to literary matters and developed into a social reform body, consisting mainly of middle-class women. Members approached fiction as a way to safely explore social problems and as “a way to disguise the political dimensions of their enterprise” (p. 185). The Women’s Club of Muncie read *Marcella*, a popular novel published in 1894 by author Mrs. Humphrey Ward. *Marcella* tells the story of a young woman who leaves her country estate to work with the poor in the city. Though the title character eventually returns to her husband’s estate, she continues to work with the poor. The novel, therefore, affirms traditional gender roles and submissiveness to a husband, but creates a place within the role as wife for social reform and work with the poor. The traditional gender roles portrayed in the novel allowed for women to safely discuss domestic discontent while appeasing their husband’s fears and expectations. Fiction provided views into the lives of the lower classes within a safe environment and while providing a happy ending.

Felsenstein and Connolly weave an awareness of the larger social context throughout the chapters, constantly connecting the library and the reading habits of its borrowers to the larger world. The authors masterfully demonstrate the ways in which the What Middletown Read database can be mined for information, but they fail to fully engage with sources outside the database. Further investigation of primary and secondary sources would have helped to provide context for the information found in the What Middletown Read database and the reading habits of the borrowers. This would also have helped to demonstrate the applicability of the findings outside of Muncie. Despite this, *What Middletown Read* stands as an excellent testimony to the power of the What Middletown Read database and the insight into reading habits of Muncie, Indiana.

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Citation: Cassie Brand. Review of Felsenstein, Frank; Connolly, James J. *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

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