

Taylor, Helen. *Why Women Read Fiction: The Stories of Our Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. pp.276. UK £10.99 (paper). ISBN: 978-0-19-882769-6.

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Helen Taylor's excellent book, *Why Women Read Fiction: The Stories of Our Lives*, reads as a homage to literature as it recounts her own love affair with fiction and her literary life journey. Alongside this, she also narrates the love affair that many women readers enjoy across multiple genres of fiction, including romance, science fiction, fantasy, crime, psychological thrillers, and indeed, any type of fiction that women read. Taylor explores reading in many different ways: the act of reading, what reading means for women, how women use reading as an escape from difficult times or to make sense of the world around them and their own life stories. She conceptualizes reading as a "life enhancer and lifesaver in many situations," and this concept is explored through survey data, interviews and conversations with hundreds of women (both readers and writers) over the course of many years of research (xiii). In her "Preface" to the book, Taylor sets out the questions she seeks to answer about how women value and relate to fiction:

I wondered if it was a secret obsession, an activity shared with others or only in solitude. Did women (like my mother) regard reading fiction in the morning as decadent, and reading at bedtime absolutely vital? How do women – the keenest book buyers, reading group members, and literature festivalgoers – think about and relate to writers, libraries and bookshops? How has reading transformed or disturbed women's social, political, and emotional understandings? (xiii).

As Taylor is the first to point out, "[t]hese are huge questions" and in order to answer them Taylor utilizes a mixed-methods methodology. Specifically, Taylor sent out an informal email questionnaire to women she knew, "had worked with, met at literary festivals and events, in book groups and book-shop events" (xvii). She analyses quantitative data surrounding book sales from the Nielsen database and she also interviewed and spoke with

individual women and female writers to gain additional qualitative data. The resulting answers form the basis of this book, which “draws on over 500 conversations and email responses” (xvii).

As an academic, I had some questions surrounding the methodology of issuing an email questionnaire to women who were previously known to the author as avid readers. Taylor herself makes “no claims for scientific objectivity” and agrees that her “respondents aren’t a representative sample” (xvii). The methodology is only ever going to capture data from avid women readers, thus potentially skewing it and failing to represent women who read more casually or do not belong to reading groups or visit literary festivals. The book also raises questions surrounding what type of scholarship is being represented here. Taylor describes herself as “a lone literary scholar” (xix) in her introduction, but the scholarship within the text is more sociological than literary. Indeed, literary analysis of any of the texts favoured by the women readers is not present and perhaps not relevant considering the scope of this study. The introductory chapter cautions against “dangerous generalization” (7) and yet the book seems to make several such generalizations about literature as it progresses. There is no question that this is a beautifully written book which covers a subject close to the author’s heart. It is also a delight to read as an avid reader. However, as an academic I felt that this book has been written with a public engagement/non-specialist audience in mind and may be of limited value to the researcher in the field of literature or popular romance. Indeed, the sections on popular romance really only rehearse well-established territory and will provide no new insights for the scholar in this field.

The responses to Taylor’s questionnaire and the information garnered from the interviews are organised across nine chapters within the book. Interspersed between the chapters are illustrations and original creative responses to the subject including “What their Books Yield or, Why I am Not Buying a Kindle” by Rosie Jackson (51), and “The Literary Blogger” by Dovegreyreader (145-7). These undoubtedly add to the text and clearly show that what is being presented here is a deeply personal response to reading by the many women involved in this project.

In the “Introduction,” Taylor addresses why she focused on just women reading fiction and not men. This was a question which occurred to me whilst first opening the text being as it is clearly not the case that only women read fiction. Her answer is: “Of course, I’m aware that men too enjoy reading fiction (though in smaller numbers)” before quoting one of her respondents, Penny S-L, who shares the view that “Boys are not encouraged to live in a make-believe world” (7). Whilst acknowledging that this may seem “a dangerous generalization,” she argues that there is “plenty of anecdotal evidence that men and women connect with and share fiction in different ways” (7). Indeed, upon first reading this, I felt that this is the first “dangerous generalization” in this text. Whilst Taylor leans upon quotations from authors such as Ian McEwan to support this approach, such generalizations made me a little uncomfortable when the author was asserting facts about fiction. That said, Taylor’s interest is in how reading impacts women’s lives—specifically in the figure of the reading woman as she is portrayed in art and literature. Perceptions of reading women, from Elizabeth I to the 18th-century, frequently erred towards the negative and often, as Taylor notes, reflected anxieties about the effects romance reading had on women readers. Again, this is well-rehearsed territory in academic circles, but would be of interest to the generalist reader.

Chapter One (“‘Cheap Sweet Vacations’ – Reading as a Woman”) introduces how, when and where “female readers indulge the fiction habit” (25). The chapter presents an overview of women’s readerly behaviours, but what is fascinating is how Taylor’s research shows how “[e]ach work of fiction takes a different shape in the hands of its specific reader, and satisfies our need for escape, comfort, solace, or inspiration in different circumstances” (28). This view that a text can be amorphous and mean different things to different readers is further developed throughout the chapter as she demonstrates how the women she engaged with use books as “a conversation” with “friends” (34); as a way of creating their own narrative arc through life with heroines to identify with (45); as a way to learn “how other humans think and feel” (46); and as a means of escape and consideration of “the lives we were prevented from living” (48). Along the way in this detailed first chapter, other considerations are reviewed, including how women consume books (e-books versus physical copies), and why women’s writing is still treated far less seriously than men’s. Again, these are huge questions and complex issues, and again some unfortunate generalizations creep in, including when detailing the types of books women read, dismissing some as “comfort reading” (45). I had the privilege of interviewing Professor Taylor at the Derby Book Festival recently and I questioned her about who determines what comprises “comfort reading” (45). The answer, of course, was hard to pin down, because it is so subjective, meaning different things to different people, and it is moments like these that undermine the academic rigor of this book. The strength of this chapter was in the qualitative data that revealed women’s emotions and stories when engaging with books. For example, one reader who sees “Books as friends that are to be referred to again and again” (35). As a literary researcher, the concept of the act of reading and researching becoming a “conversation” with the text was appealing. Most researchers will agree that the re-readings of texts leads to new interpretations and discoveries, lending credence to non-academic readers’ sense of being in conversation with the text. The manner in which Taylor has captured women’s responses to reading is a real strength within her book and her sensitivity in telling these women’s reading stories adds real charm to this text.

Each of these themes highlighted within Chapter One is discussed in more detail in the ensuing chapters. Chapter Two, “Reading as a Girl”, provides an insight into many women’s childhood reading journeys, including the fascinating history around women’s relationships with public libraries. Citing the *Reading Sheffield* history project from Sheffield Hallam University, Taylor argues how successive generations of women have found pleasure “in the swapping of books at mobile and other libraries and presence of friendly (mainly female) librarians to suggest titles and point readers in new literary directions” (64). Due to the content of this chapter and its use of the material from the Sheffield archives, I found this a much more convincing chapter in terms of research, and the chapter raises some interesting questions about the value of public libraries and the damage that has been wrought upon communities by the cutbacks of successive governments in this area. For historians with an interest in this area, this chapter will prove of undoubted value.

Following this, Chapter Three explores “the novels women love best,” *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* (79-103). Taylor’s exploration of Austen, specifically her placing “women characters at the heart of her novels, and continually reminding us of the link between romantic yearnings and economic power” (91), leads nicely into Chapter Four which considers “Romance and Erotica” (106-126). As a literary scholar myself interested in analyses of popular romantic fiction, this was probably the chapter that was most interesting

from a professional point of view, although, as mentioned earlier, much of what is contained in here is well-rehearsed territory. The chapter covers the enduring popularity of romantic fiction (“a romantic novel is sold in the UK every two seconds”) (107); a fact that must be balanced against the reputation of romance as “the least critically respected genre” (107). It covers some of the history of Mills & Boons and the argument that “Romance [...] allows a declaration of independence” (109) and “puts women at the centre of the narrative”, something which I have argued myself in *Why Read Mills & Boon Romances?*

However, there are some claims that are unfortunately inaccurate within this chapter, again undermining the academic rigor of the text. It is certainly not the case, for example, that no man ever successfully wrote romances, and that “Romance and Erotica” is just “Fiction for Women by Women” (105-126). One has only to think of the example of Marius Gabriel Cipolla, who wrote 32 immensely popular romance novels for Mills & Boon under the nom-de-plume of Madeline Ker. This section also features another generalization stating that authors for Mills & Boon avoid contemporary social issues, but one has only to consider the works of Penny Jordan (1946-2011) who wrote 187 novels for Mills & Boon over a period of over thirty years. Over the 1980s, Jordan wrote multiple novels that featured rape and sexual violence, including *Savage Atonement* (1983), where the heroine is traumatised as a young girl when her stepfather attempts to rape her. They also include *The Friendship Barrier*, from 1985, which details victim and witness responses to rape, when the heroine Stephanie, is nearly gang-raped by a group of youths. After being rescued by hero Jake, both heroine and hero are forced to work hard to overcome the trauma of the incident. These few examples, from just one author, demonstrate that it is simply not the case that Mills & Boon novels shy away from difficult or controversial subject matter, and the result was that this was the chapter where I found my concerns about the lack of academic rigor most glaring, largely due to my own research expertise.

Chapter Five covers “Women, Crime, Sci-Fi and Fantasy” (128-143) providing an insightful interpretation of why scenarios featuring violence against women might resonate so powerfully with them. As Taylor argues, these novels, and “psychological thrillers explore women’s need for constant vigilance in what feels like an increasingly dangerous world” (134). In the age where women’s vulnerability to violence is more visible and discussed than ever, it is little wonder that this genre of fiction resonates so powerfully with women readers. However, the chapter does not cover the genres of sci-fi or fantasy with much detail, again making generalized claims regarding women while not really engaging with this genre specifically. Personally, as an avid fantasy and sci-fi fan, and in an age when the work of writers like Margaret Atwood feel prescient and timely, I found this disappointing. Bearing this in mind, what Taylor does do in this chapter is make the very astute observation that “perhaps this genre best reflects our pessimism and terror of the unknown” “[s]ince we live in dystopian times” (129).

Chapter Six opens Part III of the book with a consideration of “Women Writers on their Reading and Readers” (152-173). Here, again, the argument around why women’s writing is habitually treated less seriously than men’s is reconsidered, with a discussion of how everything from book packaging (described as “disastrously gendered” (157)) to the belittling notion of being labelled as a “woman writer” (after all we do not label male writers as such) is discussed. This forms an insightful section of the book, sharing the frustrations of many well-respected authors who do not feel themselves to be taken seriously just because of their gender. There is a sense of anger within this chapter that women as readers cannot

“be respected or trusted as a literary critic; any kind of writing she and her sisters adore must by definition be of low value” (126). In addition to Taylor’s palpable – and justified – annoyance at this dismissal of women’s writing and opinions about this by women readers, this chapter contains some fascinating information and facts. These include such details as Hilary Mantel’s (and Pat Barker’s) decision to commence writing upon what might be perceived as important historical matters, rather than focusing upon novels concerning women’s lives (Mantel on Thomas Cromwell with her *Wolf Hall* trilogy and Barker on the Second World War with her *Regeneration* trilogy). Only then was their work considered serious enough to be reviewed by male reviewers. For scholars considering publication history and the fact that publishing is still even today a male bastion, this chapter will be of undoubted interest.

After this, Chapter Seven returns to women readers again, this time in the context of belonging to reading groups, before progressing to Chapter Eight, which discusses female attendance at literary festivals, alongside literary tourism and acts of literary pilgrimage. Taylor herself is extremely experienced at literary festival attendance and she writes fascinatingly about her very varied experiences at different events, from the grand Victorian Town Hall of Cheltenham to the pleasures of eating and drinking in the Deep South of America and being stuffed with “po’boy sandwiches” (172). As noted above, I was fortunate enough to interview Helen Taylor at the Derby Book Festival this year and I asked her what comprises a good book festival from an author’s point of view. Gratifyingly she replied that Derby had the makings of a great festival – friendly people, a well-organised event and an interviewer who had read her text in detail.

Chapter Nine concludes the book and draws all of the strands previously discussed together. As noted above, this text is a delight to read, and definitely resonated with me as both a woman and an avid reader. For the serious academic or romance scholar, there is not much that is new here, and as observed earlier, lacks in academic rigor. However, this text is really addressed to a public engagement or non-specialist audience, and for any woman who loves reading, this book will be a joy. As an entertaining, non-academic text, there is much to enjoy within and learn from this book. Most of all, it presents how essential an activity reading is in understanding the stories of our lives. It is a deeply personal story and one that will resonate with women readers everywhere. Indeed, books have played an integral part of my life, and so I have to concur and conclude with Taylor’s wonderful observation that “[y]ou don’t put your life into your books. You find it there” (43).