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Review of When Novels Were Books. By Jordan Alexander Stein.

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Book Reviews

When Novels Were Books. By Jordan Alexander Stein. (Cambridge,
MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. Pp. 253. $39.95 hardcover.)

But novels ARE *books,* you might be thinking. Jordan Stein points
out that this is true, but not in the way that many of us have thought
to be the case. Twentieth- and twenty-first century literary history,
Stein argues, has too often failed to deliver a programmatic discussion
of the media history of genre. Attention to changes and continuities
in the early Anglophone novel's artifactual status within an evolving,
transatlantic media ecology, supplements, and in some cases rethinks,
critical understandings of the development of novelistic form.

Stein's method is axiomatic for those working at the intersection
of form and format: texts are comprised of what Jerome McGann de-
scribes in *The Textual Condition* (1991) as linguistic and bibliographic
perceptual codes. Stein's story is one of how writers, readers, edi-
tors, printers, publishers, and others navigated and contributed to the
ongoing reciprocities among these codes. Such material specificity,
"ironically," to quote Stein's oft-used diction, is vital to uncovering
a story not of progressive, causal relation between form and format
but rather a story of association and mutation. In this respect, Stein
is indebted to the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guttari.

Stein manages his brief by way of case study trained on an el-
ement of novel form—"character, or the figural representations of
persons"—rather than emplotment (8). This is not to say that Stein
sets a low bar; indeed, it is nearly gospel in novel studies that the
negative figuration of the self is the novel's great sociological con-
tribution to the rise of the modern individual subject. According to
Stein, however, the root systems of such negative figurations of the
self extend far beyond the eighteenth-century works we *now* call nov-
els. Rather, we should make recourse to a range of texts—bibles,
devotional "steady sellers" such as sermons, testimonials, and con-
fessional narratives, as well as spiritual autobiographies—that were
written, published, and read in the same media environments as the
narratives we later came to generically designate as novels.

Stein begins with an intellectual prehistory of the characterological self found in the books that comprise the bulk of his study. Chapter 1 takes us to the fourth century and Augustine's *Confessions.* Stein explores the transmission of the formal features of the Augustinian self—narrated "in terms of what it was not" (31)—to seventeenth-century Reformist Protestant manuscript works. These later works were vital to the development of the negative figurations of self found in printed steady-sellers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Stein strengthens this insight into characterological root systems by attending to the bibliographic codes of steady sellers in chapter 2. The formats of these works oftentimes encouraged nonlinear and discontinuous reading practices, regardless of whether their linguistic codes included progressive emplotment, indexical listing, or some other formal element. That such books included negative figurations of self without being singularly tied to sociologically and/or psychologically dense, progressive narratives suggests the unlikelihood that the history of the novel can be told through mere recourse to such narratives past, including Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe.*

In chapter 3, Stein continues to mount evidence for tracking the media history of character. He turns his attention to how eighteenth-century people's relationships to written works were shaped by what Stein calls, in drawing upon the ideas of Daniel Selden, a "text-network," in which readers might encounter "a multiplicity of different versions, retailored to fit a host of different contexts, sometimes without a definite original source" (93). Stein focuses on the text-networks of Richardson's *Pamela* and Edwards's *The Life of David Brainerd*. He demonstrates how material media (and not a lineage of formal innovations themselves) contributed to a growing sense that the elements of a written work's linguistic codes, such as characters, might be identified without self-conscious regard for their textual condition. Chapter 4 further considers eighteenth-century publishing, showing how religious publishers increasingly retreated from the broader media ecology. By the 1790s, such retreat, Stein argues, contributed to the production of generic categories for differentiating the book-objects they produced—objects such as what we now call novels. Such categories, in turn, ironically worked to repress their own media histories.

Stein concludes by diagnosing the continuing power of such repression, which he best articulates when discussing the irony of Ian Watt's claim in *The Rise of the Novel,* that "the novel's realism does

not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it" (quoted in Stein 176). That "way," Stein ultimately argues, is not disciplined by linguistic codes alone, nor simply by those institutions only invested in linguistic codes but also by the quotidian, material mediations of the everyday, big and small. In this respect, Stein's work appeals not only to students of literary history, bibliography, and media history but to social and economic history and the history of religion, too.

It is worth stating an obvious point: there are forms and formats within the media ecologies that Stein tracks that go unaddressed in his book. The materialities of blank forms or pamphleture, for example, might offer a supplementary take on how print cultures figured selves or just what were the affinities (or lack thereof) between what we anachronistically call *literary* and *religious* works. Put another way, the history of the novel might start to look different yet again. I would also be remiss if I did not mention that Stein's book is a pleasure. Though he might indeed be a proponent of "the bummer theory of print culture" (19), one will also encounter political spitfire, introspective schmaltz, and irreverent humor, such as when Stein writes that John Underhill "provoked only the ire of a legislature that did not find a smoke break an acceptable means to grace" (33). I enjoyed reading this book.

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Overwhelmed: Literature, Aesthetics, and the Nineteenth-Century Information Revolution. By Maurice S. Lee. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. 296. $39.95 cloth.)

For most readers, the word "technology" refers to a set of scientific inventions and techniques whose origin is still close in time—or at least not before the nineteenth century—and whose ultimate aim is to contribute to human development in general. This includes advances in medicine and surgery, transportation, communications, and many other areas of everyday life. Until recently, however, the world of book publishing has remained outside the scholarship on the social impact