

Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa, by Christine Pawley. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. xi, 312 pp. Notes, tables, graphs, bibliography, appendixes, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Thomas J. Morain is Dean of Liberal Arts at Graceland University. Former administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa, he is the author of *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century* (1988).

Christine Pawley makes her intentions clear: her aim, she writes, is "to uncover the day-to-day uses of printed information by men and women, young and old . . . in one small, rural midwestern community—Osage, Iowa—by examining as many as possible of the ways its residents came into contact with print" (2). Pawley's examinations of several genres, including textbooks, newspapers, and religious materials, are excellent case studies. Her choice of the term *Middle Border* in her title pays tribute to Osage's most famous citizen, novelist Hamlin Garland, who popularized the term to characterize the region.

Using federal and state census records, Pawley maps out the demographics of late nineteenth-century Osage. The county seat of Mitchell County was dominated by the families of business and professional elite—the offspring of families from New England and New York, Republican in politics, and active in Protestant churches (Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, and Universalist). The major fault lines in the community ran along ethnic and religious lines, dividing the Protestant establishment from Irish Catholics and Scandinavian Lutherans. In short, Osage appears to have been a microcosm of Iowa itself.

Pawley's signal achievement, however, is her thorough and creative analysis of the Sage Public Library collection and circulation records. Pawley compares the books held by the library when it first opened as a public library in 1876 with its 1893 collection when it reformulated its catalog in a new record-keeping system. She interprets her findings within the context of the national struggle between "cultural authorities," who saw themselves as custodians of public taste and morals, and proponents of "mass culture," of popular fiction in particular, who now had access to cheaply printed books and magazines. Should Osage readers have access to what they wanted or only to what the elites believed was best for them? Pawley deftly documents how the tension affected the development of the local holdings, with the balance tipping toward the reading interests of local library patrons.

One caveat may be in order on Pawley's discussion of how a library collection develops. She writes, "Any library collection reflects the values of those who build it" (80). True. However, as she notes, the

library actively sought donations by the community to augment what it could purchase with meager acquisitions funds. Thus, "those who built" the Sage Public Library collection included book donors as well as the official book selection committee. Unfortunately, Pawley's data do not indicate which books were purchased by the library itself and which were donated by community residents willing to give away what they had privately purchased and presumably read. From my experience in small towns, it would be the rare librarian or library committee willing to tell a potential donor that what he or she purchased, read, and offered to the library as a donation was beneath library standards. It would be far easier to accept it and quietly put it on the shelf than to say, "Surely you don't think this library would stoop to such trash." However, since library patrons, as Pawley's data also show, were overwhelmingly middle-class evangelical Protestants aware of community norms, those standards would also influence what donors chose to offer to the library.

Fortunately, Pawley also had access to circulation records from 1890 to 1895. In painstaking but fascinating detail, she analyzes what individual readers checked out and places the books into general categories. In her comparisons of fiction by the reader's gender, she discovered that the lines between what men and women were checking out were not nearly as clear-cut as what might have been expected. The distinctions also blurred between patterns for adults and youth. In an era before electric lights, Pawley points out, reading was a social activity—something often done within a group setting. Such proximity among readers would have facilitated discussion of reading materials, blurring even further the lines between male and female, young and old. As for religious distinctions, few Catholics, even those in the middle class, patronized the library; nor did Lutherans, for many of whom English was not their native language. During this period, Pawley explains, there was a national debate going on within the Catholic church between those who desired greater assimilation and those who favored separation from the American mainstream. The Catholic hierarchy viewed Protestant-dominated libraries as a threat to Catholic teaching.

I appreciated two summary comments from the author. The first was her acknowledgment of the debt she owed to modern Osage residents who had assisted in her research project. She writes, "Knowledge of how present-day Osage works was an essential prerequisite to learning about its past" (224). Small towns have formal institutions and power structures, but a local resident's standing within the community, his or her influence and prestige among fellow townsfolk, also

derives from nuances that may not register on an outsider's radar screen. Pawley also takes time to acknowledge the tremendous historical potential of local records that are unknown beyond their own city limits. Her discovery of the Sage Public Library records was totally serendipitous. "Only the library director knew that they were [in the storeroom] and understood their significance" (224).

Although Pawley wisely restricts her conclusions to Osage itself and resists the temptation to leap to claims about national reading patterns based on one community case study, she documents how local residents participated in and understood themselves as part of broader religious, political, and cultural communities. Given the precision of her data, it is likely that those who are interested in these broader communities will begin to take Pawley's findings into account. Like ancestral DNA, Pawley's data will show up in successive generations of interpretations of American social history. Any synthesis of American social history must prove itself against evidence such as that distilled from Pawley's research and similar local records.

Christine Pawley's *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa*, was a co-winner of the Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award, recognizing the most significant books on Iowa history published in 2001.—*Editor*

Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, by Stephanie Foote. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. vi, 218 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer Tom Lutz is professor of English at the University of Iowa. His books include *American Nervousness, 1903* (1991) and the forthcoming *Cosmopolitan Vistas: Regionalism and the Making of Literary Value*.

Two equal and opposite interpretations of regionalist art and writing—one that it is all urban elite fantasy, the other that it is localist, populist politics by other means—have coexisted since the 1890s, and one or the other has dominated academic discussion now for decades. Stephanie Foote's *Regional Fictions* is the first book-length attempt to reconcile the two, which helps make it the most sophisticated and complex reading of regionalism to date, although one that fails to fulfill its promise. To the question in the title of her introduction, "What Difference Does Regional Writing Make?" she seems to answer, well, very little. The reason is somewhat predictable in this age of critical scolding: local color writing doesn't immediately affect "the unevenly

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