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## Seeking "Significance": Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Seeking "Significance":

Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities

While most researchers probably concur that the act of reading consists of an interaction between text and reader, more theoretical (and more empirical) attention has been paid to the "text," while the element of the "reader" remains relatively unexplicated.<sup>1</sup> It might be argued that "the sociology of the text" encompasses "the sociology of the reader."<sup>2</sup> But such an approach tends to subordinate the reader to the text; that is, researchers' reconstitution of readers emerges as a by-product of their knowledge and understanding of texts.<sup>3</sup> The history of the book is shifting attention from texts to readers, however, and the need to explore not only how we conceptualize the ideal reader but also how we can uncover the specific reading practices of actual readers is evident.<sup>4</sup> Discussion of historical reading practices has revolved particularly around the difficult question of "how" people read.<sup>5</sup> Was there indeed a reading revolution representing a shift from intensive to extensive reading? When and how did silent reading become widespread? What of collective, communitarian reading, or the active reading emphasized by reader response and reception theorists?<sup>6</sup>

One approach to addressing the "how" of reading is by way of elaborating on the "who." As Roger Chartier has repeatedly reminded us, the practice of reading takes place as a "specific act and habit, and in specific [End Page 143] places," so that one of our tasks as historians is to "identify the ... distinctive traits of communities of readers, reading traditions and ways of reading."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in Chartier's view, that key concept—"appropriation"—is best understood as involving "a social history of the various uses (which are not necessarily interpretations) or discourses and models, brought back to their fundamental social and institutional determinants and lodged in the specific practices that produce them."<sup>8</sup> Thus, according to Chartier, only by investigating the empirical details of real, historically and geographically situated readers can we discover the shape of their reading practices, at least if we are to avoid the charge of being not only ahistorical, but also aspatial.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the questions that such an enterprise raises include the following: How can we conceptualize or "imagine" readers; who read what, why, and how; in what social and institutional settings did people read; and how can researchers connect "real" texts with "real" readers?<sup>10</sup> Sorting out these questions is partly a matter of how we theorize readers, texts, and the act of reading, and partly a matter of what is practicable in terms of research methods and resources. The focus here treats as intertwined the question of how we conceive of readers and reading practices, and how empirically we can reconstruct the communities of which they were members. I will illustrate these theoretical and methodological issues with examples from two research projects: a study of late nineteenth-century readers in Osage, the small Iowa town where Hamlin Garland grew up, and another of the mid-twentieth-century patrons of the Door-Kewaunee Regional Library, in rural Wisconsin.<sup>11</sup> My aim is to show how, by conceiving of readers as members of a particular kind of reading community, historians can find a way not only to link those apparently disparate elements—reader and text—but also to elaborate on who readers were, and thus to shed light on how these specific readers read.

In "imagining" readers of the past, we are faced with an initial choice: we can study them one by one, treating them as separate individuals, or alternatively, we can try to group them on the basis of certain characteristics. Despite recognition that reading is first and foremost a social act, the image of the lone reader still exercises a powerful hold on the imagination. The dust jacket of a recent edition of *A History of Reading in the West* by Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier reinforces this image by reproducing Jean Honoré Fragonard's famous painting *Young Girl Reading*. In this picture, an eighteenth-century European woman leans comfortably...

## SEEKING “SIGNIFICANCE”



Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities

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