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## What Muncie Read

By ANNE TRUBEK

As we lurch into the digital age, people are kicking up hoary generalizations about Americans and their reading habits. “No one reads anymore,” “Kids used to read ‘Hamlet,’ not ‘Twilight,’ ” “We used to have more time to read.” But these canards are based upon conjecture, anecdote and idealized views of the past. In fact, we know very little about which books Americans used to page through: the history of reading is largely circumstantial, based upon diary entries or sales figures.

So when Frank Felsenstein, a historian of the book at Ball State University, happened to find several unmarked boxes on a shelf in the Muncie Public Library, he was eager to peek inside. Felsenstein discovered crumbling ledgers and notebooks identifying every book checked out of the library, as well as the name of the patron who checked it out, from November 1891 to December 1902 (save a short gap when the library very likely burned the records after a smallpox epidemic). Felsenstein and his colleague James Connolly began cataloging the records, checking the names against census data to provide more patron information and digitizing what they found.

The resulting database of the Muncie, Ind., library ledgers, “What Middletown Read” ([www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr/](http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr/)), is one of the few authoritative records of American reading. It is also doubly representative, because Muncie has long been called America’s “most typical” town. Muncie became famous for being average in 1929, with the publication of “Middletown: A Study in American Culture,” by Robert and Helen Lynd, which remains a landmark of American sociology. The Lynds’ close-up account of a class-stratified industrial community was enormously successful — even the curmudgeonly H. L. Mencken said, “It reveals, in coldblooded, scientific terms, the sort of lives millions of Americans are leading.” Today Ball State, located in Muncie, has a Center for Middletown Studies, which collaborated on the reading database.

What do these records tell us Americans were reading? Mostly fluff, it’s true. Women read romances, kids read pulp and white-collar workers read mass-market titles. Horatio Alger was by far the most popular author: 5 percent of all books checked out were by him, despite

librarians who frowned when boys and girls sought his rags-to-riches novels (some libraries refused to circulate Alger's distressingly individualist books). Louisa May Alcott is the only author who remains both popular and literary today (though her popularity is far less). "Little Women" was widely read, but its sequel "Little Men" even more so, perhaps because it was checked out by boys, too. The remaining authors at the top of the list — Charles Fosdick, Oliver Optic, Martha Finley, L. T. Meade and others — have vanished from memory. Francis Marion Crawford, whose novels were chiefly set in Italy and the Orient, was checked out 2,120 times, whereas Dickens, Walter Scott and Shakespeare circulated 672, 651 and 201 times respectively. Fiction was overwhelmingly preferred, accounting for 92 percent of books read in 1903.

The "classics" of American Lit 101 were checked out, too, but not often. Henry James's "Spoils of Poynton" was borrowed 54 times between 1897 and 1901. Catherine Gracey, whose occupation was "Wife of Daniel L., Carpenter," and whose occupational rank was "blue collar," checked it out in 1897. (She checked out 67 other books between 1897 and 1901, including an issue of Harper's Monthly and "The Sin of Joost Avelingh," by Maarten Maartens.) None of James's longer novels, including "The American" and "The Portrait of a Lady," make it into the database, however. A book of Walt Whitman's poems was donated to the library, but not circulated. James Connolly points out that "the board of directors sought to shape the collection so that respectable, mostly conservative works predominated. You wouldn't find Marx or the most provocative fiction (think Crane's 'Maggie: A Girl of the Streets') for instance on the shelves." Still, Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," still sometimes banned today, was checked out 149 times. Marie Corelli's quasi-spiritualist potboiler "The Sorrows of Satan" was very popular as well.

According to Connolly, blue-collar readers did not especially gravitate to best sellers. Indeed, they were slightly more likely to check out Shakespeare and other classic authors, perhaps, as Connolly speculates, because better-off households already had the books. "There are enough differences between blue-collar and white-collar readers to suggest meaningful differences between the classes," he says. "That point is further underscored by the decision in 1900 to open a separate Workingmen's Library for the city's laboring classes. The public library, a quiet, fastidious setting run by women, did not suit the needs of workers seeking a smoke and a chat. Nor was it open on Sundays, the workman's only day off."

In the 1920s, the Lynds found that "reading in Middletown today means overwhelmingly . . . the reading of public library books," and that just "a limited number of the business class" ever purchased books. There were only 19 periodicals in the library in 1890, but by 1929 the number was 225, creating, as the Lynds put it, a "ceaseless torrent of printed matter." This "did not lead to more reading time," however. They surveyed business-class women about

reading: “I would read if I only had the energy and quiet,” one said. “I just read magazines in my scraps of time,” another said.

Today, Muncie has 70,000 residents, down from a peak of 76,000 in 1980. Unemployment runs a percentage higher than it does nationwide. There are two library branches, and half of what the Muncie Public Library’s patrons check out is nonprint, including audiobooks, DVDs and e-books. While fiction remains more popular than nonfiction, patrons at the wealthier branch check out twice as much nonfiction as readers at the poorer one — “Guinness World Records” tops their list. The director of the Muncie Public Library, Ginny Nilles, says that more than the rise in e-books, she is shocked by the popularity of graphic novels: “Nothing in my career prepared me for their success. . . . Title for title, they surpass most of our audiovisual items.” Usage in general is up about 10 percent in 2011 compared with 2010. “It’s the economic downturn,” Nilles suspects.

When the Middletown database went live in March, Nilles did some browsing. She soon found a bit of her own family history. Her grandmother, Virginia Claypool, was a frequent patron. Nilles is impressed by her grandmother’s reading habits. “She took out a lot of books. She went on to receive a college education, unusual at the time for a woman.” A search of the database tells more: Claypool chose 171 books between 1891 and 1901. Her first book was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Little Foxes,” checked out when she was 9, and her last was Francis Churchill Williams’s “J. Devlin — Boss: A Romance of American Politics” in 1902. In between, she borrowed Kipling’s “Second Jungle Book,” Sidney Lanier’s “English Novel: A Study in the Development of Personality” and Mark Twain’s “Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg.”

Her grandmother’s highish-brow reading is unusual, and so, Nilles says, is Muncie, despite its nickname. “Muncie is in the middle of the Rust Belt, and we are having issues here that they don’t have in the South or West Coast.” She believes Muncie was unique in the 1890s, too. “I think the term Middletown has been a disservice to us. Average is not something to aspire to.”

*Anne Trubek is the author of “A Skeptic’s Guide to Writers’ Houses.”*