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Review of *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience among Antebellum New Englanders* by Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray

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Northern civilians sent thousands of Thanksgiving turkeys to Union troops.

Then came the Pilgrims' entry into the picture. Smith has diligently dug through descriptions of Puritan days of thanksgiving without finding any credible evidence of the famed first Thanksgiving dinner. However, Hale, writing in 1865, made a passing reference to the Pilgrims having celebrated an annual thanksgiving day. The Northern press picked up that tidbit and conjoined it with the by then customary turkey dinner on that day. In the 1880s and 1890s, Pilgrims eating turkey on what was commonly called "Turkey Day" were common features of the era's popular Thanksgiving Day cards. The symbolism of the Pilgrim turkey dinner became a tool for the "Americanization" campaigns aimed at the millions of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who flooded into America before World War I.

The rest of the turkey story is unsurprising. Their numbers and popularity swelled along with the advent of new methods of breeding, raising, freezing, and processing them. The Thanksgiving-only connotation was broken by the invention of the TV dinner and other ways of processing turkey meat. But the vast majority of the birds we now eat would hardly be recognizable to the early colonists. They have been bred to have breasts so large and legs so small that they can hardly stand up. They are incapable of reproducing naturally and must be inseminated artificially. As for their living conditions, the word "living" verges on a misnomer. The book ends with a potpourri of facts about the turkey that, while interesting, seemed to this reader like leftovers from the research. There are also a number of historic recipes, but after reading about how most modern turkeys, including "free range" ones, are raised, some readers may be reluctant to use them.

Harvey Levenstein is Professor Emeritus of History at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, and is the author of *REVOLUTION AT THE TABLE* and *PARADOX OF PLENTY*, two social histories of food in America.

*Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience among Antebellum New Englanders.* By Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006. Pp. xxvi, 430. \$48.00.)

Using letters written and diaries kept by 931 New Englanders living during the antebellum era, Ronald and Mary Zboray beneficially unsettle a number of grand narratives about readers and reading in the nineteenth-century United States. Since the influential work of theorist Rolf Engelsing, the turn from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century has been understood as the transition point from intensive reading and rereading of a select group of texts (such as the Bible) to extensive reading of many texts without rereading. Literary historians under the sway of Michel Foucault who have sought to chart the “rise of the novel” have described novel reading as an absorbed, solitary activity through which readers internalize social codes and become modern, middle-class subjects (for an influential formulation in the American context, see Richard Brodhead’s “Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America,” in his *Cultures of Letters* [1993]). The Zborays complicate both of these accounts and also offer fresh perspectives on History of the Book scholarship, which has often focused on the rise of “professional” authorship, the nationalization and industrialization of print, and on libraries. Using manuscript sources produced by everyday readers, the Zborays document circulation of print outside of market and institutional structures.

Both defining and describing forms of socioliterary activity, the Zborays divide their study into Production, Dissemination, and Reception, and in each section they weave together materials from all of their “informants.” In their chapter on “Everyday Dissemination,” the authors show how antebellum New Englanders transcribed bits and pieces of printed texts into their letters, sent newspapers to one another in the mail, and negotiated the challenges of sending books at a time when the postal service would not carry packages. To aid the public dissemination of information, the postal rates for newspapers were set quite low, much lower than that for letters. Although steep fines were imposed for violations, citizens cleverly manipulated the system by secreting notes in the papers, making small marks to convey coded messages, or simply sending the paper as an indication that the recipient was being remembered. The Zborays also present lively accounts of New Englanders lending and borrowing books informally, without the aid of the institutional structure of a library. Although scholars are always cautious about the difference between a title’s sales numbers and its readership, readers’ own accounts of the circulation of printed texts among their acquaintances makes the point far less abstractly. Readers walk between homes to borrow or

return books, give or are given access to home libraries for on-site reading and consultation, keep lists of books borrowed and lent, and occasionally harass people into returning books borrowed or express guilt for having held on to others' volumes too long.

The Zborays chapter on "Literary Performances: Dissemination through Reading Aloud, Recitation, and Enactment" presents overwhelming evidence that absorbed private reading was an aberration rather than the norm. As they write, "[L]iterature was finely and . . . intricately interwoven into the social context of its performance" (p. 128) to such a great extent "that even silent and solitary reading could be experienced performatively and socially, as readers so habituated to oral renderings could almost hear the words on the page" (p. 130). When, in their diaries and letters, readers recount a retreat from sociability into absorbed, private reading, they do so to castigate themselves for it. More often, they record with pleasure reading aloud, whether that reading is relatively intimate (a husband reads aloud to a wife sewing, a woman reads at the bedside of an invalid friend) or is more broadly social (a family shares reading aloud from a novel over time, young people in a community meet regularly for reading). Certainly, reading aloud potentially enforced social norms, but it did so in a sense different from that which historians of the novel have described. In reading aloud, the self was disciplined less through a direct relation with the text than, presumably, through the other people literally present at the moment of reading. Likewise, in their "Reception" section, the Zborays present ample evidence of rereading in the supposed age of extensive reading, although, again, rereading does not necessarily entail subjection to an author or text. Instead, texts reread or recalled in memory or through recitation evoke previous readings that took place in social contexts or memories of those who may have owned the printed object. Although the Zborays do not draw attention to this aspect of their findings, throughout they present evidence of how infrequently antebellum New Englanders read American literature. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Cooper's novels make a modest, but significant, number of appearances, as do Whittier and Longfellow, but these references are dwarfed by accounts of reading Dickens, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and de Stäel's *Corinne* (Emerson appears primarily as a lyceum lecturer, not a print author).

For all of its merits, the Zborays' book as a whole lacks cohesion, in part because of conceptual flaws at the center of the authors' enterprise. They frame their research in relation to anthropological and

sociological methods, designating the people who kept diaries and letters as “informants” (“dead informants,” to be precise). However, they do not define their central terms, “social” and “literary,” in relation to any coherent body (or bodies) of theory. “Social” seems to encompass any event with more than one person present (or even imagined to be present), while “literary” and “literature” seem to signify all kinds of texts, even all uses of words. The Zborays justify their focus on New England and the antebellum era with their statement that they “examine the very soil from which the ‘flowering of New England,’ one of the most significant and creative periods in the cultural history of the United States, bloomed” (p. xxiv), which would seem to imply a focus on *belles lettres*. This lack of definition makes the “Production” section the least satisfying and persuasive, and throughout, the authors construe “literature” so broadly that it includes all newspapers, no matter what their content. Thus a “Yorkshire immigrant” who “inserted ‘statistics of the Manufacturers of Lowell for the year 1847,’” which he had drawn from a newspaper, into a letter to his parents becomes a New Englander disseminating “literature” through transcription (p. 147). Then, unaccountably, in the book’s epilogue on the Civil War, newspapers become antithetical to both the literary and social realms. Finally, although the Zborays trouble a grand narrative that places a definitive transition to solitary reading earlier in the century, their own narrative is equally grand and value laden in locating this shift during the Civil War years. Everything “social” is “deep” and “rich,” but when the social and literary part ways during the war, “antebellum letters gave way to strident goading and shrill competitiveness” (p. 293). Although most of their study focuses on the earlier “deep” and “rich” era, the Zborays present, in essence, a declension narrative in which American letters “falls” from an idealized communal past into atomized modernity.

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*Stories of Independence: Identity, Ideology, and History in Eighteenth-Century America*. By Peter C. Messer. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. Pp. x, 258. \$39.00.)