Novel Craft is an excellent book that marshals the history of women, industrialism, finance, material culture, the book form, and imperialism to provide a cogent historical narrative about handicraft that then informs Schaffer’s expert readings of four significant novels. Schaffer deliberately refrains from making grand claims for handicraft as the key to understanding Victorian literature or culture (p. 6); she sees handicraft and novels sharing a commitment to realism but sees no grounds for arguing that either caused the other’s interest in literalist mimesis. As a result, the arguments that Novel Craft makes about individual novels do not necessarily attain the status of paradigms, but they will help us better understand the watchguard that Lucy Snowe makes for M. Paul in Charlotte Brontë’s Villette and the bazaar scene in Anthony Trollope’s Miss Mackenzie. The book offers something fresher and more unexpected than yet another paradigm: it demonstrates that Victorian handicrafts merit our interest, whether they appear inside novels or without them.

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Publishing a book like this one invites empiricist griping. Gillian Silverman contends that readers experienced bodily “communion” with others through the books they shared. Not surprisingly, such a thesis poses problems in confirming if readers did experience “consubstantiality” with others through books, or if this is an appearance produced by figurative language originating in prescriptive literature from the time and in the wider culture of performative sensibility. Indeed, Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America may provide its own object lesson as a locus of communion between Silverman and anyone who has ever struggled to identify and assess transactions in reading that are no less historical for being elusive. This is not to ignore failings that might have been avoided through more time in the archive or fewer theory-driven arguments. Some of these I take up later. Yet Bodies and Books is a worthwhile addition to the already substantial body of work on nineteenth-century reading, if for no other reason than that, by treating its paranormality
as a palpable fact (p. 19), Silverman forces us to evaluate, once again, how we make claims about a complex activity that was so central to social and bodily life in the time, and yet is so often reduced to the simplemindedness of proof.

Silverman begins with a personal account concerning the death of her father and how reading “became a means of imaginatively forging contact with [him]” (p. xii). Wording is important in that central to her thesis is the idea that while imagination propels contact through books, this contact is not imaginary, but real, embodied through a process she likens to the Protestant Eucharist. As an effect of reading, communion must also be differentiated from “community,” a term used widely to signify its function as a social act, or in the kind of expansive, impersonal exchange that Benedict Anderson associated with national identity. Communion is personal, or “intimate,” as Silverman puts it, with books providing the medium for psychophysiological contact between readers and authors, characters, previous owners, or other readers.

As it happens, Silverman’s father was a psychologist, and his own research on interpersonal “oneness fantasies” shaped her communion with him through reading, leading to an account heavily reliant on psychoanalysis, combined with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological move away from mind-body dualism, and selected passages from texts in her period, published and manuscript. Here too we find reference to material book history, which Silverman faults briefly for overemphasizing empiricism, and a more sustained critique of the preoccupation in reception studies with the dyadic freedom-constraint account of how readers interpret texts and with the “resistant reading” of minority identities, when most reading is anything but.

Following are five chapters in which Silverman “examine[s] the book’s status as a technology of intimacy” (p. 19). Chapter 1 treats “wayward reading”—reading that escaped the quotidian demands of middle-class life by ignoring prescriptive accounts that reduced reading to an act of economic calculation, and by offering communions that served needs other than instrumental. Chapter 2 deems the widely employed book-as-friend metaphor inadequate to account for the range of relations that readers had with them, as reading enabled experience unconstrained by time, space, or the “antiseptic restrictions” that governed face-to-face social encounters, from “necromantic reunion” with the dead to the “mesmeric influences” of bad council (pp. 54, 68). While Silverman’s first chapters rely heavily on commentary from contemporary observers with little reference to actual texts, chapter 3 begins with Herman Melville’s famous “infinite
fraternity of feeling” letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and proceeds to interpret Melville’s 1852 novel *Pierre* not as a parody of sentimentalism, which is how it is usually treated, but as a reflection on his twin preoccupations with literary originality and communion with readers like Hawthorne who understood. Chapter 4 is similarly text-driven, arguing that Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* identified literacy as an embodied practice not just to prefigure a sovereign self, but to bring that self into cross-racial communion with white Northern readers. Also on a major author, chapter 5 offers a greater balance than in previous chapters between prescriptive advice, textual analysis, and private writing to argue that the disciplinary practice of reading provided Susan Warner with an enlarged female self “physically linked both to the material page and to other readers” (p. 125). *Bodies and Books* concludes with Silverman’s thoughts on the future of communion fantasies as the material book turns digital.

The psychophysiology of nineteenth-century reading is not a topic for the empirically queasy, once again. Inevitably it requires a combination of evidence and ingenuity to tease claims from a historical record marked by reticence and expressive grammars meant to hide as much as they revealed. *Bodies and Books* is most successful where the variety of evidence and plausibility of its hypotheses urge us past skepticism only natural when we are reminded on every page that the historicity of the phenomenon is not immediately apparent. The Warner chapter is effective in this light, as is Silverman’s reading of *Pierre*, where a long history of Melville criticism grounds her claim that he used incest as a metaphor to examine “a creative process alternately informed by imaginative independence and deep communion with others” (p. 86). Less effective are claims for which evidence is dubious or ingenuity an end in itself. Silverman’s most sustained account of “nineteenth-century reading practices” is from Mary Austin’s autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, published in 1932, the better part of a century after most of the reading dealt with in *Bodies and Books* (p. 42). And her account of why Douglass changed his aunt’s name from Hester to Esther (pp. 113–14), while exegetically fascinating, ranges historically from barely plausible to highly unlikely.

If tactical missteps weaken otherwise interesting arguments, the project as a whole might have benefited from more resolute engagement with material book history. Several studies from the last decade seem pertinent. Leon Jackson’s alternative “economies” of authorship, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008), would provide useful counterpoint to Silverman’s heavy emphasis on psychoanalysis, in particular when
she treats the oneness fantasies of professional authors, whom Jackson ignores in his study. An even stronger case can be made for Trish Loughran’s challenge to the long-held view that print culture provided the unifying basis for national identity in the early Republic. By arguing, instead, that nationalism was enabled by the lack of printed materials in circulation, thus masking regional differences that returned with a vengeance (succession and civil war) when availability grew, Loughran’s *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2007) makes a strikingly different case for the social effects of reading in nineteenth-century America. Incorporating an account of reading as a *technology of social masking* would have problematized the more celebratory claims that underpin *Bodies and Books*, such as one repeated in various forms throughout that, given widespread constraints on personal relations, “we might understand reading as providing an alternative route to intimacy” (p. 6).

This said, materialist arguments in book history are often overstated, and not just by historians. Jane Tompkins warned many years ago that scientific yearnings make literary critics equally vulnerable to the blandishments of empiricism. Others, including me, have more recently cited the risks of discarding literary methods in an effort to achieve a more authentic historicism. One of these risks is that we lose hard-won textual abilities to identify and treat that which eludes this authenticity. Whatever its flaws, tactical or strategic, *Bodies and Books* highlights these abilities and their value at a time when, as Silverman points out, the digital revolution has once again made reading “an escape from the confines of limited subjectivity” (p. 156).

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Mary Ellis Gibson’s carefully researched and wide-ranging study delves into a rich but neglected field of literary history. Providing biographically detailed narratives, Gibson sets out in *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* “to re-create the mutually constitutive history of British and Indian poets