



## Scott B. Guthery. *Practical Purposes: Readers in Experimental Philosophy at the Boston Athenaeum (1827-1850)*

Scott B. Guthery. *Practical Purposes: Readers in Experimental Philosophy at the Boston Athenaeum (1827-1850)*. Boston: Docent Press, 2017. 394 p., ill. ISBN: 9781942795940. US\$24.99 (paper).

Guthery's objective is to inquire as to what the books Athenaeum members borrowed can tell us about the influence they had on their community during the period 1827 to 1850 (xix, 17). However, his concern is not solely with who those readers were and what books they borrowed, but the connections between what they read, what they built, and what they wrote. He then goes beyond this to explore what the specific books they selected (and did not select) can tell us about what they sought and what they valued in that literature and how they thought about what they were reading and building, making this truly a unique contribution to the academic literature.

Guthery concludes that the interest of the readers in scientific and technical literature was driven in no small part by what they were doing, and, further, that they preferred a style of scientific and technical exposition that was organized around reports of the author's own experiences (240). Not surprisingly, they preferred texts that included details of how to adapt the teachings of the text to the particulars of that project (241) on which they were working. They wanted to know how and why an author's solutions worked, not merely that they did work (241), so that they could modify them as needed.

The primary weakness of the work is an overwhelming attention to detail and extensive documentation for what seems to be the sake of documentation. The reader interested in book history and the history of readers and reading must slog through page after page of mathematical equations, figures, and tables which have little to no relationship to the reader's interest and add very little to the reader's understanding. The narrative sections of the work are engagingly and clearly written. The conclusions appear to be well-supported, but some of them require a scientific or technical expertise that the average book history scholar lacks. As another reviewer noted, it is really two books in one (Jordan Goffin, back cover). Unfortunately, the two books have been integrated, so that those interested in the readers and their reading, and those interested in the scientific and technology data, cannot easily locate the "book" that holds the information they are seeking. A bit of an irony, considering the purpose and mission of the work.

However, the work promises to stimulate further research into readers and reading in other areas and



other institutions, looking at both what readers choose to read and not to read, and at the connections between those choices and what they seek for and value in that literature and how they think about they are reading and the uses they are making of it.

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