At the beginning of "Jane Eyre," we find the heroine, a ten-year-old orphan, living as a poor relation in the home of her maternal kin. One day, she takes a book down from a shelf and slips behind a curtain to read it. The son of the family, John—he is fourteen—comes in and discovers her:

"What were you doing behind the curtain?" he asked.

"I was reading."

"Show the book."

I returned to the window and fetched it there.

"You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father let you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentleman's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my bookshelves."

John throws the book at her. She falls and cuts her head. His mother enters and tells the servants to take Jane away and lock her in a room.

A nineteenth-century reader would have understood, as a twentieth-century reader might not, that Jane's crime was made especially serious by the fact that it involved a book. In the history of women, there is probably no matter, apart from contraception, more important than literacy. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, access to power required knowledge of the world. This could not be gained without reading and writing. Skills that were granted to men long before they were to women. Deprived of them, women were condemned to stay home with the livestock, or, if they were lucky, with the servants. (Alternatively, they may have been the servants.) Compared with men, they led mediocre lives. In thinking about wisdom, it helps to read about wisdom—about Solomon or Socrates or whomever. Likewise, goodness and happiness and love. To decide whether you have them, or want to make the sacrifices necessary to get them, it is useful to read about them. Without such introspection, women seemed stupid; therefore, they were considered unfit for education; therefore, they weren't given an education; therefore they seemed stupid.

It is hard to find out how many women in early-modern societies could read and write, but one method that scholars have used is to count how many, in giving legal depositions—a duty that crossed class lines—were able to sign their names to their statements. Between 1580 and 1640, only about ten percent of women in a diocese of London were able to do so, and this figure is probably too high as a measure of literacy. A woman who can write her name can't necessarily write anything else. Furthermore, even if the figure were typical for England, that nation was far ahead of many others. The slow process by which women took up books and pens is the subject of "The Woman Reader" (Yale), by Belinda Jack, a tutorial fellow at Oxford.

It was in the fourth millennium B.C., in Mesopotamia, that people began writing and reading. Jack can't tell us much about this innovation, or its early development—not much is known—except to say that for a long time few people, and very few women, were literate. That includes the citizens of two cultures that we regard as foundations of our own: ancient Greece and Rome. Around 480 B.C., when Aeschylus was staging plays, five per cent of Greeks (men and women), at the most, could read. Plato,
the fount of Western philosophy, actually disapproved of reading and writing. He worried that such practices would ensnare memory. He also seems to have thought that written statements might be accepted without the test of dialogue—of people asking “Is this really true?” and batting the question back and forth. In imperial Rome, it seems, more women were literate, but when, occasionally, this achievement was praised by their contemporaries it was mainly because their skills would help them in educating their male children.

In the chaos that came after the fall of Rome, reading and writing survived almost exclusively in religious retreats. The Church saved Latin, and literacy, and, by stressing the inner life—the soul, speaking to God—it preserved the fragile idea that reading (a sacred text, of course) was an elevating experience. An important moment in the history of literacy is the passage in St. Augustine’s “Confessions” when he sees his mentor, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, reading without moving his lips: “His heart searched out the sense, but his voice and tongue were at rest.” A new idea of reading was taking hold. Before that word usually involved not just moving your lips but actually speaking reading some text, such as a sermon or an edict, to an audience. Now people had started reading alone, which meant that they could go at their own pace and compare the text with their knowledge of the world. As a rule, the only people who could do this—the only ones who had access to a private room, and were able and entitled to read—were the nobility and, of course, monks and nuns, but they were often highborn. Many medieval convenants had two classes of nuns, the “laboring nuns,” who peeled the vegetables and mopped the floors, and the “church nuns,” who, because they came from upper-class families, were given time to read and discuss.

In the eighth century, Charlemagne, eager that his subjects seem like more than a collection of houts, decreed that all churches in the Frankish kingdom had to have schools, for girls as well as boys. And, in time, more books were written in the vernacular, which meant that more girls were able to read. (The girls might, with effort, have learned to decipher their mother tongue, but they were far less likely than boys to know Latin.) On the other hand, vernacular literature was frequently scorned by men, because it tended to be sentimental and realistic: ballads and lays—that is, verse stories—about love and friendship and animals and magic potions. Some of these were written by women, as were some vernacular holy texts. I Hildegund of Bingen, the twelfth-century German abbess, poet, and composer, was a learned person, and corresponded with highbly placed churchmen, but since, in her letters, she described elaborate visions—she heard voices, saw white lights and black abysses—her correspondents often made fun of her behind her back. Until the late eighteenth century, a female writer who had bold ideas, especially ideas that might be socially disruptive, was widely regarded as foolish or insane. Conversely, a book by a woman which seemed to make sense was sometimes said to have been penned, secretly, by a man.

A touching example of female education in the twelfth century is Heloise, the niece of Canon Fulbert, of Notre Dame de Paris, and a student of the brilliant Scholastic theologian Peter Abelard, also a canon of Notre Dame. Abelard advocated “critical reading,” that is, asking yourself whether you actually agreed with the text. He had a willing pupil in Heloise, who, in Jack’s account, was a considerable scholar—versed not just in Latin but in Greek and Hebrew as well—and a great questioner. Heloise denied the separation of body, mind, and spirit. She questioned the Gospels. (Why did the four evangelists tell such different stories?) Most important, she asked herself whether she could bring her own life into accord with the holy books. She didn’t succeed; she had an affair with Abelard. When this was discovered, he was castrated. She became a nun and, eventually, an abbess. Her letters to Abelard are piercing. “I wanted simply you, nothing of yours,” she wrote. “I looked for no marriage bond, no marriage portion, and it was not my own pleasure and wishes I sought so greatly, as you well know, but yours.” Heloise has not gone down in

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history as a learned woman. Instead, she and Abbadia are regarded as iconic lovers, like Tristan and Isolde. Still, people have heard of her, which is an improvement over our knowledge of literate women in earlier times.

In the Renaissance, there were, again, more books in the vernacular, more books by women, and just more books. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Dominican convent of St. Catherine, in Nuremberg, had forty-six volumes. By the end of the century, it had more than five hundred. The religious were still ahead of the game, but with the expansion of vernacular literature, especially romantic stories, many more women outside the Church were reading. This included merchant-class wives and daughters. (They needed to know letters and numbers in order to help in the shop.) Servants, too, were reading. In some quarters, there were strong objections to women’s putting their roses into books, but this was probably not the majority view, as long as the text was a holy one. In Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation, we begin consistently, to find the Virgin Mary interrupted by the Archangel Gabriel as she is reading, a circumstance certainly not mentioned in the Gospel of St. Luke, which is the main source for this story. (Mary herself says she is a woman of “low estate.”) In an early example, the “Annunciation and Two Saints,” by Simone Martini, which is in the Uffizi gallery, in Florence, the Virgin keeps her thumb in her book, so as not to lose her place, as Gabriel, having flown into her room, informs her that she is going to give birth to the son of God.

Such instances of the growth of female literacy are fun to hear about, but for early-modern times they are few and far apart, with the results that they begin to seem small barks on a great ocean.

When Jack comes up with an example of something, you often wonder if she has a second one. Also, because the stories are disconnected, Jack’s organization of them is largely chronological, and so her account reads like a list, with no statement of what caused what, or what was a variation on what. Again, this is not really her fault. To describe a shape, you have to see a shape.

The real action begins with the Reformation, or a little before, with Gutenberg. In the history of women’s reading, the fact that Gutenberg’s machine made books more available is almost a minor matter compared with the impact that printing had on Western culture as a whole. The Reformation, Jack tells us, is sometimes known as “the daughter of Gutenberg.” The easier it was for people to get hold of books, the more readily they could find out about the duties Martin Luther had placed before them—above all, private, unmediated thinking. People were supposed to ask questions about their lives, and, apart from the peasantry, no social group had better reason to do so than women.

More and more of them began to spend time with books. In France and elsewhere, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, publishers started producing small, relatively inexpensive editions, which women could afford and conceal from their husbands. Eventually, a number of men gave up on the idea of forbidding women to read and began publishing books that would at least have a good influence on them. In 1766, James Fordyce, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, exhorted ladies to be gentle and to do what men told them to, in his “Sermons to Young Women.” In Sheridan’s “The Rivals” (1775), the heroine, Lydia Languish, suddenly hears her elderly coming to visit her in her boudoir. “Here, my dear Lucy, hide these books,” she says to her maid. “Quick, quick—Pongervine Piddle under the toilet—throw Frederic Randow into the closet...cram Oxen behind the bolster.” Fordyce’s “Sermons,” she tells Lucy, should be laid open on the table.

What was it that men feared about women’s reading? A big worry was that it was something they could do alone, without anyone to guide their thinking.
They would thus learn to think independently. Accordingly, they might cease displaying the attractions—sweetness, soft voices, compliance—that were the product of their dependence on male approval. Indeed, they might start talking back to men. They did. This began long before the eighteenth century, but during the iconoclastic Enlightenment, and then in the nineteenth century, female protests against miscegeny became both more frequent and more pointed. Also, as men feared, books caused women to imagine a different life for themselves, especially if the books were romances or, as we can call them by this point, novels.

Some women, too, venerated the stern song. Nancy Johns Tatum Hall, a middle-class American woman, wrote a memoir that included a chapter entitled “My first peep into novels and its consequences. Heart-rending disappointment.” In her youth, Hall recalled, she happened upon a stack of novels: “While conscious of the sin, I opened & read them, one after another until all were perused... when I had read the last, I almost wept that there were so many to read.” Writing for the sort of “edifying, rapturous love that these books portrayed, she married unsuited, at the age of sixteen. Fortunately, she recovered her sanity and made a prudent second marriage.

Other women might not be so lucky. Indeed, reading might even kill them, as was said in the Spectator, in 1744, to have been the case with the wife of the First Earl of Ellingham. One night, in her bedroom at Hampton Court, she became so absorbed in her book that she failed to notice that her clothes had caught fire. She died. Worse, a woman could be corrupted sexually. In Pierre-Antoine Rabaour’s “The Reader” (c. 1760), we see a sapphronically dressed woman, her legs apart, her head plunged suspiciously deep into her pocket, swaying as she drops the book she has been reading. If female novel-readers did not abandon themselves to sexual license, they might still disrupt the social order. In Samuel Richardson’s alternately salacious and prudish epistolary novel “Pamela” (1740), a servant girl writes to her parents plaintively, and at length, of being chased by her employer down the hallways of his mansion. “I found his hand in my bosom,” she says with apparent surprise. In fact, she was just holding out for a wedding ring, and she gets it, which was surely an inspiration to many a chambermaid. But the book seems to have appealed to all classes. It was the bestseller of its time. There were spinoffs: Pamela mug, fans, playing cards. And people didn’t just read the book; they read it in groups. Here is an account of the novel’s reception in an English village:

The blacksmith of the village had got hold of Richardson’s novel of “Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded,” and used to read it aloud on the long summer evenings, seated on his stool, and never failed to have a large and attentive audience. ... At length, when the happy turn of fortune arrived which brings the hero and heroine together ... the congregation were so delighted as to raise a great shout, and procuring the church keys actually set the parish bell ringing.

In the nineteenth century, the problem of women’s reading acquired a new dimension. By then, women were thought to be prone to “hysteria,” whereby strong emotions caused physical symptoms. This concern, too, had been voiced long before. “Pamela” and Richardson’s later novel “Clarissa” (1748) were products of, and appeals to, the eighteenth-century fashion for “sensibility,” or emotional susceptibility. Women reacted powerfully to these novels. One of Richardson’s fans, Lady Bridalgh, wrote to him of her response to “Clarissa”:

Had you seen me, Mr. Richardson, I surely would have moved your pity. When alone, in agencies would I lay down the book, take it up again, walk about the room, let fall a flood of tears, wipe my eyes, read again, perhaps not three lines, throw away the book, crying out, excuse me, good Mr. Richardson, I cannot go on; it is your fault—you have done more than I can bear; [it] threw myself upon my couch.

Some medical experts felt that such responses might endanger a woman’s mental health, or aggrivate her physical disorders. One London doctor wrote that female patients might be allowed fiction but should be carefully watched. If a novel seemed to worsen a woman’s condition, it should be taken away and replaced by “a book upon some practical subject; such, for instance, as beekeeping.”

But the women, won over, or captivated, they did. Many writers—not only Dickens but George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Trollope—published books as scribbles.
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in inexpensive magazines. Booksellers opened stalls in railway stations—that is, for people who were about to have a few hours of leisure time. And books kept getting cheaper. The Abbé Prévost's "Manon Lescaut" (1731), like "Pamela," had to do with a beautiful lowborn girl who was good at marketing her attractions. (Manon comes to a bad end, though.) In 1848, the publisher Gustav Havard issued a handsome edition of the book, with plenty of pictures, and priced it at twenty centimes, a great bargain. The book sold millions of copies. By that time, actually, people could obtain books at almost no cost, thanks to commercial lending libraries. The most important was Mulie's, the Netlix of the nineteenth century. Founded in London in the middle of the century and eventually opening branches in other English cities, the company charged subscribers a guinea a year to borrow one book at a time. Until the popularization of public lending libraries late in the century, Mulie's offices were thronged.

As a result of these developments, and others, such as the increasing spread of compulsory education, about half the people living in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century could read, though with large differences between north and south, and Protestant and Catholic. The literacy rate for Sweden was about ninety per cent for Scotland and Prussia, eighty per cent; for England and Wales, between sixty-five and seventy-five per cent; for France, sixty per cent; and for Spain, twenty-five per cent; for Italy, twenty per cent. In Russia, the serfs were not freed until 1861, only five to ten per cent of the population could read. Tolstoy had a larger audience in Western Europe than he did in his own country.

However many people spent time with books, they spent it mostly with fiction. The nineteenth century has been called a golden age of reading. In any case, it was the golden age of the novel, which became both hugely popular and, on average, of better quality than in any other period. The writers of that time raised the novel to the top of the hierarchy of genres, and also generously stocked the lower tiers. At all levels, from art to junk, women writers, though still in the minority, were as accomplished as the men. And women readers were more likely to read fiction than men were. Female novelists probably drew female patrons just by being of the same sex, but they also, much more than men, dealt with problems that were central to the lives of women.

Both sexes could have their lives destroyed by misfortunes in love and marriage, but women were more vulnerable, and those subjects were a near-constant in the books produced by women writers, the best (Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot) and the worst alike.

The most important fact about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, apart from its increasing artistry, was its democratic reach. Ian Watt, in his classic 1957 study "The Rise of the Novel," writes that while in eighteenth-century England the poor were still strongly discouraged from reading, apprentices and household servants were likely to slip past the barriers:

They would normally have leisure and light to read by; there would often be books in the house; if there were not, since they did not have to pay for their food and lodging, their wages and wages could be devoted to buying them if they chose; and they were, as ever, particularly liable to be contaminated by the example of their betters.

And, however harsh the servants' upbringing, their employment separated them from the neighborhoods where most of England's urban poor spent what little free time and money they had drinking the cheap gin of the period.

From that point to the present, it seems, many of the working poor have found popular fiction, especially about rich people and their love lives, one of the most reliable of life's pleasures. Marxists would call this "false consciousness," and even mild-minded progressives might frown their brows over it. Kate Flint, in her 1993 book "The Woman Reader: 1837-1914," quotes a late-Victorian report about a book popular in Acocks, a working-class neighborhood in Manchester:

It was a love story. The scenes were those of old baronial houses, country roads, wealthy mansions, formal parks, old and stately trees, delicious glades,limpid streams, hunting expeditions, billiard rooms, and continental pleasures. The characters were rich men and beautiful women: titled men such as earls and knights, and ladies of refinement, wealth, education, real British pride, and charms investi-
Jack goes up to the present. She discusses the Internet and censorship, which no doubt falls harder on women, because they are held closer to home and therefore have more need of information. (The censorship of books, too, is more punishing to women, because the books in question often discuss issues crucial to women, such as sexuality, morality, contraception, and power relations between husband and wife. That's why such books are forbidden.) She also addresses blogs, which, particularly when they focus on literature, have been used successfully by many Western women. She writes about American reading groups, which are definitely a female preserve. This is a poignant matter: women who spent their young-adult years putting their husbands through medical school, and who now, in their forties or fifties—maybe after the husband has left them for a younger woman—are finally reading "Anna Karenina."

One study of adolescent girls and boys found that the two sexes still differ in their reading choices, in stereotypical ways. As before, girls favor fiction, particularly when it is about love, friendship, animals, and adventure. Boys, more than girls, like nonfiction, especially about sports and science. In a 2004 poll, eight hundred Britons—most of them well educated, obviously—were asked to name their "watershed books," books that sustained them "through key moments of transition or crisis in their lives." Among men, the winners were "The Stranger," "One Hundred Years of Solitude," and "The Catcher in the Rye." For women, "Jane Eyre," "Pride and Prejudice," and "Anna Karenina" topped the list (last anyone doubt that women prefer tales of love and marriage).

A great virtue of Jack's book is that she repeatedly reminds us of the internal pleasures of reading—not so much the acquisition of ideas or information as just the pleasure of going to new places in one's mind. I wish she could have said more about women's experiences of reading and how it differed from men's, and also how it varied from class to class. (We get very few statements from below the middle ranks.) Jack tells us some important things: that women read more fiction than men did; that they responded to it with strong emotion; that both circumstances were counted against them and against fiction. Such facts are well known, however, and she has no special theories about them. But if her book is thin, another word for that is modest, or honest, Jack doesn't like to say things that she has no evidence for. Also, she does not go in for special pleading. When George Elliot writes an essay called "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856), Jack records this. When women come out against women's reading, she says so. While she writes of some novelists that had very rich libraries, she also points out that the surviving copies of the nuns' books tend to have fewer margins than do those of the priests. This, she says, might indicate that the women were less willing to deface their books, but it might also mean that they were less likely to read their books, which were often donated by parishioners.

Still, Jack tells some moving stories of women's delight in being allowed to read. Samuel Johnson's friend Hester Piozzi noted in her diary, in 1790, that she was ashamed to scribble in the margins of her books, "but one longs to say something." Piozzi's contemporary Anna Barbara, a poet and a compiler of fiction—her fifty-volume "British Novelists" contained selections from Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Ann Radcliffe, Maria Edgeworth, and so on—wrote that people should not defend fiction (as many did) on the ground that it was actually unprofitive, that it deals with real life. "The glory of the novel," she argued, was the opposite, that it spurred the imagination: "It is pleasant to the mind to sport in the boundless regions of possibility; to find relief from the sameness of every-day occurrences by expatiating amidst brighter skies and fairer fields." Many people lead lives that are pretty boring to them, and are not going to get better. Reading, for them, is a secret garden, a second life. Men got there first, but women arrived eventually.