



# **A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public**

*Ronald J. Zboray*

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# A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public

Ronald J. Zboray

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This book explores an important boundary between history and literature: the antebellum reading public for books written by Americans. Zboray describes how fiction took root in the United States and what literature contributed to the readers' sense of themselves. He traces the rise of fiction as a social history centered on the book trade and chronicles the large societal changes shaping, circumscribing, and sometimes defining the limits of the antebellum reading public. *A Fictive People* explodes two notions that are commonplace in cultural histories of the nineteenth century: first, that the spread of literature was a simple force for the democratization of taste, and, second, that there was a body of nineteenth-century literature that reflected a "nation of readers." Zboray shows that the output of the press was so diverse and the public so indiscriminate in what it would read that we must rethink these conclusions. The essential elements for the rise of publishing turn out not to be the usual suspects of rising literacy and increased schooling. Zboray turns our attention to the railroad as well as private letter writing to see the creation of a national taste for literature. He points out the ambiguous role of the nineteenth-century school in encouraging reading and convincingly demonstrates that we must look more deeply to see why the nation turned to literature. He uses such data as sales figures and library borrowing to reveal that women read as widely as men and that the regional breakdown of sales focused the power of print.

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