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**A conversation with Barbara Sicherman**

Author of *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women*

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**Q: What will readers find most surprising about the young women you write about in your book?**

**A:** Readers may be surprised by the public achievements of women born in America's first Gilded Age who broke away from the domestic lives expected of them. Taking advantage of new professional opportunities, a surprising number of the first generation of college women distinguished themselves—as physicians and scientists, social workers and educators, perhaps most of all as leaders of the social justice wing of the Progressive reform movement of the early twentieth century. Two of them received the Nobel Peace Prize. Despite the era's polarized gender norms, these careers were acceptable because women worked mainly on women's and children's issues or in all-female institutions like women's colleges and did not compete with men. For the most part, they also remained single, a choice the next generation was unwilling to make—hence the subsequent scarcity of women in public life until late in the twentieth century.

**Q: What do you mean by a "community" of readers? Isn't reading a solitary pursuit, often a means of escape, rather than a social activity?**

**A:** In the Gilded Age reading was more obviously a social activity than it is today. Reading aloud in family circles, informal reading and writing groups, and more formal study clubs all flourished. In a larger sense, all reading is socially based: children learn to read from others; publishers and libraries determine what books are available; even what we make of our reading is influenced by literary gatekeepers. Influenced, but not totally determined by. A central point of *Well-Read Lives* is that readers are quite creative in making their own meanings. To understand how this is done, I found I needed to pay close attention to relationships with other readers.

**Q: You find a connection in your book between women's reading and public life in the early twentieth century. Could you elaborate on that connection and draw any comparisons to today's cultural and political landscape?**

**A:** Obviously reading has been important in other times and places, especially for girls and women. It still is, as anyone who has tried to engage the attention of an absorbed pre-teen or adolescent reader can attest. My argument is that in the years after the Civil

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War structures of reading intertwined with women's lives in ways that fostered a more direct connection between a seemingly private activity and women's entry into public life.

Literary culture was never more highly revered than at this time and women were central to it. They not only supervised cultural life at home, but founded hundreds of libraries across the nation, as many as 75 percent according to one estimate. In ways that are unimaginable today, young women created communities of learning, imagination, and emotional connection around shared literary activities that could be truly transformative. In addition, the fiction of the era was conducive to dreams of heroism. Writers like George Eliot highlighted women's social responsibilities, a call to female service that encouraged higher aspirations. I am not suggesting a necessary one-to-one identification of women readers with female heroines. This is too limited a view of an activity that allows readers to take imaginative leaps, even risks, when they enter what one psychologist calls "the place of elsewhere." There they can become, if only momentarily, characters, male as well as female, they would never encounter (or suffer) in real life.

### **Q: Were working-class women literate? And did they have access to books?**

**A:** The vast majority of white women could read and write. Although the 90 percent figure often cited is probably too high, they attained near literacy equality with their male counterparts by 1850, erasing an earlier gender gap. The situation was different for African Americans, who had been forbidden to learn to read and write under slavery. Despite limited access and inferior schools, by 1880 an estimated 30 percent of African Americans could read and write, and by 1910, 70 percent. By then, black women's literacy surpassed that of black men; because teaching was women's primary alternative to domestic service, many families kept daughters in school longer than sons.

Access to books depended on social and geographical location. Even well off families owned few books at this time. People relied on neighbors, subscription libraries (for a fee), or, if they were fortunate, reading rooms and libraries established by organizations like the Woman's Christian Temperance Union or the new public libraries that evolved after 1850. White and black working-class women had access through Sunday School libraries, Jewish immigrants from settlement houses. Farm children had the least access.

### **Q: What were young women of the Gilded Age reading?**

**A:** What they read depended in part on their social location. Girls and boys of the comfortable classes had access to a range of fiction that would today be considered middle- or even high-brow. A new secular literature for children and young adults emerged after the Civil War, some of which, like *Tom Sawyer* and *Hans Brinker*, or the *Silver Skates*, is still around. Scott and Dickens were popular with young readers of both sexes. Older girls gravitated to more or less realistic "domestic" fiction constructed around the sentimental education of heroines.

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Working-class women tended to find romances like Laura Libbey's *Little Rosebud's Lovers* more satisfying than realistic novels. These often feature harrowing adventures and melodramatic escapes from villains and end with the heroine's marriage to a well-off hero or the revelation that she was born into a higher social class. The appeal is easy to understand.

**Q: What were men of this period reading. And did their reading have a different impact on their lives?**

**A:** A new literature for boys developed in this period that featured adventures on the high seas or western plains. Available as "dime novels," these stories often depicted "rough" behavior (smoking, drinking) and were condemned by cultural authorities and parents. Despite the gender marketing of books, the importance of the family reading culture gave men and women greater access to each others' books than was true later. Boys and men of the comfortable classes read many of the same books and magazines as their sisters and vice versa. Theodore Roosevelt for one confessed to admiring Louisa May Alcott's books.

As to impact, books could be extremely important to individual boys and men, as their autobiographies attest. But on the whole they had less reason to invest themselves in literature. Middle-class boys were expected to make something of themselves; they had many avenues open to them (business, sports, politics); and they had models in fathers, relatives, and public figures.

**Q: Do you think that a "culture of reading" still exists for today's young women?**

**A:** I do, but it's a reading culture of a different kind. The vast changes in women's professional, political, and cultural worlds have reshaped their relationship to reading. Girls today grow up with different expectations than those of previous generations. They no longer have to read to catch glimpses of their future selves, although of course some still do. They consult women doctors, study with women professors, and follow the doings of female secretaries of state and justices of the Supreme Court. Girls and young women still read more than their male counterparts; they still discuss books, but they no longer do so in formal or semi-formal groups. The heterosexual teen culture that developed in the early twentieth century undermined both the family culture and female friendship networks of an earlier era.

Where reading was a central source of both entertainment and information in the Gilded Age, today it competes not only with movies, TV, and the Internet, but with new forms of social networking. Film and TV characters now constitute the common cultural coin as novels did earlier. I don't agree with the pessimists who claim that reading is on the way out. But it no longer occupies the central social and cultural role it once did.

One of the most significant changes in the literary landscape is the re-emergence of book groups among older women since the 1980s. Like the earlier clubs, most participants are **[more]**

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female (as are followers of Oprah's Book Club). But where most Gilded Age groups had an educational component, today's represent more of a time-out from busy professional and personal lives by women who welcome the opportunity for female bonding at a time when such occasions are fewer than they once were.

**Q: You talk about the importance of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* to women of the late nineteenth century. Are there any books or other cultural phenomena that have a comparable effect on today's young women?**

**A:** *Little Women* remained popular well into the twentieth century and its feisty bookworm heroine, Jo March, served as the exemplar of female independence for countless women, including writers as different as Simone de Beauvoir and Cynthia Ozick. When I was growing up, many of my contemporaries read the novel yearly. Nancy Drew, the heroine of a popular detective series for young readers, joined Jo March as an inspiring figure at that time and I don't think it's an accident that all three female justices of the Supreme Court consider her a significant prototype.

I haven't discovered any signature books that have the same kind of influence today, although girls as well as boys are avid readers of *Harry Potter*. This is most likely a sign of progress, since girls have more choices, both in terms of books and in life. According to the children's and teens' librarians at the public library in my mainly upscale community, popular books for fourth to sixth grade girls include the "Clique" series, with titles like *These Boots are Made for Stalking*, and for teens, "The Gossip Girl Books." Do I date myself when I suggest that they may be less conducive to dreams of personal achievement than earlier novels? Of course, the emphasis on clothes, looks, and early sexual experience reflect current preoccupations of girls, so one can't simply blame the books.

**Q: Why do you think that women have historically been more attracted to fiction than men?**

**A:** This is a subject that deserves further study. One reason often advanced is that women's socialization to be attentive to others inclines them to immerse themselves in stories about complex situations and characters, with some of whom they can connect emotionally. Another is that women read fiction because they find so few satisfactions in their daily lives. People often interpret the latter motivation as escapism. My own view is that, in the nineteenth century at least, women often read in order to escape to as well as escape from. Given the restrictions in their lives, they also had greater need than men did to look to fiction for self-authorization.

**Q: What do you share with the women you write about in your book? What role did reading play in your own intellectual and emotional development?**

**A:** I grew up in very different circumstances than my subjects, but I was a reader. Of necessity, since I was an only child with two working parents whose main entertainment was reading. My father, an autodidact who read Shakespeare for pleasure, was a

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wonderful story teller who entertained me when I was little with stories of his own invention. But in the 1940s and 50s, when the feminine mystique signaled that intellectual achievements were unfeminine, I found few companions outside the family with whom I could discuss books.

Like my subjects, I had signature books, among them, *The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes* for very young children, and *Thee, Hannah!* for older ones. One is about a courageous mother bunny who against great odds delivers an Easter egg to a sick child, the other is the story of a Quaker girl whose family shelters a run-away slave. In both I found characters to admire rather than those I thought I was like. If I have not lived up to the models, they continue to move me to this day, as may be apparent by what I have written about Alice Hamilton, Jane Addams, and Ida B. Wells, among others.

### **Q: How might book clubs and reading groups benefit from reading *Well-Read Lives*? What would make it an especially appropriate choice?**

**A:** Many book clubs read fiction only, a genre that can open up the world to readers and help them discover their own place in it. Some works of history do this as well. I'd like to think mine is one of them. In addition to meeting a number of interesting characters, some of whose lives read like fiction, my readers would learn that they belong to a long line of women with whom they shared an affinity for books. By understanding the changes as well as continuities of this history, they would gain perspective not only on their foremothers, but on their own lives as well. As a teacher, I have often regretted the historical amnesia that existed for most of the twentieth century about the women I think of as "my generation." After gaining the vote, women assumed that their options had increased to such a degree that they had less need to work together. The women's movement exposed the fallacy of that assumption. That is one reason I find the re-emergence of book groups such an encouraging sign. Although they lack the activist edge of the consciousness-raising groups of the late 1960s and 1970s, they are a reminder that each generation must find ways to promote female agency and that this is often best done in spaces inhabited by women—both real and imagined.

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