Abstract
In 1957, Richard Altick's groundbreaking work The English Common Reader transformed the study of book history. The collection aims to conceptualise some of the new directions that the field is taking fifty years after the publication of this seminal work and to interrogate the category of the ‘common reader’ itself. What do we now mean by the term ‘common reader’? Is it still a useful term in book history and the sociology of literature? Though the history of mass readerships attests to a rise in literacy in the second half of the nineteenth century, and to snobberies and anxieties surrounding the development of a mass reading public, how did different institutional contexts, different groups of readers (such as women, soldiers, prisoners and radicals) and different forms of publication respond differently to the general trend of a growth in literacy? Were there groups of readers or forms of publication, for example, which complicate the picture of a growth in mass literacy and an elite fear of that growth? And who is to be included or excluded from the concept of the ‘common reader’? How did changing concepts of what constituted the ‘common reader’ in the first place contribute to the development of literary and print forms, educational institutions, and concepts of reading and readerships within the period? This privileging does not aim to disassociate the ‘common reader’ from Robert Darnton’s formulation of the author/publisher/reader circuit central to Book History, but rather to more closely analyse the multiple functions and interactions of the reader therein. Importantly, the interrogation of the concept of the ‘common reader’ is brought to bear, in every essay, on questions about the development of the novel in the period. The book offers important textual analyses of literary works by Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Ouida and a range of other popular novelists fruitfully bringing together Book History, print culture and literary methodologies in order to further research into the relationship between the social history of reading and the development of literature in the late nineteenth century. Bringing together a collection of essays, each of which explores distinctive cases of constructions of the ‘English common reader’, this book will further research in the sociology of literature by taking one of its fundamental categories of thought and exploring the complicated set of sociological, literary and historical assumptions and ideas which both underpin and contest it.

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