

ant memory and part unhealed wound." Ironically, the end of the convict system, like its beginning, was linked to a major development in American history—abolitionism. Those free settlers who wanted to end transportation in order to claim Australia for themselves denounced the system as a "slave system," which it definitely was not. The critics of transportation, as Hughes relates, drew on antislavery rhetoric and imagery to discredit it. And, until the 1980s, those images have largely determined the way early Australian history was presented.

Although he takes full account of the tales of atrocities, Hughes offers a truer picture of the human story of successes, as well as the tragic failures, that were all part of a remarkable penal experiment that gave birth to a new nation.

—*Rhys Isaac '87*

**REVOLUTION
AND THE WORD:
The Rise of the Novel
in America**

by Cathy N. Davidson
Oxford, 1987
322 pp. \$22.95

Central to the formation of the new American Republic was the founders' belief that the ideas that would unite the nation would be diffused to its citizens through the medium of the printed word. But at the close of the 18th century, most Americans had not yet grasped the distinctive nature of printed matter. A goodly number of readers still believed that words delivered orally could be put into print without altering their essential

character. Most such readers had in mind the sermon, by definition an oral performance. Thanks to the printing press, American preachers had long been able to address an audience beyond the walls of the local meeting-house. Similarly, politicians believed, the new nation's expanding printing industry would now make it possible for political ideas to reach beyond the local forum and thus help shape a national citizenry.

The realization that print affected subject matter precisely because it was aimed at a wider, less visible audience was slow to arrive. Benjamin Franklin grasped it before most others. He observed, for instance, that in transcribing legal discourse into books "You must abridge the Performances to understand them; and when you find how little there is in a Writing of vast Bulk, you will be as much surpriz'd as a Stranger at the Opening of a *Pumpkin*." Accordingly, he strove to achieve conciseness without density. Learning from such proto-novelists as John Bunyan, he introduced dialogue, anecdote, and drama into his treatises. This not only made his works more readable but allowed him to address new subjects and issues as well. And indeed it enabled him to reach a new kind of audience—an audience of what he called "leather-apron men," small-tradesmen and artisans.

Chief among the new things that print made possible was the genre

that took its very name from this circumstance, the novel. But the novel met with an uneasy reception in America, particularly among the country's recognized spokesmen and leaders. It was, of course, written by a single person, but that person, unlike the sermonizer or social philosopher, disappeared into the multiplicity of the characters' voices and actions. Eschewing an authoritative voice and transferring control to the response of the common reader, the novel appeared democratic to the point of anarchy. Not surprisingly, ministers, politicians, and teachers were wary; they complained that novel-reading wasted time, enfeebled the intellect, corrupted morals. But behind their litany one detects a deeper, if not quite articulated, concern: The novel dealt with feelings and ideas outside of the authorized channels for such communications and hence was out of control, socially subversive.

Despite their large social implications, American novels that shaped a wide readership at the end of the 18th century have received only scant attention from literary critics and historians. The novels seem to be wretched stuff: maidens seduced and abandoned; Gothic goings-on in a country that had no castles; lampoonings of village politics so broad that even a royalist would be hard put to draw comfort from them. To her great credit, Cathy Davidson, a professor of English at Michigan State University, has not let established—and, as she shows, highly politicized—notions of artistic merit stand in the way of a much-needed examination of these early novels of sentiment, horror, and social satire. In *Revolution and the Word*, she convincingly demonstrates their significance to their age while at the same time making the better ones, if not exactly inviting reading, at least accessible to us. It is a notable achievement.

There is, to be sure, some small price to pay for what Davidson supplies. Since her study is based on a synthesis of critical methods—feminist approaches to the history of women, the ethnography of readership, theories of interpretive communities—the early chapters are somewhat clogged by her effort to accommodate them all. Once under way, however, her argument, presented with wit as well as intelligence, goes from strength to strength.

"The early novel," writes Davidson, "constituted a definition of America different from the official one that was being worked out at the end of the Revolutionary War. . . . The novel, I would insist, addressed the gaps in independence. The revolution that did not occur for many Americans on the level of the political and legal system did occur, to a greater or lesser extent, within a fictive world of words."

Chief among those for whom the revolution "did not occur" were



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women, the central subjects, principal audience, and most popular writers of the period's novels. Davidson pays shrewd attention to other circumstances, but the main thrust of her work clearly grows from recent insights provided by historians of women. Sometimes this leads her to force her rhetoric. For example, she sees the "elite" who were troubled by the novel as far more monolithic than the evidence supports. Conversely, she understates the latent conservatism of sentimentality, regardless of the objects, or messages, to which it is attached. But her consideration of the novels themselves is quite remarkable.

Davidson has not only read, and read well, most of the novels of the period, but has looked at hundreds of copies of the same novel in order to glean from the margins a sense of what their various readers prized. The result is an impressive ethnography of readership built on such evidence as a jotted response to a given moment in a novel as well as on shrewd inferences drawn from the successive signatures or embellishments found in spaces outside the text. Davidson's discussion of such ephemera and more traditional evidence, such as the diaries and letters of novel readers and changes in the illustrations of frequently reprinted work, brings us closer to the actuality of the popular audience than anyone would have thought possible.

To enable us to appreciate the experience of the early American novels' first readers is a valuable accomplishment. One need require no more. Yet a nagging question persists: Does this mean we can now open the better of these novels and react to them with neither boredom nor a patronizing smile?

The first party to attempt an answer is Oxford University Press, which in conjunction with the publication of this impressive critical history is issuing two early best sellers, both introduced and edited by Davidson: *Charlotte Temple* (1791) by Susanna Rowson and *The Coquette* (1797) by Hannah W. Foster. Both novels read well. They will not take their place at the checkout counter, nor will they bump *The Scarlet Letter* from the reading list of college surveys of American literature. But they read more sensibly and a good deal more eloquently than a drugstore romance and they deserve to stand as first in any serious sequence that includes *The Scarlet Letter*. Perusing them with the aid of Davidson, we find ourselves not just understanding how others nourished their imaginations on such fare but joining them in that experience.

Welcome as such dividends may be, however, *Revolution and the Word* is finally separable from them. Revising our notions of early American culture, it compels us to recognize the hidden sources of our aesthetic judgments.

—Larzer Ziff '87