PART

Reconstructing Readers

Far from being writers—founders of their own place, heirs of the peasants of earlier age now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses—readers are travellers, they move across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves. Writing accumulates, stocks up, resists time by the establishment of a place and multiplies its production through the expansion of reproduction. Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself *and* also forgets). It does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984)

How can we re-create something as ephemeral as reading once the readers who interest us are dead? How can we reconstruct the lives and views of those who have left few traces in the historical record? These are the methodological problems at the center of Part One. Wealthy people with access to education and print media leave all sorts of evidence—diaries, letters, autobiographies, annotated personal libraries—of what they

read and how they read it. However ephemeral the reading process may be, the writings of such readers give us representations of their reading selves. The social position of less privileged readers—African-Americans, immigrants, the poorly educated, the working classes—made it unlikely that they would leave this kind of evidence. Lacking the education, leisure, and discretionary income necessary to own many books or write at any length about their experiences, such readers left few traces.

What are we to do with these silences, these conspicuous absences in the history of reading in America? Are there other ways to get at the literacy levels, texts, and reading practices that were characteristic of these "marginal" readers? Did others—librarians, social workers, teachers, government agencies, publishers, writers, advertisers—leave accounts? If so, what can we learn from these accounts about the mostly privileged observers and the mostly unprivileged observed? If we surround this gap in the historical record with information from a wide variety of other sources, does that constitute adequate evidence of these marginal readers' ways of reading? Must all these secondary accounts agree in order to be convincing?

This book is a reconstruction of the reading practices of one set of marginal readers—the white, working-class men who encountered hard-boiled detective fiction in pulp magazines between 1923 and the collapse of the pulp-magazine market in the early 1950s. Because these readers were outside the record-keeping classes, and because this type of literature was dismissed as trivial by almost everyone involved, we have no accounts of the ways in which such fiction intersected or failed to intersect with readers' lives on the shop floor and in working-class families and communities. Lacking such records, I approach the question of the cultural work of hard-boiled detective fiction from numerous other directions. What did pulp writers, editors, and publishers have to say about their audience? What can we learn from readers who wrote letters to their favorite publications or won prizes in the contests these magazines periodically sponsored? What kinds of people did the advertisements in pulp magazines target? To what themes did pulp fiction repeatedly return? What did librarians of the period think the proletariat spent its time reading? What does interwar labor history tell us about the concerns of workers?

These sources coalesce around a primary readership that was white, male, often immigrant, and working-class. These readers were preoccupied with obtaining and keeping jobs that earned a family wage and

with asserting a manliness defined by physical strength, autonomous work, and the subordination of women. They were interested in social advancement, and they recognized that this required an understanding of how owners and managers dressed, spoke, and carried themselves. Readers preoccupied with these issues, those predisposed to make sense of their world in these terms, would have viewed hard-boiled detective stories quite differently from critics trained in Western philosophy. Pulp fiction for working-class readers was less about crime and the process of detection than about the hard-boiled private eye's struggles for autonomy at work, his skill at reading class and social position from details of dress and decor, his manly physical and rhetorical prowess, and his tortured relations with women.

Constructing a scenario, however speculative, about how these and other marginal readers made sense of their texts is necessary if we wish to construct a history of reading in America that looks a little less like the *Social Register* and a little more like the American reading public. Robert Darnton argues that "Worldviews . . . are bound to be fuzzy around the edges, and they will slip through the fingers if one grabs at them as if they were pages from the *Congressional Record*."[1] Ways of reading are like worldviews, and may, in fact, be indistinguishable from them. Better to engage in a scholarly way with evidence that is sometimes maddeningly vague and incomplete than to dismiss the study of reading outside the record-keeping classes as not worth doing because it does not offer historians the kind of proof to which our training accustoms us.

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The Hard-Boiled Writer and the Literary Marketplace

Into this underworld of literature most of us never dive unless, like Mr. Hoover's Committee on Recent Social Trends, we are curious about the literary preferences of those who move their lips when they read.

Vanity Fair, June 1933

It is not pleasant to think of the immature minds and mature appetites that feed on such stuff as their staple fodder, but there is no ducking the fact that sensationalism is the age-old need of the uneducated. The steady reader of this kind of fiction is interested in and stirred by the same things that would interest and stir a savage.

Harper's, June 1937

The June 1931 issue of *Black Mask*, the most important publishing outlet for hard-boiled detective fiction between the wars, printed the following letter from a new reader:

> I have just read my first copy of *Black Mask* and am writing to ask you why in the world you don't use good paper. If you had been using good paper I would undoubtedly have started reading it years ago, but I never thought of doing so, because I took it to be just another one of "those" magazines that flood the newsstands which I never buy. I never dreamed that it had such wonderful stories in it. I bet there are thousands more like me and that you are losing thousands of sales by not using white paper.[1]