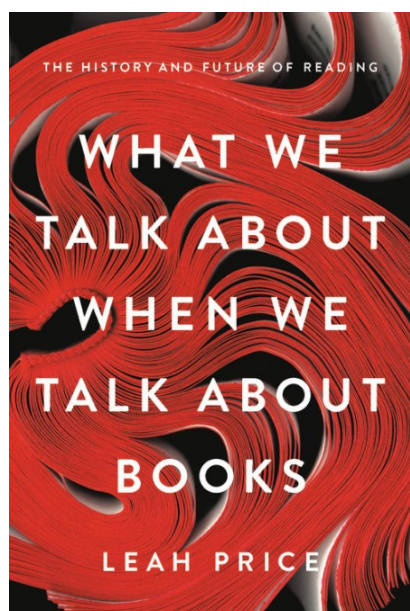


# Vegetarian carcasses, ubiquitous buying and prescribed reading

Rui Silva

UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA | CLP, FCT PHD RESEARCH FELLOW  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4721-5733



Leah Price. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books: The History and Future of Reading*. New York: Basic Books, 2019. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-154-167-390-8.

Charming and sexy are hardly two adjectives one would attribute to an essay on book history or most academic subjects. The team that led to the result of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books: The History and Future of Reading*, written by Leah Price, is responsible for this achievement. The gloominess of the preceding examples of the *genre* are also a generous contribution to this book's distinctiveness. In the past twenty years, studies of the book have delivered several volumes — from readers, introductions, companions to global histories — that sought to provide answers to the much-advertised and imminent tragedy of the death of the book. These hefty paperback compilations seem to share a common cover, a variation of a portrait of the codex that is: either blurry or over-focused; slightly opened and singled out in the foreground or stacked in a

pile in the background; adorned with imposing serif titles or blended in apathetic grotesque fonts that leave very little to the imagination.

The *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* book jacket — it is a hardcover! — does not stray from the main illustrated subject; it is an actual image of a book. The craftsmanship and execution dedicated to the cover are closer to a best-selling novel than an academic essay. The high-quality top overview photograph of a thick book block — red painted on the edges with a twisted spine and swirling pages fading into a black background — makes an attractive heterogenous shape. It contrasts sharply with the geometric font used on the centered text — single weight, uppercased, letter spaced. The fancy hardcover has a matching red uncoated paper with silver metallic letters on the spine. The book block has an elegant and grainy natural white paper with chips of wood pulp, randomly spread across the page. Not so widespread in the academy — we must concur. As a peculiar coincidence, the title seems to be in accord with a trend initiated after Raymond Carver's 1981 short stories collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and which currently covers a wide range of subjects — from God to the Tube.

The previous two paragraphs try to present *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* with a taste of its own medicine. It illustrates some of the methods used in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books*, and generically in book history, on how to analyze books just by browsing them in context. By focusing on the materiality of the object and the environmental data that surrounds it, the author of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* excels in demonstrating the strengths and quirks of the medium both in history and contemporaneity. The author's take on the discipline is quite straightforward: "[l]iterary critics interpret the stories that books tell; book historians tell stories about the objects that contain them" (34).

Leah Price publishes in the field since the year 2000, and her previous book, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012), already provided a remarkable picture of the interclass uses and ethics of the book by the Victorians as the book developed into a fashionable object. Price is also a professor of book history, a mission she does not take lightly. She induces discovery tactics to her students by engaging them to play a game called *name that book*, where they try to guess the identity behind paper-covered volumes and, later in the course, browse a Library blindfolded (30).

In *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books*, Price continues her travels beyond the Victorians and aims to give an updated and informed response to the threat posed by digital-age communication to books and reading. Her primary assumption is that this menace is fictional and built on three myths: the myth of exceptionalism, the myth of the ideal reader,

and the myth of the self-made reader (8-9). All three myths point to a contemporary assumption that imagines a lost era of the book and the reader, as hegemonic and 'serious' medium and as a figure with exemplary reading skills that is capable of an unmediated communion with the author's mind. The development of such a task demands five chapters and an interleaf plus an introduction and endpapers, always led by a personal backstory that entangles with dispelling those myths in a journey through surprising book history facts.

The expedition starts with *Reading over Shoulders* (ch. 1), a trip to the New York Public Library in quest for the first vegetarian cookbook written in English. Recipe books are historically popular, they "appeared only two decades after the Gutenberg Bible" (47), but to the author's dismay, the 1833 fourth edition of *Vegetable Cookery* is "printed on carcasses" (48) — parchment, standard printing surface before paper became widely accessible. Next, in *The Real Life of Books* (ch. 2), we are taken to the tangibility of book ownership, where we realize that most Kindle books are rent and not sold (59) and that booksellers were progressively shaming book borrowing as a malicious activity since the nineteenth century (62). The corollary is that in 2016 "Amazon banned [...] the table of contents at the end of the book" (64) because publishers received a percentage of the amount read. In *Reading on the Move* (ch. 3), the transitory quality of the paperback becomes an emancipatory quality that creates a dispersed library — from bookmobiles to the trenches —, or an opportunistic business venture — from 1937 train platforms vending machines to waterproof e-readers. If mobility is a reading enabler, we should consider Penguin's and Amazon's unwritten success motto "that mobile reading implied ubiquitous buying" (91). Furthermore, an average American spends "1,500-odd hours yearly on their smartphone," a deed that could enable them to read "Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*—twenty times every year" (105).

Due to a back injury, Leah Price makes an intermission between chapters, *Interleaf: Please Lay Flat*, where the text is set horizontally through the page spread as a demonstration of her current reading conditions. The double-page horizontal display provokes a reading discomfort and works as a reflexive reminder of the physical experience of reading and its habits.

In *Prescribed Reading* (ch. 4), the situation evolves into one of the book's idiosyncratic moments. The long waiting lists for antidepressants in the British NHS are replaced by medically prescribed titles in mild to moderate depression cases (119). The enterprise boosts sales and library book requests of the self-help *genre*. However, since the nineteenth century, links between books and mental disease abound: from the "excessive indulgence in novel-

reading [that] enervates the mind” to its “debasing effects constantly assisted by the habit of self-indulgence” (130). The last chapter, *Bound by Books* (ch. 5), reflects on the importance of book communities and their work to grant access to all in opposition to expanding public regulations. Civic movements like Project Gutenberg and street projects of ‘book-activism’ provide access to wider audiences, while Victorian book disinfectors and the 1980s refusal “to handle any books through HIV-positive readers” (146) narrow the public service.

*What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* makes a strong case for the book enthusiast without focusing on the rhetoric of the industry statistics or indulging in a romantic version of book history. Books failed their nineteenth-century predictions of demise as they are likely to do today, probably because they are more elaborated objects than just an artifact that mediates communication — a possible conclusion to infer from this book. Moreover, at a time when everyday life becomes the core poetical motto for the imagination, this book narrows the gap between the scholar and the common reader — for some a blessing, for some a heresy. Book history will tell us which.