



Sapsford, F. (2011) 'Review: William A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2010.'

*Rosetta* **10**: 94-97.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_10/Sapsford\\_Johnson.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_10/Sapsford_Johnson.pdf)

---

**William A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 250. £40. ISBN 978-0-19-517640-7.**

Reviewed by Francesca Sapsford  
*University of Birmingham*

William Johnson has produced an interesting and informative book about the way in which texts were read and produced in the Roman world. More importantly, he has situated this reading within the communities they were produced for, consolidating and expanding our knowledge of not only what these authors wrote, but *who* they were writing for (and, to some extent, why).

Our knowledge of writing and reading in the ancient world comes almost entirely from the written texts which were produced, and, with a few exceptions, authors did not feel the need to explain how their texts were written, distributed, or whom they were for (cf. Hutchinson 2008, Winsbury 2010). By examining the writings of key authors in the Roman world from the late first century onwards, Johnson teases out the explanations and clues contained within the texts to broaden our understanding of the elite literary world.

The book opens with a chapter examining the idea of reading as a sociocultural system as well as beginning to look at the question of how books were read (the recitation vs. silent reading debate). For an opening chapter the style jars a little, which is probably due to the fact that it is a reworked version of Johnson's excellent earlier article on this topic (Johnson 2000). However, it does introduce the main topics he aims to examine near the end of the chapter, and provides a good lead-in to what I consider the main introductory chapter, in which the author attempts to recreate the 'experience of an ancient book: what it was to hold one in the hand, how it was used and to what effect, and what sort of training was assumed in its use and digestion' (p.17). What follows is then the basics of the object of the book in the high

empire, namely the book roll, and a discussion on the writing system, as well as an introductory look at why the book roll and the writing system developed and continued even after the appearance of the codex. The main primary source Johnson looks at in this chapter is Quintillian's *Institutio Oratoria*. While Johnson is quick to point out that Quintillian is writing about the ideal rather than reality, he stresses the importance of this type of text for showing the place which literary culture had within elite communities during the high empire, and this is a topic which will be returned to with each of the authors investigated in the following chapters.

The first author Johnson turns to is Pliny. In chapters three and four the elite literary communities at the end of the first century are explored mostly through the *Epistles*, though in chapter 4 Johnson also looks at Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*. Pliny, according to Johnson, is like Quintillian, in that he does not describe the reality of the contemporary elite literary communities, but instead is 'constructing a picture of the world as he wishes it to exist' (p.35), and the *Epistles* are Pliny's 'attempts at defining what elite culture and community are, or should be, about' (p.36). Johnson argues that in his definition of elite literary culture, Pliny is not just talking about the book or text which is being read, but the attitude one holds towards that particular text and the act of reading in general, as well as the way in which this is integrated within the reader's daily life. One important aspect of Pliny's literary community is the use of recitation, the way in which the community is drawn together through group appreciation (and criticism) of each other's work. This elite self-fashioning is, Johnson argues, the main purpose of Pliny's writings, and is part of an ongoing dialogue within the community. To this purpose, Johnson then moves onto Tacitus, author of the *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, an author contemporary with Pliny whom Pliny admires greatly. Through the analysis of the two similar yet separate literary communities described through Pliny and Tacitus' works, Johnson shows the importance of self-fashioning and community construction at the end of the first century in Roman elite society.

The next author Johnson turns to is Galen. After the writings of Pliny and Tacitus, the technical treatises of Galen present a very different community

and audience. However, Johnson shows that even within technical writings, over fifty years after the writers of the Trajanic period the construction of literary communities and the self-fashioning of writers is still an important concern. Reading culture also continues to be important for authors: who is reading what, where and how. The construction of reading culture, and the existence of multiple contemporary reading cultures simultaneously is brought to the forefront through the analysis of the overlapping communities of the readers of Galen, Gellius and Fronto (as well as Fronto's epistolary discourse with Marcus Aurelius).

The final author Johnson turns to is Lucian, and especially his satirical *The Ignorant Book Collector* (though Johnson points out that a more correct translation of the Greek title assigned to it by later scholars is 'To the man who lacks *paideia* and buys a lot of books', p.158). Johnson shows how literary culture is not just about reading books or owning books, but the way the texts are approached by the community and the *paideia* one needs to be accepted as part of the elite reading and literary community within the Roman elite. Johnson's final chapter turns to reading communities in Greco-Roman Egypt with a brief look at the papyrus evidence, mostly from Oxyrhynchus. It connects with Lucian as papyrus letters found show evidence of book collecting among the elite communities, and there is also evidence of a scholarly community through the discovery of annotated texts, mostly non-canonical texts with the annotations showing a community of scholars' attempts to understand and analyse texts.

In the first chapter Johnson explained that he was presenting a series of vignettes, a brief dip into a series of reading communities in the high empire. However, he does manage to present a series of characteristics shared by these 'various literary universes' (p.200). Taking a period of over 150 years, he shows how books were read, what books were read, and how the communities produced continued to be important to authors. The reader was assumed by the author to have a certain education, social class, and a particular attitude to reading and understanding which created closed communities of readers and authors, in theory as well as fact.

Overall, Johnson has produced a fascinating and useful study looking at not just the words authors have written, but what they are trying to produce through their writings. By looking at the readers as much as the writers (or at least the ideal reader the author is addressing), the author shines a light on how texts were read and appreciated in the high empire, and the importance of literary appreciation and a certain type of *paideia* for both authors and readers.

### **Bibliography**

Hutchinson, G. O. 2008. *Talking Books. Readings in Hellenistic and Roman Books of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, W. J. 2000. 'Toward A Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity', *The American Journal of Philology* 121.4: 593-627.

Winsbury, R. 2010. *The Roman Book: Books, Publishing and Performance in Classical Rome*. London: Duckworth.