A mutual wariness exists between book historians and literary scholars, between those who study the production, circulation, and consumption of texts, broadly conceived, and those who study the content of some carefully chosen texts, narrowly conceived. Book history and literary study remain two robust fields separated by a common research agenda, with many literary scholars unwilling to embrace the empirical methods of book history and its pursuit of exploring context over text. The few scholars who have stepped across the great divide often find themselves at the vanguard of literary and cultural studies, discovering in the methods of the Great Satan approaches that have helped revise many cherished chestnuts on gender (Tuchman, M. Cohen), class (Rose), nation (St Clair), empire (Joshi), and social formation.¹ This essay draws upon a series of research vignettes in order to reflect upon the contributions book history continues to make to more traditional literary study, by introducing new vistas that open the practice of close reading so cherished in the Anglophone literary academy.

When the French historian Roger Chartier asked whether books made revolutions, he was only half serious. His response, though, that ways of reading just might be responsible for revolutions, is a gauntlet that has yet to be seriously taken up.² It seems time now to address the many opportunities and challenges that research into readers and institutions of readings, such as libraries, present to literary studies. Our focus will be on the social lives of readers as well as on the institutions that shaped readers and reading in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My comments will attempt to bring a comparative dimension into play, integrating insights from the relatively well-studied archives of metropolitan libraries such as those in England and Scotland, with libraries being uncovered in the peripheries (Canada, India, and Nigeria).
There is another ‘comparative’ dimension to introduce here and that is a transhistorical one. Having worked quite extensively with nineteenth-century archives of British and Indian publishing and book culture, I’d like now to extend these findings into the twentieth century.

The chapter proceeds in three parts, each exploring a term from the subtitle (Books, Reading, Culture) and weaving them together toward the conclusion. India is the primary case, but as is clear in this and my previous work on the subject, to conceive of ‘India’ as a discrete national identity or limited geographical space is a grave error, especially when it comes to studying the circulation of print and ideas. For ‘India’ was involved in the global commerce of ideas and ideologies well before the Raj, when a tax was placed on all print originating from outside the British metropolis. There are many legacies of the Raj’s century-long effort to monopolize print in the former colony, but the robustness of the global marketplace prior to and since Independence has obviated the once-bipolar colonial relationship and cemented an entity far greater than the national.

I. Books

Walking the streets of Bombay is quite possibly one of the most spectacular of urban activities. Unlike London or Paris, and maybe even New York, whose downtown streets seem to have given way altogether to an undistinguished global economy of Gaps, Starbucks, and Tie Racks, Bombay seems to have held out a little better. The city bears it colonial past with fading indulgence: the neo-Gothic Churchgate Station is among the most photographed site among nostalgists of the British Raj. Right beside Churchgate’s magnificent façade, however, lies the other Bombay, jostling for attention and inevitably getting it. Surrounding the heart of this Bombay are hundreds of book vendors selling everything from Marie Corelli’s bestselling Victorian novels to multiple biographies of that other Victorian victim-goddess Diana, the Princess of Wales (the titles are almost entirely in English). Bombay’s bouquinistes are a hardy group, and they are to be seen even during the torrential monsoon months, covering their wares with flimsy blue tarps, but still purveying bestsellers of all ages to readers of all ages (see Figure 5.1 [(a) and (b)]).

My first real memory of book buying and bookselling came from this textual cornucopia, and years later when I saw Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s painting ‘Librarian’ (1566), with its subject’s face and figure entirely constituted by elements from the codex (Figure 5.2), I was convinced