‘... despairing that I would ever find a book that would answer my questions, I began to formulate the research agenda for a study I really wanted to read, not write. Here is the outcome of that study...’

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World histories are more than typographical marks on paper. They are also more than the property of authors who inscribe and fix meaning. They are, rather, sites of relation and even contestation among authors, editors, publishers, critics and readers. Traditionally, however, studies of world histories have been author- and text- oriented. This is due in no small part to the assumption of a proprietary relation between authorial intentions and experiences and textual meaning. In recent years, ‘intentionalist’ intellectual histories have come under increasing challenge from literary theorists. One of the recurring themes in the writings of Roland Barthes, for example, is ‘the death of the author’: for him, authors are no more than conduits for larger socio-cultural forces, and readers impute meanings to texts regardless of author intention. Barthes writes:

We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture.

Within literary theory, Barthes’ pronouncements have stimulated the emergence of reader and audience theory.
The terms ‘reader theory’ and ‘audience theory’ cover a disparate group of critics. There is, for instance, little agreement on whether the concept of ‘the reader’ incorporates ‘narratees’ (persons addressed by narrators), readers implied by a cultural context or a specific text that has gaps that need to be filled, intended readers or the presumed readers of theorists engaged in review and criticism. There is, nonetheless, widespread acknowledgement that readers participate in the construction of meaning and that they are therefore a part of intellectual history. As Michel de Certeau argues, readers do not accept texts passively; indeed, textual meaning is impossible without them:

Whether it is a question of newspapers or Proust, the text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception that it does not control. It becomes only a text in its relation to the exteriority of the reader, by an interplay of implications and ruses between two sorts of ‘expectation’ in combination: the expectation that organises a readable space (a literality), and one that organises a procedure necessary for the actualisation of the work (a reading).

Recognizing readers has led to a reappraisal of texts. Writing in S/Z, for example, Barthes has suggested a distinction between lisible (‘readerly’) and scriptible (‘writerly’) texts. ‘Readerly’ texts elicit a more or less passive response on the part of readers through the use of familiar themes and rhetorical devices like footnotes or an omniscient narrator. They disguise their status as timebound cultural products and encourage readers to treat them as timeless, transparent windows onto reality. ‘Writerly’ texts on the other hand self-reflexively draw attention to the various rhetorical techniques that produce the illusion of realism and encourage readers to participate in the construction of meaning. They may also be polysemic, that is, capable of being read in multiple ways. Barthes clearly favours writerly texts, insisting that ‘the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text’. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur has written of a hermeneutic arc, where the ‘world of the text’ and the ‘world of the reader’ collide and coalesce; Umberto Eco has identified ‘open’ texts in which readers are invited to collaborate in the creation of meaning, and Michael Riffaterre has described the activities of ‘superreaders’, who seek meaning beyond superficial appearances. All of these writers emphasize negotiated readings, but Eco and Stuart Hall have gone further, allowing