



Reading Dickens

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PUBLIC LECTURE



What is a reading community? Is it the same thing as a literary community and does it always evidence literary sociability? In my study of the reading history of a New Zealand farm the idea of a reading 'community' seemed easy to establish, since all the people who lived within the physical bounds of the station could access the subscription library (if they paid the subscription). Did they exhibit literary sociability? Fitzpatrick and Dixon define this as 'various forms of community that facilitate and sustain writing and reading' and 'the kinds of communal identities that are formed by the practices of writing and reading'. I argued in that book that the library was the ground in which social and cultural status was asserted and social norms averred, and it still seems to me that reading, and particularly the performance of reading, however that might be displayed, is always inflected with registers of discrimination which play out across other sociabilities. But the question I want to ask in this paper is about how 'community' might be manifested in readers who do not meet in a library collection or any other way, and whose communal identity is formed around a writer's works-I refer of course to Dickens. This paper will examine evidence of reading Dickens in disseminated networks across New Zealand in the nineteenth century.

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CONFERENCE WEBSITE: <http://ciw.anu.edu.au/events/2014/readingconference/>