

BOOK REVIEWS

Slow Reading, by John Miedema. Duluth: Litwin Books, 2009.

reviewed by Erik Estep

I tried writing this review with my facebook account open; after a few sentences, my eyes would drift and I would find myself checking to see what my friends had for lunch and if they found it appetizing. Later, after logging out of my facebook account, my concentration improved and the pace of my writing improved. Still, I needed a little something to inspire me to finish and listened to the Smiths to get the job done. John Miedema, the author of the excellent *Slow Reading* might argue that I'm writing a "fast" review.

In fact, Miedema, writes that "the act of writing a review is itself helpful to me as a way of deepening my understanding of a book, committing it to memory, and bringing closure to it" (65). In this age of information overload, Miedema argues for a slower, more meditative pace; best to savor every word to enjoy a good novel in the same way you enjoy a meal at a fine restaurant. *Slow Reading* comes to the reader at a slim 80 pages but is intellectually hefty. Miedema cobbled the book together from his graduate school research, and while the seams sometimes show, this a serious work that moves beyond the ivory tower.

Miedema has many interesting, if familiar, things to say about how Web 2.0 has given us information overload and how it works against slow, careful reading of texts. With the benefits of wider access to information comes the cost of a diminished attention span; the very pace of the information cycle does not allow for contemplation. More than any other reason, this speed of information has not allowed for reflection and thus reduced reading to an intellectual track meet. Miedema also carefully traces the history of reading in its many varieties.

However, Miedema is on slippery ground when he takes the leap and links slow reading with the slow eating movement. Eating is very different than reading. Essentially, the slow eating movement is against the mass consumption of fast food; it is better to organically grow your own food. Eat locally, think globally, or something like that. That is good as far as it goes, but it doesn't address poverty in an intelligent way. It is true that a lot of fast food is bad for you; high in calories and artificially sweetened but it also very cheap. McDonald's has been very smart and lowered the prices of their products in response to the recession. If you are poor, slow eating is a luxury.

Reading is less necessary than eating, but no less a luxury for those in poverty. Miedema doesn't explicitly address the issue of poverty but his tone can be patronizing, especially when he gives guidance to readers on how to slow read; when he does this it sounds remarkably close to an insipid self help book (which doesn't usually require slow reading). And when Miedema talks about his own experiences reading it doesn't fit in well with the more scholarly chapters in this book.

Still, this is a very good and useful book. For a book that is short in length, it packs a hefty intellectual punch. Tone aside, Miedema is also a very good writer; his synthesis of his sources is elegant. *Slow Reading* would have been even better had he addressed class and poverty. Also, it would have been interesting to see his analysis of the very popular "one book, one city" programs. Are these large book clubs an example of slow reading? Or is it just part of a consumption model of mass reading? *Slow Reading* should be read by slow, fast, and medium readers. Recommended for Academic and Public Libraries.