Book historians’ taste for the case study has traditionally led them to recapitulate the humanism of their sources, whether authors’ biographies, company histories, or readers’ memoirs. They—we—gravitate toward agents such as the author, the editor, and the reader (or even more literally, the literary agent). This paper argues, however, that the most productive overlap between recent book-historical scholarship and the much longer tradition of fiction which interrogates the act of reading lies not in their common interest in human agents, but rather in their shared attention to the circulation of things. As analytical bibliographers have long emphasized, books accrue meaning not just through their manufacture, but through their subsequent uses: bought, sold, exchanged, transported, defaced, mended, sorted, catalogued, ignored, collected, neglected, discarded, recycled. More specifically, I want to suggest that a history of the book that took these transactions into account could usefully borrow its formal conventions from the “it-narrative”: a fictional autobiography in which a thing traces its travels among a series of richer and poorer owners. Such autobiographies proliferated in the Victorian religious press, under titles like *The Story of a Pocket Bible* (1800); *The History of a Religious Tract Supposed to be Related by Itself* (1806); *The History of an Old Pocket Bible* (1812); *Adventures of a Bible: Or, the Advantages of Early Piety* (1825); *The Story of a Red Velvet Bible* (1862); *Handed-On: Or, the Story of a Hymn Book* (1893). This paper asks, therefore, what stories these narratives tell about the circulation of free or subsidized print, and what they imply for 21st-century scholars’ understanding of the tension between ascribing agency to books or to their readers.

**Workshop with Leah Price:**

“How to Do the History of Reading”

Friday, October 31, 10 a.m.–1 p.m.
CCA Seminar Room

Because of space limitations, participation in this workshop is limited to 20 faculty and graduate students, and is by reservation only. Please contact Curtis Dunn at CCA: 732.932.8426, or curtis.dunn@rutgers.edu.

Readings for this workshop will be posted on Sakai.
Box lunches will be provided for participants; please let us know of specific dietary requirements at the time of registration.