

Early Modern Women's Reading, Education and Book Collecting

Date and Time: May 22, 2026, 9.00-17.00

Venue: Wadströmska villan, Norrköping

Organizers: Johanna Vernqvist, Ass. Prof. (Docent) in Language and Culture

Lucie Duggan, PhD. in English Literature



Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *La Lisense*, 1776

Program

9.00-9.15 Coffee and Welcoming words by Johanna Vernqvist and Lucie Duggan

9.15-10.15 Keynote lecture by prof. Cecilia Rosengren: Vagabond Books – Margaret Cavendish at Skokloster

10.30-11.00 Peter Sjökvist: Queen Kristina's Library: Books as Spoils of War

11.00-11.30 Matilda A B: Anna Rosén's Editorial Reading Practices. The Bookscape of an 18th-century Gothenburg periodical

11.30-12.00 Mark Towsey: Eighteenth-Century Libraries Online and the Digital Recovery of Women's Reading in the British Isles

12-13 Lunch

13.00-13.30 Maria Nørby Pedersen: Birgitte Thott (1610-1662) as a Reading Woman of the Danish Learned Elite

13.30-14.00 Tim Berndtsson: Lovisa Ulrika's book collections at Svartsjö and Fredrikshof

14.00-14.30 Amy Wells: In the Margins: Researching the History of Book Use by Women and Children

14.30-14.45 Pause

14.45-15.15 Bo Eriksson & Anna Katharina Richter: "Given to me to read and study it diligently": Early Modern Women as Book Collectors in Skokloster Castle

15.15-15.45 Alicia Montoya: Reconstructing Early Modern Women's Book Use from Library Sales Catalogues

15.45-16.15 Concluding Discussion

16.15-17.00 Mingle

Abstracts

Matilda Amundsen Bergström

Anna Rosén's Editorial Reading Practices. The Bookscape of an 18th-century Gothenburg periodical

In 1776, Anna Rosén formally became editor of the Gothenburg newspaper *Hwad Nytt? Hwad Nytt?*, a periodical founded in 1772 by her husband – probably with Rosén as a key collaborator. She remained its sole editor until the newspaper ceased publication in 1785, making her the first female newspaper editor in Sweden. Yet *Hwad Nytt? Hwad Nytt?* offered much more than conventional news. More so than other, contemporary publications, it was marked by an eclectic blend of genres, authorial voices, and textual forms. Central among these were translated excerpts drawn from a wide range of international sources: newspapers and journals, but also collections of poetry, essays, scientific tracts, letters and philosophical treatises. During Rosén's ten years, its readers encountered German *sturm und drang* poetry, Danish medieval history, English economic theory, Montesquieu's thoughts on freedom in *De l'esprit des lois* and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's description of Turkish women in *Turkish Embassy Letters*.

In this presentation, I examine the broader bookscape of *Hwad Nytt? Hwad Nytt?* to show how Rosén's editorial work was, fundamentally, a form of reading practice – a fact that I argue offers new perspectives on 18th-century women's engagement with texts at the intersection of reception, transmission and creation. By mapping the texts Rosén selected, read, and transmitted to her audience, I will highlight in particular both the circulation of women's voices and Rosén's commitment to promoting Enlightenment ideals in Gothenburg.

Matilda Amundsen Bergström is a researcher in comparative literature and history of ideas at The University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her research is focused on women's thought in the early modern period, and she is particularly interested in ethics and philosophical thought in various genres. Amundsen Bergström is currently completing the monograph *Women Philosophizing about Happiness in Early Modern Scandinavia*, which will be out with Amsterdam University Press, and her work has appeared in journals such as *Early Modern Women*, *Hypatia*, *Vivarium*, and *1700-tal*. The presentation proposed here relates to her ongoing project "Making Enlightenment Happen. Gothenburg Women in 18th-Century Swedish Public Life", conducted with two other colleagues at The University of Gothenburg.

Tim Berndtsson

Lovisa Ulrika's book collections at Svartsjö and Fredrikshof

Queen Lovisa Ulrika (1720–1780) is considered one of the great cultural figures of 18th-century Sweden. She is famous as the founder of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities and patron of poets and historians; as an eloquent letter writer to her relatives in the Brandenburg royal family and on various Enlightenment philosophies; and as the creator of the large royal book collection at Drottningholm Palace. Voltaire, and after him dozens of other poets and orators, praised her as "Minerva of the North."

However, interest in Lovisa Ulrika's cultural achievements has usually focused on her life as a princess and queen consort. Her life as a queen dowager, in increasing conflict with her son Gustav III (who as monarch stood at the center of the limelight), is less well known. Her library catalogs from the palaces of Svartsjö and Fredrikshof, with book collections that were largely created through new purchases in her later years, can, however, provide an exciting insight into the interests and tastes of the elderly queen.

Tim Berndtsson is senior lecturer in literary studies at Umeå University and visiting researcher at the Department of History of Ideas at Uppsala University. He is currently working on the project "Dreams of Iron. Knowledge mobilization and resource exploitation in the Swedish North around 1800", as well as with book and library history research on the private library of the Holstein-Gottorp royal family, the period 1750–1830.

Bo Eriksson & Anna Katharina Richter

“Given to me to read and study it diligently”: Early Modern Women as Book Collectors in Skokloster Castle

This project explores early modern noblewomen as book owners and readers through the exceptionally well-preserved collections of Skokloster Castle (c. 1500–1800). While Skokloster's library has long been associated with male collectors, recent findings indicate a far richer and more complex history of female book ownership. We aim to identify and analyse the women whose books entered—or shaped—the collections: figures such as Elisabeth Leijonhufvud, Margareta Persdotter Brahe, Margareta Abrahamsdotter Brahe, Sigrid Bielke, Margareta Juliana Wrangel or Brita Horn. Skokloster Castle Library preserves a number of private collections originating from other noble estates and therefore is a perfect place for this study.

By combining material bibliography, provenance studies and gender-oriented reading history, we trace what kinds of books these women owned—psalters and prayer books, Bibles, devotional literature, but also secular works in foreign languages—and how patterns of acquisition, inheritance, and gift-giving structured their libraries. Particular attention will be paid to material traces: inscriptions, bindings, marginalia, and signs of use that illuminate practices of devotion, education, and emotional life.

The project is planned as an academic study consisting of several sub-investigations suitable for long-term collaboration (c. 2026–2030). A second output (planned for 2031) will be a book aimed at a wider cultural audience, presenting early modern noblewomen not only as readers but as active shapers of Skokloster's intellectual legacy and cultural heritage.

Anna Katharina Richter is Senior Teaching and Research Assistant at the Department for German and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Zurich. She holds a PhD in Scandinavian literature and has published research articles on early modern Swedish and Danish fictional narratives. Her main field of research is Scandinavian literature and book history in the early period of print. She is co-editor of *Top Ten Fictional Narratives in Early Modern Europe* (De Gruyter 2023) and currently works on an annotated edition of the unique handwritten Danish translation of book I of *Amadis de Gaule* (Royal Library Copenhagen).

Bo Eriksson is Associate Professor in the Department of History at Stockholm University. In his previous research, he has conducted extensive studies of the Swedish nobility from 1500 to 1800, a genre-based investigation of household books from antiquity to the eighteenth century, and a focused study on animals in Gamla Uppsala, published as a digital knowledge resource by the Swedish National Heritage Board (RAÄ). He is currently completing a project on the use of books at Skokloster Castle: *Talande böcker – Skoklosters slotts boksamling i kommunikativt bruk 1500–1800* (forthcoming open access in the newly launched book series).

Maria Nørby Pedersen

Birgitte Thott (1610-1662) as a reading woman of the Danish learned elite

Maria Nørby Pedersen, Ph.D. in history, postdoc at the Department of Scandinavian Studies and Experience Economy, Aarhus University, Denmark.

In one of the two surviving copies of the handwritten treatise *On the Path to a Happy Life* (c. 1659) written by the Danish Seneca-translator Birgitte Thott, the main text is connected to a bookscape of ancient and early modern European literature. These margin references open a window into the nature of parts of Thott's reading and her own book collection (since burned) as well as the ones she frequented in the homes of her relatives and friends in the small elite nobility of early modern Denmark. While historians of philosophy and philology have studied Thott's framing as a female intellectual through her Seneca-translation, Thott's other works have rarely merited attention from scholars. This chapter seeks to explore what Thott's thoughts on reading and her references to other literature in both her handwritten and printed works can tell us about her embrace of a book and reading culture. By mapping and exploring Thott's bookscape in the historical context of the Lutheran elite nobility, the chapter seek to contribute to our understanding of how social status and gender intersected in (trans)confessional reading, and what evidence of the reading practices of Danish (noble)women Thott's writings can yield.

Maria Nørby Pedersen has a Ph.D. in history with expertise in early modern cultural history. She is currently employed as post doc. at the Department of Scandinavian Studies, Aarhus University. She has worked with the understanding of poor relief as a Christian practice in early modern Denmark, the learned seventeenth-century noblewoman Birgitte Thott and the use of fictionality in scientific communication in eighteenth-century periodical journals.

Alicia Montoya

Reconstructing early modern women's book use from library sales catalogues

Printed library sales catalogues, as has often been noted, present multiple challenges when used as a source to reconstruct early modern reading practices. Not only do they represent merely a snapshot, taken at a particular moment in time – typically after the library owner's death – of reading practices across a lifetime. Because of their commercial purpose, they tend to foreground the larger, materially attractive and more expensive volumes in a library, while passing over, or even omitting altogether, the more worn ones – which were, however, often the books most intensively used by the library's owner. Yet in the case of early modern women, these catalogues may be the only extant evidence documenting their lives as readers and book collectors.

In this contribution, therefore, I will distant-read a corpus of 74 catalogues of British, Dutch and French female-owned libraries, produced between 1650 and 1831, attending specifically to the material traces of use that were sometimes noted by cataloguers. These include manuscript annotations in books, interleaving, the presence in libraries of customized books (grangerized volumes, *Sammelbände*), information on the condition of books, as well as incomplete sets that might point to a volume that had been in use or lent out at the moment of the owner's death. I will demonstrate that, sparse as this evidence is, it does throw up significant patterns, particularly regarding the role of women readers within broader social networks or interpretive communities, and the continuing importance of devotional reading for many of these early modern female readers.

Alicia C. Montoya is Professor of French Literature and Culture, specializing in eighteenth-century studies, at Radboud University (The Netherlands). She is the author of *Medievalist Enlightenment: From Charles Perrault to Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge 2013), *Marie-Anne Barbier et la tragédie post-classique* (Paris 2007) and the co-editor of several volumes, including *Lumières et histoire / Enlightenment and History* (Paris 2010). She is currently Principal Investigator on the Dutch Research Council-funded project *Civic Fictions: Modelling book-reader interactions in the Age of Revolution, c. 1760-1830*, and was formerly PI on the European Research Council-funded *MEDIATE* project (2016 - 2022). She is the recipient of the 2017 Ammodo-KNAW Award Humanities, and a member of the Royal Holland Society of Sciences and Humanities (Koninklijke Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen), the oldest learned society in the Netherlands. Her book *The Enlightenment Common Reader: A Digital Bibliometric Approach*, co-authored with Simon Burrows, is forthcoming in 2026.

Peter Sjökvist

Queen Kristina's Library: Books as Spoils of War

The cultural ambitions and interests of Queen Christina (1626–1689, r. 1645–1654) are well known. At the castle in Stockholm, she gathered learned people from all of Europe and collected a large library. Book agents were sent to several parts of the Continent to help with the acquisitions and to follow the international market. But she also used the wars that Sweden was involved in during the 1640s to enrich the own collections at the castle, through spoils of war. However, as has been noticed in previous research, she took a relatively small portion of these looted books with her when she abdicated and left Sweden in 1654. In my talk, it is my intention to discuss possible reasons behind this circumstance. I will do so in particular by closely studying a list created in 1648, in which books that Christina exchanged with Uppsala University Library are listed, on her order.

Peter Sjökvist is Associate Professor of Latin at Uppsala University and Rare Books Librarian at Uppsala University Library. In his research, he has been especially devoted to the study of early modern occasional poetry, academic dissertations, and books taken as spoils of war during the 17th century.

Mark Towsey

Eighteenth-Century Libraries Online and the Digital Recovery of Women's Reading in the British Isles

This paper examines the presence of women readers in the Eighteenth-Century Libraries Online (ECLO) database, a new digital resource which brings together membership lists, catalogues and borrowing records produced by more than eighty subscription libraries across the British Isles and North America between 1731 and 1801. Subscription libraries were private membership clubs whose subscribers pooled their resources to acquire a wider range of books than most could afford individually. While scholars have traditionally believed that these libraries were primarily – if not almost exclusively – masculine spaces, I argue that they played a very significant role in facilitating the circulation of women's writing and in extending women readers' access to print.

My paper will begin by outlining women's direct engagement with libraries as subscribers in their own right, before explaining that these libraries' administrative practices – as well as the wider cultural context of *couverture* and separate spheres – likely mean that many female users were obscured in the documentary record. I will then proceed to examine evidence of female book use, considering the few sets of surviving borrowing records against the wider landscape of subscription library acquisitions to reflect particularly on women's reading of novels, history books, travel writing, botany and education. Two detailed case studies from the Bristol Library Society will be used to animate this discussion, one focusing on the inventor and educational writer Sarah Guppy and the other on an otherwise entirely unknown haberdasher called Mary Adams. The paper will finally reflect on how library circulation evidence fits within the methodological toolkit of the historian of reading, asking how far marginalia, commonplace book, diaries and other sources of 'reader response' can be used to plug in the gaps between library records.

Mark Towsey is Professor of the History of the Book and Head of the Department of History at the University of Liverpool. He has published very widely on the history of reading, libraries and intellectual culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment* (Brill, 2010), *Before the Public Library: Reading Community and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850* (Brill, 2017) and *Reading History in Britain and America, c.1750-c.1840* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). As Principal Investigator on the 'Libraries, Reading Communities and Cultural Formation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic' project (funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council), he led the team responsible for the *Eighteenth-Century Libraries Online* database and has co-edited scholarly editions of the eighteenth-century minute books of the Bristol Library Society (Bristol Record Society, 2022) and Liverpool Athenaeum (Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 2020).

Amy Wells

In the Margins: Researching the History of Book Use by Women and Children

As scholars of book history are all too aware, there is often a necessary reliance on fragmentary evidence rather than comprehensive records; histories of reading are even more challenging when so much intellectual activity may go entirely undocumented. Add to this an additional marginalising factor, be that gender, race, class, age or, indeed, intersectionality across these, and the already

rigorous task of historic research becomes a complex, sometimes frustrating, hunt for traces of treasure. The rewards of such traces, however, are vital to moving these histories out of the margins and into the spotlight, where they can confront imagined or absent narratives.

This paper offers an insight into the conceptual framework I use in my research into childhood engagements with books in country houses, namely the notion of ‘bookhood’: a holistic understanding of a book’s evolving biography and its connections with the lives of those whose hands it enters. I propose that bookhood affords a positive dialogue between different kinds of sources to bridge literary, material and social histories rather than keeping them separated. Notably, many of the female voices that illuminate my research come not from archival records but from fiction written by women, where reading practices, domestic pedagogies, and imaginative self-fashioning receive fuller articulation than the surviving material evidence often permits. By placing physical evidence, historic contexts, and literary representations in conversation, we can better understand how cultural narratives of marginalised book users guide our interpretations, and how historical findings may in turn complicate or unsettle those narratives.

Amy Wells is a PhD candidate at the University of Oxford, researching childhood engagements with books in English country houses through an AHRC-funded collaboration with the National Trust. Her work looks to the relationship between the lives of books and the lives of their owners to better understand the place of stories in these histories.