



Expanding the American Mind: Books and the Popularization of Knowledge

Beth Luey

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Over the past fifty years, knowledge of the natural world, history, and human behavior has expanded dramatically. What has been learned in the academy has become part of political discourse, sermons, and everyday conversation. The dominant medium for transferring knowledge from universities to the public is popularization?books of serious nonfiction that make complex ideas and information accessible to nonexperts. Such writers as Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, Stephen Hawking, Daniel Boorstin, and Robert Coles have attracted hundreds of thousands of readers. As fields such as biology, physics, history, and psychology have changed the ways we view ourselves and our place in the universe, popularization has played an essential role in helping us to understand our world.

Expanding the American Mind begins by comparing fiction and nonfiction?their relative respectability in the eyes of reading experts and in the opinions of readers themselves. It then traces the roots of popularization from the Middle Ages to the present, examining changes in literacy, education, and university politics. Focusing on the period since World War II, it examines the ways that curricular reform has increased interest in popularization as well as the impact of specialization and professionalization among the faculty. It looks at the motivations of academic authors and the risks and rewards that come from writing for a popular audience. It also explains how experts write for nonexperts?the rhetorical devices they use and the voices in which they communicate.

Beth Luey also looks at the readers of popularizations?their motivations for reading, the ways they evaluate nonfiction, and how they choose what to read. This is the first book to use surveys and online reader responses to study nonfiction reading. It also compares the experience of reading serious nonfiction with that of reading other genres.

Using publishers' archives and editor-author correspondence, Luey goes on to examine what editors, designers, and marketers in this very competitive business do to create and sell popularizations to the largest audience possible. In a brief afterword she discusses popularization and the Web. The result is a highly readable and engaging survey of this distinctive genre of writing.

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