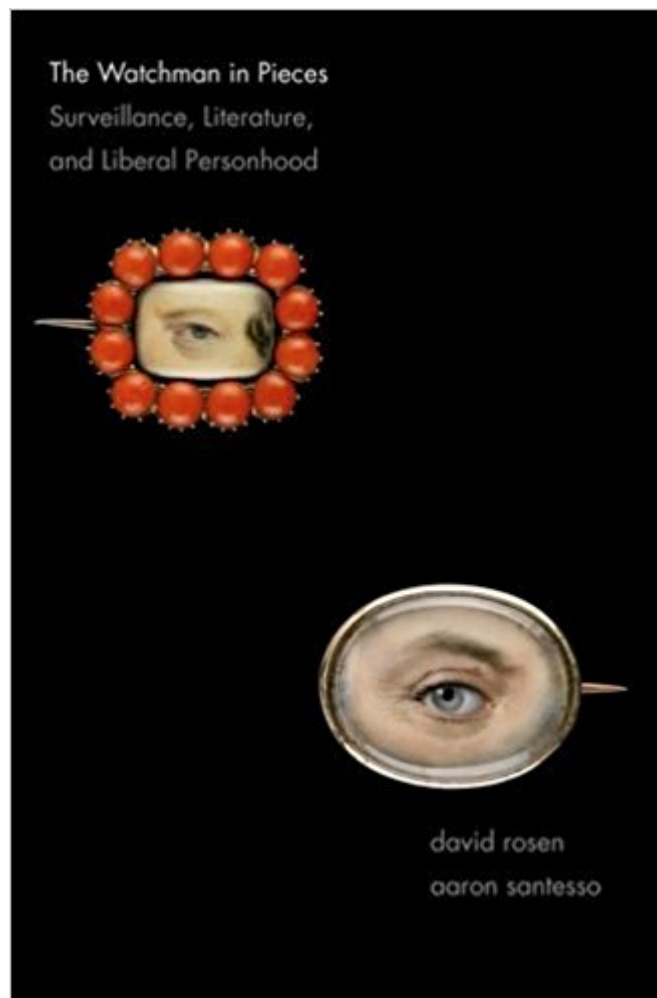




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The Watchman In Pieces: Surveillance, Literature, And Liberal Personhood



Synopsis

Spanning nearly 500 years of cultural and social history, this book examines the ways that literature and surveillance have developed together, as kindred modern practices. As ideas about personhood—what constitutes a self—have changed over time, so too have ideas about how to represent, shape, or invade the self. The authors show that, since the Renaissance, changes in observation strategies have driven innovations in literature; literature, in turn, has provided a laboratory and forum for the way we think about surveillance and privacy. Ultimately, they contend that the habits of mind cultivated by literature make rational and self-aware participation in contemporary surveillance environments possible. In a society increasingly dominated by interlocking surveillance systems, these habits of mind are consequently necessary for fully realized liberal citizenship.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“An ambitious, illuminating, and convincing book. I have rarely been so excited and enlightened by the argument of a literary study as I was by this.”—Edward Mendelson, Columbia University (Edward Mendelson) “The Watchman in Pieces is an erudite, major addition to surveillance studies. Like Weber, Habermas, and Foucault, though with many differences, the authors are ‘rethinking the history of modernity.’” —Patrick Brantlinger, Indiana University (Patrick Brantlinger) Winner of the 45th annual James Russell Lowell Prize sponsored by the Modern Language Association. (James Russell Lowell Prize Modern Language

Spanning nearly 500 years of cultural and social history, this book examines the ways that literature and surveillance have developed together, as kindred modern practices.

The Watchman in Pieces is a detailed literary study of surveillance in its ideas and in its practices over several centuries. It turns commonplace perceptions upside down--those being watched are told, and believe, that the watchers are controlling the narrative, so innocent or guilty, the watched worry. The book's argument is, those under surveillance control the narrative. And if so, the watchers are pretty much wasting their time. They can piece together things after the fact, but anticipate events? Not very well. A nicely argued and for me, refreshing book.

This is a truly brilliant book: a wide ranging, deeply researched, and compelling argument that "surveillance and literature, as kindred practices, have light to shed on each other." It's a counterintuitive claim, at first, because these aren't fields we associate with each other, but it comes together as Rosen and Santesso address the ways in which surveillance is primarily about creating a narrative, and that the power to be gained through surveillance resides in control of that narrative. So who controls the narrative: the one in front of the camera, or the one behind it? The one writing the script, or the one reading it? The questions started for Rosen and Santesso when they considered the discipline of surveillance studies in the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001. They saw contributions to surveillance discussions from political scientists, sociologists, legal scholars, and engineers, but found that "the distinctive and necessary contribution of the humanities as such to this conversation" had "largely gone unarticulated" (5). There was a lot of gadgeteering, and plenty of discussions about what kinds of techniques were legal, should be legal, or could be legal, even some communications theory, but all founded on an assumption that if we are just able to assemble the right data, we will "know the truth about people" (an important phrase for the book), and that we would be able to tell what they will do next. So this book is a corrective to that gap in discussions of surveillance. Their work places humanistic thought "in careful cultural history" in a complex and satisfying conversation with the disciplines working to theorize surveillance for our moment. Arguing that "the ultimate target of all surveillance activity: the individual self" is best approached as a tangle of slippery questions rather than a stable given, Watchman in Pieces offers an account of "the ways that conceptions of selfhood

have changed over time" (8). Working across modes and genres, their argument spans from the early modern period to the present day, along the way challenging current discussions of the role of literature in culture (I love their contention that there is no significant role for studying literature "in a conceptual field configured by Foucault and Baudrillard" — what?! Read it!). Even more, they take on the myth of interpretive competence that lies behind much thinking about surveillance: the idea that if you start getting data on someone, it gives you the keys to their life. Through careful examination of diverse texts, from Locke's Essay on Toleration through Orwell's oeuvre and Tolkien's novels to Enemy of the State and other films from our own era, Rosen and Santesso demonstrate that the "hermeneutic problems of surveillance are also literary problems" (13). There's plenty of modern and early modern history here, through a careful selection of representative figures, but what I love even more is the way that this strategically leaps forward to discuss more recent events in the light of past discussions (I've got to say that I did NOT expect this book to analyze the Keith Urban/Nicole Kidman wedding, but it DOES). In assembling the broad conceptions of what a human and how the idea of watching and tracking people have changed over time, the argument engages a significant range of thinkers who have attempted to grapple with the power of narrative to shape our lives. I love what they do with Shakespeare, in handling both Othello and The Tempest. We get discussion of More's Utopia as a predecessor to industrial age experiments in demographic sorting and policing. I find their discussion of Bentham significant in the way that they disentangle him from Foucault's conception of the panopticon — was Foucault ever not reductive? (but he was reductive so interestingly!) — and read Bentham through his cultural (social and literary) context, through more than just one passage describing a prison. There's a great piece wherein Bentham describes his own experience of reading Richardson's sentimental Camilla which is well worth the price of admission. They do some really interesting things with the development of surnames, the history of the post office and the surveillance of mail, the relationship between class and policing (and the detective novel), the split between progressivism and paranoia in twentieth century narratives. Seriously, this book is great. As a literary scholar and an intellectual historian I just found this continually satisfying and surprising and on the mark. The way they pull together Wordsworth and Louis Brandeis, J. S. Mill, Weber, Adorno, Habermas, Foucault, Baudrillard, and others just makes this compelling stuff. Overall, it's an ambitious, and what's more successful, attempt to rethink modernity, exploring "the effects that fiction has on reality" and finally offering us a new way of understanding how and why we watch and read our neighbors (9).

my students like it , very fast, receive it next day, Great product. Feels good in the hand. very good .
feel very good .

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