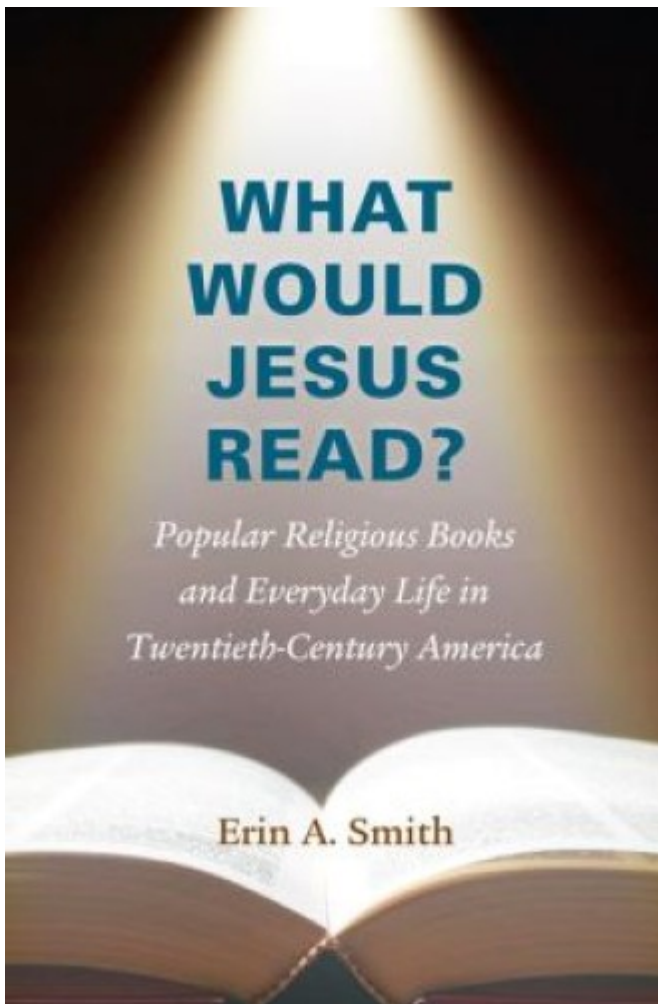


*What Would Jesus Read?* by Erin A. Smith

Books in the [July 22, 2015](#) issue

## In Review



### **What Would Jesus Read?**

By Erin A. Smith

University of North Carolina Press

Smith traces the path of popular religious books—*In His Steps*, *Ben-Hur*, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, *Left Behind*—from the late 19th century to the present. Early chapters explore religious reading in an emerging consumer society. Later chapters

deal with the complexity of the current moment, when books like *The Cloister Walk* make it to best-seller lists with ease, and a broad audience for religious books is assumed, and yet institutional religion seems to be on the decline. This was not true, Smith argues, at the beginning of the 20th century, when audiences for religious books had to be created, sometimes one book at a time, and religious books were usually ignored by the secular press. Smith is not interested in judging the quality of popular religious books, but in understanding what their popularity tells us about religious hopes, fears, and longings.