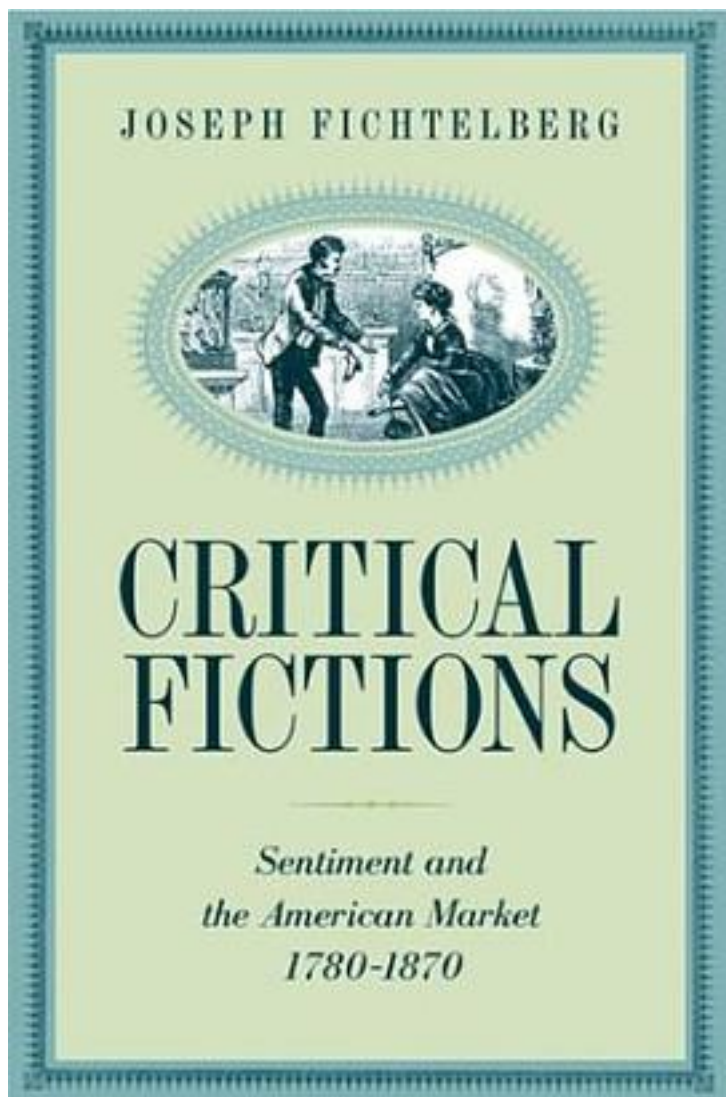


Critical Fictions



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Past studies have discussed antebellum and early national sentimental literature by and about women as a retreat from, or criticism of, the burgeoning market. In this landmark study, Joseph Fichtelberg examines how this literature actually helped to bring market behaviors into maturity. Between 1780 and 1870, Americans endured no fewer than seventeen economic depressions. Each one generated sentimental outpourings in which women came to personify the travails of the marketplace. In the early national period, novels like Martha Meredith Read's "Margaretta" and Isaac Mitchell's "The Asylum" depicted resolute heroines who soothed national ills with virtuous vulnerability. While men often languished in such novels, women thrived. Antebellum fictions extend the argument: bankrupt husbands dissolved in sentimental despair, while their wives used a different sensibility to understand, and adapt to, the market itself. These fictions used women characters to think through the problems of economic crisis and growth--a process completed by the Civil War, when popular fictions began to depict merchants and clerks as feminine. To master the market was to act like a woman--virtuous, immune to commercial temptation, and thus pure. This notion, Fichtelberg argues, was crucial to the onset of liberalism and the emergence of the American middle class. In addition to his discussions of popular, though noncanonical, writers such as Read and Mitchell, Fichtelberg also covers well-known authors such as Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Olaudah Equiano, and Walt Whitman. He brings to bear neglected sources (including the ledgers of Ralph Waldo Emerson) and interweaves best-selling novels and pamphlets with political debates and contemporary economic analyses to create rich descriptions of the era. A crucial addition to American literary criticism on sentimental literature, "Critical Fictions" is a groundbreaking analysis of the relations between commercial and sentimental discourses in early American literature as well as a history of early American economics. It will appeal to specialists as well as to the general reader interested in how American culture has portrayed women in ways that express its deepest needs.

作者介绍:

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