

Have you ever inscribed a book? You are contributing to our social history.

# The Child Reader 1700-1840

shows how these short inscriptions reveal much more than you could have imagined.

Authors had it so much easier in the eighteenth century. An author could call his little volume for children, *The Looking Glass for the Mind* and declare it be an “intellectual mirror” and assure the purchaser that, among other virtues, it would provide twenty-four interesting stories, twenty-four agreeably silly stories, with twenty four cuts, or illustrations. We could imagine parents being impressed. The author, Arnaud Berquin, reckoned without thirteen year old Mary Greaves. She annotated the subtitle, attacking it with vigour, and declares that it is an “unintellectual mirror Being an inelegant collection of the most disagreeable silly stories and uninteresting tales with twenty-four ugly cuts.” For a moment, we see behind the curtain.

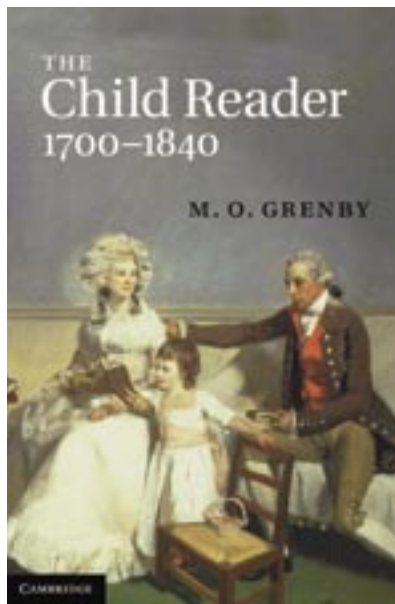
Matthew Grenby, in a fascinating new book, *The Child Reader 1700-1840*, shows that annotations and inscriptions can be the key to an enormous amount of information about children’s books and reading in the eighteenth century. For those of us interested in current children’s books, much of it provides intriguing parallels. For the specialist, it is an original and scholarly resource; for the non-specialist, it is an intriguing and often entertaining piece of detective work.

Children’s books from this period have been much studied but, as the author says, “too often, those making large statements about reading practices have neglected children’s experiences ...” The inscriptions were the starting point for discovering more about these experiences. He explains that they were common, possibly as many as 90% of books having them. He thinks he must have examined three to four thousand inscriptions which provided a large body of material to draw on.

Asked what could be learned from them, he reels off the possibilities: the gender of the owner, the age, the name, relationships, sometimes a place. Then, with research, cross-referencing with parish registers, leading on to the census, it was possible to go further. The information gained in this way, as well as tracking down diaries, memoirs, letters, inventories, catalogues and accounts could reveal class, profession, religion, even attitudes. From that starting point, a simple inscription, a great deal of sociological information emerged.

A common inscription records the donor’s and the recipient’s names. At its simplest, we read, “Dearest little Mary from her most

affectionate Mama.” Sometimes an occasion or reason for the gift is recorded. “C. Fellowes given her by her affect<sup>ate</sup> Brother Harry ... while she had the Chicken Pox.” Children do tend to be given books and this became a marketing ploy in the eighteenth century. Titles echo the enthusiasm of the modern greetings card companies: *Nurse Truelove’s Christmas-Box*, *The Easter-Gift*, *The Valentine’s-Gift* and, (perhaps pushing their luck), *The Twelfth-Day-Gift*. Studying four collections of early children’s books, Dr Grenby has arranged a table by decades from 1750 to 1840 which shows how the giving of books as gifts rose consistently. He has also been able to say who was making these gifts and from 579 inscriptions was able to identify aunts as the most frequent donors (114) with mothers the second (112). No surprise that fathers (79) and uncles (23) are less well represented.



In the early eighteenth century, it is startling to see how cheap books could be. *The Renowned History of Giles Gingerbread* (helpfully, a volume to show how a good lad could rise from rags to riches by his own industry) sold for only a penny. Books were published initially in more expensive editions and then, later, were priced down to exploit a new market. There has been recent concern about

the provision of books for ‘looked after children’ so it is striking to read that the accounts of the large parish workhouse of St Martins in the Fields show a “not insubstantial expenditure on books for the children there.” Madame de Genlis declared that her *Theatre of Education* (1781) was “intended solely for the education of children of Shopkeepers and Mechanics” though no doubt she did not object to other sales. Less overtly, in one book, the word “shopkeeper” is underlined and in the margin is written “your mamma”. Parents were aware of the benefits of literacy in terms of its social possibilities, a “springboard into future success”. Children’s books, Dr Grenby shows, were becoming a serious commercial proposition. We have to turn to the inscriptions to see how they were actually used.

It would seem that books were read through an age range of two to eighteen years, mainly six to tens. Most were owned by girls. They were passed on and shared. They obtained them from a variety of sources. Gradually, children’s bookshops and libraries appeared, though the latter was not without controversy. Later, libraries were used as an agent for supervision but, at first, libraries did not contain

children's books. At this period, the supposition was that the adults would be fully engaged with the child's reading. The fear was that visiting libraries might lead to unsupervised reading. The young people might be dangerously exposed to unwelcome religious or social ideas, or even sex. One picture of Adam and Eve was criticised on the grounds that it showed "too much flesh by three quarters". Maria Edgeworth recommended "the pen, the pencil and the scissors (sic)" to deal with offending passages. One parent not only removed passages but whole pages, too. Other pages had been pasted down. With admirable foresight, this parent had also pasted down the contents page.

Children were not supposed to read alone, explains Dr Grenby. Reading was "part of an oral culture" and the basis was "conversation used in a supervised relationship". All those books of instructive walks where Papa points out the finer points of local trades have their origin in this idea. Ideally, the adult mediates the book whether at home or in school. Many books contained guidance and instructions for the parent about how the book should be used and marks in the books show that parents did comply. They marked progress, sometimes they 'improved' the text by substituting one word for another. Sometimes, the child's name was substituted for that of a character, making it very personal. That they were closely involved in their children's reading is demonstrated when Dr Grenby draws attention to one particularly charming annotation which records in the margin: "first time that 'sh' has been pronounced by John 1823." As this is sixty pages into the second volume of Aikin and Barbauld's *Evenings at Home*, one feels one should add, "Well done, John!"

There is, however, some tension revealed through the inscriptions between the adult's ideal and the child's, as demonstrated by the opening example. The adult saw the book as a means to an end. Reading the right book, parents believed, could bring its reward, whether in terms of proper behaviour, religious instruction or preparation for the future. Children, on the other hand, did not necessarily always appreciate this view. Just as we know that the hornbook was sometimes used as a bat, we see books being used as building blocks or even weapons. They valued books materially. The physical characteristics of a book were important to them. They delighted in ownership. Just as now, they liked to 'get the set' but the grown-ups could be suspicious. Sarah Fielding in the preface to *The Governess* (1749) says, "Do not 'run thro' Numbers of Books, only for the sake of saying you have read them, without making any Advantage of the Knowledge got thereby." In *Little Historian*, a child boasts he has read an enormous historical tome, "even the word *finis*, and the printer's name" but is found out when his father questions him.

There is evidence that children also saw books as conferring esteem. "... shall I a woman look/By reading?" asks Eliza in *Tea Table Dialogues*, suggesting that she thought owning books conferred status and maturity. They hoped carrying books around, (though not necessarily reading them) would result in adult approval. The interesting parallel here is with all those young readers of the Harry Potter series who read the first books and were then overwhelmed by the larger later volumes. They nevertheless carried them around but, one suspects, they were not seeking adult approval. They

wanted them because their peers had them. It provokes speculation on whether this is because adult status and books no longer go together or because today, adult approval matters less than the approval of peers.

One should not think, however, that there was no imaginative engagement. Parents might seek a 'profitable' interaction with the books but children still immersed themselves imaginatively. Dr Grenby draws our attention to the reminiscences of Catherine Hutton, born in 1756, who stated that she did not distinguish between her "two objects of pursuit ... books and play." She reveals her enjoyment in the early 1760s of the *Tales of the Fairies* and recounts an incident when, believing that she, too, might be a fairy, she made a wand. She remembers her disappointment and then embarrassment when, alas, the grate did not turn to gold.

He has also found a reference in Darwin's study of his own children where he reports that his three year old daughter "can't stand *Little Robert and the Owl*," a story by Mrs Sherwood about a boy caught in a snowstorm. She declares, nearly in tears, "He must have someone to take care of him." Darwin concluded she "shews more feeling for imaginary sorrows than for real ones."

Especially fascinating is the example of young Thomas Webb who has so identified himself with a character that he has inscribed TW above the character's head in most of the woodcuts which decorate the book.

It is good to remember that, then as now, there are always at least two books: the one that the author wrote and the one that the reader reads.

Dr Grenby has been able to draw some conclusions from his extensive research. Some are expected: middle-class users predominated. Reading was, ideally, supervised and the adults hoped books would teach self-discipline and bring future success. Other findings were less expected. Books were produced all round the country, not just in London and girls seem to have owned, from the 1770s, many more of the new books. The fact that the greatest number was owned by children aged from five to eleven suggests their purpose was not just to teach reading. Touchingly, although the adult purpose in giving the books may have been inspired by hope for the child's improvement in some area, they were also tokens of affection.

Commercially, it might be said that children's books were established in this period but, in a sense, so were children. They were moving to the centre, culturally and economically. Those of us involved with current children's books are living with the results of this progression. We can do no better than quote the author of this fascinating and very readable book when he says, finally, that two groups of consumers, "parents and pedagogues" and children "did as much to invent modern children's books as the authors and illustrators, educationalists and publishers, whose names fill the pages of the standard histories."

Pat Thomson

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