



BOOKS FOR AMERICAN CHILDREN

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The American Revolution, followed by the wave of biblical Protestantism known as the "Second Great Awakening," inspired the creation of a uniquely American children's literature.

The first American children's books were textbooks. Not only did the book trade with England stop during the Revolution, but American independence called for fresh interpretations of history and geography, and a different outlook on civic duty for American children. An entirely new society was being formed, incorporating concepts such as dedication to "Republican virtue" and universal education.

American children, unlike their European counterparts, were encouraged to be self-reliant, independent, self-assured and high-spirited. American books on deportment and manners were needed for this new breed of American children.

The beginnings of a mercantile and factory system were also changing relationships within families as women had fewer responsibilities for directly producing family goods and more time for educating their children. Families actively sought a variety of literature for their children, widening the market for publishers.

Literature for this audience was directed by two conflicting forces. The cultural influences introduced by the Pilgrims and the Puritans with their emphasis on hard work, distrust of imagination and fiction, and positive concern with family and home and parents, remained strong. The opposing theories of John Locke, a believer in children's innate capacity for rational thinking, who emphasized that learning was more effective if it was enjoyable, had been gaining strength for a century.

From the American Revolution through the 1850s, these forces warred. Out of this tension, and out of the more general ferment of the early 1800s, came an inspired cadre of educators and writers. The result was an explosion of American children's literature.

One of the earliest books written specifically for American young people was a history of their new nation.

Americans have always had a keen sense of history. The first history of Plymouth Colony, Nathaniel Morton's *New England Memorial*, was published less than 50 years after the landing of the *Mayflower*. History gained an even greater importance in the aftermath of the American Revolution and, although most history books were written for adults, they were read by young people as well. An account of the reading habits of American youth in the early Republic is found in Caleb Bingham's 1805 *Juvenile letters; being a correspondence between children, from eight to fifteen years of age*.

The book provides sample letters from imaginary children to equally imaginary recipients, meant to serve as a style guide for the reader. The letters themselves contain interesting incidental information. One sample letter, written as if "From a Miss of twelve to her brother of fourteen years of age" reads

Papa has lately bought a right in the library and you cannot think how glad I am. The first book he took out is called "New-England's Memorial." Jenny wanted a novel; but papa said she had better read the history of her own country, than fill her head with fiction, which would probably do her more hurt than good. Though papa says I am quite young to begin to read history; yet, as we cannot too soon become acquainted with our worthy forefathers, the first settlers of this country, he will permit me to read a little in this book, every day, after I come from school.

One of the first authors to provide a history written specifically for younger audiences was Hannah Adams. Her *Summary History of New England*, aimed at adult readers and published in 1799, traced the United States from the *Mayflower* to the ratification of the Constitution. In 1805 she published *An abridgement of the history of New England, for the use of young persons*, "with the ardent desire, that it may prove useful to the rising generation." Adams relates the story of the Pilgrims and draws this conclusion

From the history of the first settlers of New-England, the persecution which they suffered in their native country, the motives which induced them to emigrate, and the pious zeal which animated them to encounter the hardships of effecting a new settlement, the rising generation may learn the most important lessons of piety and industry. Education and early habits form the great outline of the human character much earlier than many are willing to admit.

Adams' emphasis on "lessons of piety" presaged one of the great movements of the 19th century - the Sunday School. Growing out the "Second Great Awakening," the schools gained great influence on the reading habits of American children with the 1824 formation of the American Sunday School Union, a combination of 720 separate Sunday Schools, and the founding of the American Tract Society, with a goal of supplying evangelical literature to the entire population of the United States, in 1827. Both organizations ran extensive publishing operations, producing hundreds of juvenile periodicals and books. The stories contained in their early publications often ended with conversion experiences and, occasionally, a deathbed scene reminiscent of 17th century children's literature.

Even if not published by the Sunday School presses, most children's literature of the 1820s had a very overt religious purpose.

The first widely-read American author of secular children's literature, apart from text writers, was Samuel Goodrich. Beginning in 1827, Goodrich wrote over 100 books under the pen name of "Peter Parley" and edited ***Parley's Magazine***. The books and magazine articles were didactic but informal; they were full of zest and readable, using simple and direct language and a conversational approach. In ***Peter Parley's Book of the United States***, published in 1837, Goodrich wrote that he had *sought to make the book attractive, by the introduction of illustrative sketches and anecdotes, and by the use of a free, and somewhat colloquial, style.*

The Peter Parley books were very attuned to the educational theories of John Locke, emphasizing rational thought, with instructive stories about science and the natural world. Although Goodrich would often include articles on temperance and small moral stories in *Parley's Magazine*, the open moral purpose that was so dominant in Sunday School literature played a smaller and smaller role.

This was a trend found in all children's magazines of the 19th century. Hundreds of these magazines were founded, few lasted more than a few years. There was an occasional success story, however: the longest-lived juvenile periodical, ***The Youth's Companion***, ran from 1827 until 1929. Many of

these magazines served as the launching ground for the writings of literary ladies such as Louisa May Alcott.

The influence of "Peter Parley" in nonfiction was increased a hundred fold by the fictional writings of the great educator Jacob Abbott. Abbott wrote his first children's book in 1834, beginning a long-running fictional series for American children centered around "Rollo," a little boy who learns and grows and encounters challenges.



Joseph Abbott's ***Rollo Learning To Talk***. (Weeks, Jordan and Company, 1839.)

The earliest book, ***Rollo Learning to Talk***, uses very simple language and many woodcut illustrations. In his "Authors Note," Abbott writes

These little talks about pictures are mainly intended to be read by a mother, or by one of the older children, to a little one who is learning to talk. Their design is to interest and amuse the child, and at the same time to teach it the use of language and the meaning of words.

As Rollo grows, the complexity of the vocabulary and sentence structure - as well as Rollo's adventures - grows. In *Rollo Learning to Read* (1839), Abbott notes

The author's design here has been, first to interest the little reader, hoping, by this interest, to allure him on to the encounter of the difficulties in the language, and to the conquest of them.

Rollo always learns a moral principal; not through lecturing, however, but through realizing the consequences of his actions. His lessons are always mild.

In a similar vein, Abbott also wrote a series of books about Rollo's "Cousin Lucy." Using naturalistic nonrepetitive dialogue, he tells charming stories of a little girl interacting with her family and her schoolteacher to learn simple lessons about right conduct (to be orderly with her possessions, to tell the truth), enlarging her vocabulary and learning new skills. Abbott's characters always seem like real children.

The popularity of Goodrich, Abbott and similar authors had an effect on Sunday School literature. As the 19th century progressed, their stories became less gloomy. Virtuous behavior and hard work were rewarded less often with conversion or a pious death and more often with friends, material success and upward mobility. Language became more naturalistic and a greater effort was made to engage the children's interest.

Thanksgiving-Day, written around 1840 and published by the American Sunday-School Union, tried to incorporate the conversational technique used to good effect by Goodrich and Abbott. A mother asks

her young daughter Annie "What does the word thanksgiving mean? Think a moment." The dialogue then proceeds:

A. *Thanksgiving? Why, giving thanks, to be sure.*

M. *That is right, and to whom do we give thanks?*

A. *Oh mother, I know; to God for all his kindness to us.*

M. *Can you tell me some of the things for which you should be thankful?*

After seven pages of questions and answers, however, the final seven pages revert to an old-fashioned "Mother's" monologue on reasons for thankfulness.



Anonymous. *Thanksgiving-Day*. Philadelphia : American Sunday School Union, c1827-1854.

Thanksgiving-Day is a small book, of the type sometimes advertised in the 19th century as "toy books" and more often referred to today as "chap books." Toy books, often measuring less than 3" x 5," were written for young children. Their appeal lay in their small size, limited vocabulary, simple stories and frequent use of woodcuts.

The story of the Pilgrims' First Thanksgiving in 1620 was a natural topic for later Sunday School literature. An account given in *The Child at Home*, a small newspaper published by the American Tract society in 1867 reads:

Noble men! Contented, thankful, and joyful in their wilderness home! And what nice thanksgiving-feasts they had on venison and wild turkeys! I would like to have seen them at their tables. Don't you wonder what the Pilgrim children had to say about the dinner?

and concludes:

Thanksgiving Day is a good time, not only for happy feasting at home, but for both old and young to remember the mercies of "our good God" to our fathers, and to the country which we have inherited from them.

***The Child at Home* was a newspaper designed to be shared by the entire family. The Victorians valued shared family activities, including reading aloud. In 1864, Catharine Beecher wrote in *The American Woman's Home*:**

The most successful mode of forming a taste for suitable reading, is for parents to select interesting works of history and travels, with maps and pictures suited to the age and attainments of the young, and spend an hour or two each day or evening, in aiming to make truth as interesting as fiction. Whoever has once tried this method will find that the uninjured mind of childhood is better satisfied with what they know is true, when wisely presented, than with the most exciting novels, which they know are false.



The American Woman's Home by Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. New York : J.B. Ford & Co., 1869.

Beecher was a conservative, however, and society was changing rapidly around her. Most Americans, by the 1860s, comfortable with moral fiction for children, were coming to accept purely recreational reading for youngsters.

America's view of children was changing once again as childhood became increasingly romanticized and sentimentalized. Books of gentle humor, even books of fantasy and imagination, anathema to parents of an earlier age, were being written for American children. New types of children's literature became popular: the domestic novel, middle class in setting and values, with a young female heroine serving as a catalyst for moral improvement; and the adventure novel, starring an assertive young boy, romanticizing the freedom of childhood.