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*Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of  
Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America* by Patricia Crain  
(review)

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Patricia Crain. *Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2016. 280 pp. \$59.95 (Hardback).

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Children, or more accurately, constructions of children and childhood are rich mines of discursive knowledge and understanding. In *Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America*, Patricia Crain explores how “the so-called invention of childhood was also an invention of a new relation to books and reading” (1). In doing so, Crain also shows how this relationship was affected by, and deeply connected to, the concept of property and ownership established from the eighteenth century onwards, which, in turn, fed into an emerging consumer culture (6). Engagingly written, the book is also richly illustrated through its thirty-five colored images and forty-five black and white images.

Crain, an Americanist specializing in the nineteenth century and literacy, starts by unpacking the cultural fantasies underlying Jessie Willcox Smith’s illustration for Robert Louis Stevenson’s poem for children, “Picture-books in Winter” (1905) and persisting into the illustration’s afterlives: domestic, bourgeois bliss combining childhood and the act of reading, effectively situating the (child) reader on the threshold between the outside and the inside, and activating the associations of “dreamy, natural, cozy, sleepy, safe, comfortable, comforting, desirable” for both the child and the act of reading (3). Taking its cue from this image, *Reading Children* establishes a dialogue between constructions of the child and constructions of readership. The “literate, dependent, and protected” child was, after all, greatly indebted to “the democratization of print” (5). In examining the description and valorization of the practices of child readers and the materials attached to them, Crain delineates “the ways in which the histories and discourses of childhood and of literacy . . . share a cultural evolution beginning in the eighteenth century” (9).

As Crain shows in her first chapter on one of the earliest books for children, John Newbery’s *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765), property has unexpected connections with literacy: literacy was conceived of as a kind of property that did not have solid monetary value but could lead towards both capital gain and moral well-being. The second chapter examines the changes undergone by “Babes in the Wood.” A popular ballad, initially aimed more at adults rather than at children, this story of two orphan children killed while trying to escape their avaricious uncle’s malicious plans, and his just punishment, became a staple of children’s literature by the early nineteenth century (50).

Moving away from children’s reading material to educational practices and exercises, particularly letter writing, the third chapter begins by highlighting the medial connections embedded in Joseph Lancaster’s monitorial system of mass education and its deployment for the civilizing mission targeting American Indian children in the early nineteenth century. In discussing the practice of giving rewards encouraged

by the monitorial system, which became rewards of monetary value in missionary schools, Crain highlights another kind of relationship between literacy and consumption going beyond the familiar practice of buying reading material (81). Particularly interesting is the chapter's final section, which, after discussing the racializing practices of missionary schools, examines letters written by Cherokee children to their white "benefactors" (84–88).

In the fourth chapter, Crain returns to fictional children in popular children's stories in the context of the changing legal, social, and economic situation of the nineteenth century, focusing on not only the presentation of literacy but also the narrativization of race and class in Jacob Abbott's many successful stories about Rollo Holiday. Crain then turns to marginalia by child readers leaving "legible traces of an affective history" in chapter five (111). These inscriptions by young readers also materialize the links between (book) ownership, literacy, and reading children. Crain does not limit herself to inscriptions and writing in the books but also elaborates on the treatment of these books by their young owners and eventually how the "artifacts express in emphatic form the extent to which children in the nineteenth century became identified with books," especially through the preservation or bequeathing of dead children's books (143).

So far, although transatlantic connections are acknowledged—and are already evident in the American artist's illustration of the Scotsman's poem opening the book—they are not examined in detail, despite the British origin of the earlier works analyzed in the book (*Goody Two-Shoes*, "Babes of the Wood," as well as the chapbook trilogy about Little Fanny, Little Henry, and Little Eliza). Comparisons, even brief ones, between these different production and reception contexts would have further enriched Crain's compelling insights into the intertwining of the concepts of property, literacy, and child readers.

It is only in the sixth chapter, in turning to Henry James, that the "fluid transatlanticism" of the works and even "the transatlantic hybridity of nineteenth-century childhood" is given some, albeit relatively superficial, attention (145). The chapter focuses on James's fictive children and his reflections on child characters at a time when he himself became increasingly reliant on a typographer. For Crain, James's unconventional children "provided models for the narrative exploration of consciousness . . . that at the same time testify to new forms of displacement and dispossession at the heart of late-century literary practices" (170). In considering James's "The Pupil," *What Maisie Knew*, and "The Turn of the Screw," Crain introduces the concept of the medial child, who is closely related to Dorothea von Mücke's "medial woman": "James's medial child, seductive, vulnerable, and fragile, or ill . . . poses at the cusp between living and dying in the literal but also in a figurative sense, as she inhabits with temporal fluidity the transitions between life stages" (146). In a changing media landscape where print no longer reigned supreme "the medial child promised access to a reparative narrative mode" (147).

The book ends with a coda on the establishment of bedtime story reading and a return to Stevenson's bestselling *A Child's Garden of Verses*. In suggesting that the anthology's opening poem or address, "To Any Reader," "articulates a disconcerting, displacing condition of bookness, or in-bookness, of children," Crain once again deftly works out the connections between fictive children, their child readers, and

the contemporaneous discursive structures around literacy, property, and the status of children (174).

Crain's close analyses of influential, popular children's literature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, combined with the study of children's writings and the contemporaneous educational systems, build surprising but successful bridges between discourses that are rarely brought together. In spite of the wide scope of material—the rationale for the selection of which is not always evident—Crain convincingly teases out the intricate imbrication and re-working of the connection between children, child readers, literacy, concepts of property, and consumption.

Hence, the caveats of limited transnational comparisons and the somewhat obscure logic behind the corpus selection and chapter flow aside, *Reading Children* is a must-read for anyone interested in children's literature, literacy, and readerships, especially in the American context.