

## “Books for the Young”: Digital Humanities Approaches to Decoding the Canon

In 1882, Caroline Hewins wrote “Books for the Young” for the Hartford Public Library and the ALA. As one of the field’s “founding mothers,” Hewins is regularly credited with laying the early foundations for what would become the canon of children’s literature, in part with her publication of this list, which constituted the first set of examples of what constituted “good children’s books.” By examining the texts from this list through the use of stylometrics, or computer-assisted style analysis, this paper will demonstrate the stylistic qualities consistently present in the texts Hewins recommended in order to highlight and quantify some of the ineffable or unconscious preferences expressed through this first canon forming project. While her work was groundbreaking in its time, the cultural contexts and biases (both explicit and unconscious) that were folded into her evaluative criteria helped shape a field of American children’s literature that preferences narratives about white, Christian, Western, heterosexual/cisgendered, upper or middle class youth.

Stylometric analysis is especially suited to uncovering and quantifying these types of unconscious biases and patterns and this kind of digital humanities distant reading adds a new and valuable dimension to the ongoing and important discussions about how and why many voices have historically been silenced or ignored due to marginalization in its many forms. I intend this paper to be part methodological demonstration, showing how stylometrics can be deployed in the larger contexts of children’s literature studies, and part presentation, discussing my own results from analyzing “Books for the Young.”