

CFP: Reading Girls: Literacy in 19th-Century Girls' Transatlantic Literature and Culture

In the mid-nineteenth century, the literacy rates among women and girls were on the rise. This was due to changing attitudes toward educating girls and women and the increasing popularity and availability of reading materials aimed at girls and women. Authors such as Lydia Maria Child, Louisa May Alcott, Juliana Horatia Ewing, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Sarah Tytler, and L.T. Meade wrote works specifically for girls, from novels and short stories to periodicals and conduct manuals. As more girls and women became avid readers, many religious leaders, educators, and philosophers argued that reading distracted girls and women from fulfilling their domestic duties and evoked strong emotions in females who, according to nineteenth-century conventional wisdom, were already prone to hysteria. Despite this perception, girls and women did read, write, and publish, often finding great success as authors. Moreover, novels written for girls in nineteenth-century Britain and North America regularly feature girls reading and often represent reading as a worthy hobby that allows girls to improve both their minds and their character.

In this proposed collection, we interrogate the complexity of nineteenth-century attitudes toward literacy in young women and girls. This project examines representations of girls reading in nineteenth-century transatlantic texts, exploring the tensions found in various works between support and critique of reading and considering how such representations frequently challenge the common perception that girls' reading was harmful. The project also considers how debates over girls' reading address the balance between autonomy and submission, physical productivity and intellectual development, that nineteenth-century girls were expected to strike. We seek essays that consider how nineteenth-century girls were understood as individuals who were able to, and needed to, cultivate some sort of reading life to understand themselves and the world around them; to learn about their societies and their expected roles in those societies; and to guide themselves as they became autonomous beings. We also seek essays that consider the anxieties over girls of this century reading excessively to the detriment of their responsibilities, girls reading the wrong books, and girls thinking the wrong thoughts due to reading without adult guidance. We welcome essays that explore nineteenth-century fictional representations of girls reading as well as projects that analyze broader nineteenth-century cultural discourses on girls as readers.

Among other topics, we are interested in essays that consider the following within the nineteenth-century transatlantic context:

- The texts girls read and how those texts influenced them
- Discourses and debates on girls' reading habits, including how they were viewed in the U.S. versus the UK
- How reading shaped girls' perceptions of themselves, their families, their communities, their nation
- How reading contributed to or challenged girls' physical productivity and intellectual development
- How reading and/or books were marketed to girls
- How girls accessed books and cultivated reading lives
- The role of race, class, gender, disability, and/or education in shaping how or what girls read
- Relationships between girls' reading and the sickroom or disability

- How girls' reading contributed to colonial projects, or how books for girls taught them about colonialism and imperialism
- Reading and interiority
- Reading as an act of empowerment or as an act of submission
- Reading for entertainment versus reading for education or moral duty

We are particularly interested in essays that take an intersectional approach. We are also interested in essays that take a pedagogical approach to nineteenth-century girls' literacy.

Please send abstracts of 300 to 400 words to Dr. Sonya Fritz (sfritz@uca.edu) and Dr. Miranda Green-Barteet (mgreenb6@uwo.ca) along with short CVs by Dec. 1, 2025.

Complete essays will be due by May 15, 2026 and should be formatted according to the most recent MLA style. We are currently seeking a book contract for this collection and may require additional materials prior to the May 15 deadline.