

Navigating the “Flood of Print”: Perilous Hazards of Reading Children in 19th-century Adaptations

In histories of reading, it is not a surprise that anxieties about the effects of reading fiction were palpable in the nineteenth century. Technological innovation facilitated an unprecedented increase in print production, which was symbolically marked as a “flood of print.” What was uncertain at that time was how to navigate the choices and the media forms readily and steadily available so that children could engage in thoughtful and active meaning-making. This remarkable moment of social change produced a culture of reading that affected the book market for children and strongly influenced how children were instructed to read. Samuel Goodrich, an American children’s author in the antebellum period, writes, “Indiscriminate reading...is dangerous to most; to the young it is perilous in the extreme.”

Indiscriminate reading was considered hazardous because the child reader could thoughtlessly engage with her book or, worse, thoughtlessly embody the book. In this paper, I use adaptations targeted for children that feature the figure of the thoughtless, misreading child to discuss nineteenth-century attitudes toward children’s reading and the strategies presented to child readers in how to navigate this print “flood” during this seminal moment of growth and expansion of American print culture within the juvenile book market. I will present at least two adaptations (one of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and another of *Robinson Crusoe*), both of which complicate as to what purpose a patronizing didacticism serves when fictional little readers embody the book and are exposed to real hazards of reading. Initially, the course of reading to navigate this flood of print can be read as cautionary yet cute tales of little readers’ funny mishap. However, I argue that these adaptations also reveal little readers’ tenuous relationship with objectified cultural capital, i.e. popular travel and allegorical narratives, when exposed to unmediated modes of reading. These texts imagine young readers that fail when they are unable to grasp symbolic, spatial, and practical notions of their autonomy outside of domestic spaces, absent from adult authorities.