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Kate McDowell

A History of Children as Readers, 1881-1926

Librarians, teachers, and journalists documented children's reading choices in surveys published from 1881 to 1926, a period that coincided with the rise of children's publishing in the United States. This paper will examine surveys of child readers published in *Library Journal*, *Public Libraries*, and popular periodicals including *The Boston Herald* and *Harper's Weekly*. The questions posed by the adults who created these surveys reveal attitudes about changing social norms of what constituted appropriate reading in childhood. The answers that children gave demonstrate both their compliance with and resistance to these reading norms.

Questionnaires ranged in purpose from a straightforward ascertainment of the children's favorite titles to attempts to influence children's reading tastes away from "harmful" dime novels. Some of the surveys were primarily tools for marketing publications to children, as evidenced by several of the surveys that appeared in newspapers and offered prizes to children who submitted complete answers. Others appear to have been used by professional librarians for developing and marketing library services to children.

The voices of children reflected in these surveys must be read as responses to adult authority. Some children's words were reprinted verbatim, and yet what they said was shaped by the questions that were posed to them; most children's responses seem to fit what the adults hoped to hear. This paper raises questions about the history of reading in childhood and what it is possible to know about this history when even ostensibly "primary" sources were mediated through adults. These surveys provide the basis for a limited history of children's responses to books, reading, and libraries. This paper marks the beginning of a larger project to document the history of children's reading experiences, focusing on the agency of child readers.