INTRODUCTION

This project aims to analyze the methods with which 19th century children’s periodicals cultivated and scripted ideal childhoods for their readers. This analysis was performed by examining reader correspondence (interactions between child readers and adult editors) in two magazines from the Nesbit collection: a British periodical for girls, entitled The Girl’s Own Paper, and in an American periodical, St. Nicholas, that was written for children more broadly.

METHODS AND TEXTS

Text Profile: St. Nicholas

Dates of Publication: 1873-1943
Editor: Mary Mapes Dodge, editor from 1873 to 1905
Target Gender and Nationality: American boys and girls

Pictured: A picture drawn by a correspondent of the St. Nicholas “Letter-Box,” H. M. R. L. It was published alongside a letter from H. M. R. L. that tells the story behind the artwork. (2)

Text Profile: The Girl’s Own Paper

Dates of Publication: 1880-1956
Editor: Charles Peters, editor from 1880 to 1907
Target Gender and Nationality: British female youth

Pictured: An illustration published in the “Answers to Correspondents” column by Charles Peters, editor of the Girl’s Own Paper. (3)

METHODS AND TEXTS

Major Research Questions

1. How do the editors of the two periodicals create and convey ideal models of childhood to their readers through correspondence? In what ways do readers accept and/or reject these models?
2. Does St. Nicholas employ similar rhetorics of community-building and specifically feminine aspirations as The Girls’ Own Paper? In other words: How do constructive efforts meant for girls map onto constructive efforts meant for all children?

To best explore these inquiries within reasonable scope, only the first five years of each magazine’s letter-writing columns were examined through close reading tactics.

RESULTS & FURTHER RESEARCH

Through this research it becomes evident that St. Nicholas uses a more equitable system for transmitting ideal childhoods to its readers than does The Girl’s Own Paper because of its child-centered mediation tactics, thus granting children a greater level of perceived agency within the correspondence column. Examples of these tactics include:

- Publishing original letters from “Letter-Box” correspondents.
- Referencing children to other readers’ inquiries, rather than to adult-authored content.
- Creating a structurally flexible correspondence column.
- Encouraging children to offer corrections of and revisions to the magazine’s content.

Other Questions to Consider

1. How do greater levels of perceived agency for children translate into their actual lived experience?
2. How do other kinds of correspondence columns (such as competitions or child-authored fictional content) fit into the above argument? Does examining a different type of correspondence change the possibility for child-adult equitability in 19th century periodicals?

Potential Future Directions

There exists a whole host of possibilities for extending this project. These include: examining other magazines for both boys and girls to test the applicability of the claims about St. Nicholas, examining an all-boys’ periodical in place of an all-girls’ periodical, or considering magazines from other parts of the world.

Acknowledgements

- Dr. Amy Murray Twining, Faculty Mentor
- Clare Withers, Archivist Mentor
- Laura Nelson, Patrick Mullen, and the OUR

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(1) "The LETTER-BOX: PUZZLE." St. Nicholas; an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907), vol. 1, no. 15, 10 Apr. 1880, pp. 240.
(2) "THE LETTER-BOX: BOX." St. Nicholas; an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907), vol. 4, no. 10, 10 Apr. 1877, pp. 701.