



# Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America (Material Texts)

*Patricia Crain*

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What does it mean for a child to be a "reader"? How did American culture come to place such a high value on this identity? *Reading Children* offers a history of the relationship between children and books in Anglo-American modernity, exploring long-lived but now forgotten early children's literature, discredited yet highly influential pedagogical practices, the property lessons inherent in children's book ownership, and the emergence of childhood itself as a literary property.

The nursery and schoolroom version of the social contract, Crain argues, underwrote children's entry not only into reading and writing but also into a world of commodity and property relations. Increasingly positioned as an indispensable form of cultural capital by the end of the eighteenth century, literacy became both the means and the symbol of children's newly recognized self-possession and autonomy. At the same time, as children's legal and economic status was changing, "childhood" emerged as an object of nostalgia for adults. Literature for children enacted the terms of children's self-possession, often with explicit references to property, contracts, or inheritances, and yet also framed adult longing for an imagined past called "childhood."

Dozens of colorful illustrations chart the ways in which early literature for children was transmogrified into spectacle through new image technologies and a burgeoning marketplace that capitalized on nostalgic fantasies of childhood conflated with bowdlerized fantasies of history. *Reading Children* offers new terms for thinking about the imbricated and mutually constitutive histories of literacy, property, and childhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that ground current anxieties and long-held beliefs about childhood and reading.

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