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## BOOKS FOR COLONIAL CHILDREN

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**When the *Mayflower* arrived in Plymouth in 1620**, it carried (among other cargo) books. What the *Mayflower* did **not** carry were books written for the youngest passengers. The genre we know as "children's literature," books written specifically for the edification of children, was just on the verge of invention.

Which is not to say that children had not been reading books! Children throughout the ages have always read whatever they could get their hands on. Many children of past centuries had, for instance, read books of fables and myths. Appealing though they were to youngsters because of their short, interesting and occasionally illustrated stories, these books were adult literature, stories in an uncensored form as told by adults to explain the workings of a mysterious world.

These myths and fables did, however, generally end with a "moral." This component eventually turned into one of the distinguishing marks of children's literature. Although cultural values have changed dramatically over the centuries, the use of children's literature to instill moral lessons has remained a constant. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century to today, parents have consistently sought more than just "entertainment" in the books their children read.

The need for their children's reading material to be instructive and above reproach was particularly crucial for the Pilgrim and Puritan parents of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They saw their children as born into eternal damnation and mired in original sin, and their duty as parents to save their children by turning them from wickedness to God. Reading was essential for an understanding of the Scripture but good parents could not allow their children to corrupt their minds or to waste God's precious gift of time on purely recreational reading.

Young children in 17<sup>th</sup> century Plymouth Colony read the Bible. Most families owned at least one Bible.



Woodcut from the New Testament title page of a Geneva Bible, printed at London by Robert Barker, 1610. From the Rare Book Collection of the Pilgrim Society & Pilgrim Hall Museum

Catechisms and other religious works, such as the *Lives of the Martyrs*, deemed suitable for young readers, were also available. The 1637 inventory of William Palmer includes "A Catechism." The 1641 inventory of Nathaniel Tilden includes "The Book of Martyrs" and the 1644 inventory of John Atwood includes "The Acts and Monuments" (an alternative title for "The Book of Martyrs").

The inventories of Samuel Fuller and William Brewster both include the "Works of Richard Greenham." A copy of Greenham's Works, printed in 1611, is in the Rare Books collection at Pilgrim Hall Museum. Included in the volume is Greenham's "A Short Form of Catechising." The forward by Henry Holland says "This Catechism I have sent you, that you may teach it your children..."



Woodcut from the *Works of Richard Greenham*, printed at London by Thomas Creede for William Welbie, 1611. From the Rare Book Collection of the Pilgrim Society & Pilgrim Hall Museum

Greenham's *Catechism* is 19 pages long and uses the familiar question and answer format. The type is small, the vocabulary uses multisyllabic words such as "revelation" and "everlasting," the answers given are very lengthy. No concessions are made to the young or to beginning readers. Children were, none the less, among the intended audience. Greenham's answer to "May all read the Scriptures?" is

*Yea, all that be of age able to discern between good and evil, ought to increase in knowledge, for their furtherance in salvation, as they increase in years.*

In addition to religious books, older children in Plymouth Colony would have read adult books of history, travel and geography. Some of the secular titles included in William Brewster's library that a youngster might have found of interest were John Smith's 1616

*A Description of New England*, the 1632 *Swedish Intelligencer ... the famous actions of that warlike Prince [Gustavus Adolphus]*, Richard Hakluyt's 1589 *The principal navigations, voyages and discoveries of the English nation, made by sea or over land*,

and G. Abbott's 1620 "A brief description of the whole world".

The need for worthwhile literature geared towards a child's level of understanding and smaller vocabulary was just being recognized both in England and America at this time. Children and their parents were beginning to look for a greater variety than could be provided by the standard adult catechisms. The first children's book written in America, John Cotton's *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babies*, was published in Boston in 1646.

There were, however, few other acceptable alternatives. English chapbooks, crudely printed and illustrated books of ballad tales, were widely available - and undoubtedly attractive to children - but Puritan parents found the subject matter corrupt. Religious thinking of the day found most fiction offensive, but fairy tales were particularly abhorred. Those few "stories" that were allowed, such as Bunyan's 1678 religious allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, were religious in tone with strong moral statements and not suited to the very young.

The need for variety in children's literature was first met by the *New England Primer*, first printed sometime between 1687 and 1690 (although the earliest surviving edition dates from 1727). The *New England Primer* incorporated Bible stories, a catechism, hymns and moral tales along with rhymes and an alphabet. One moral tale that appears in nearly all editions of the *Primer* is the martyrdom of John Rogers, complete with a woodcut of Rogers at the stake. The illustration of the martyrdom only added to the *Primer's* allure, children seldom being deterred by the gruesome or macabre.



**"Mr. John Rogers, minister of the gospel in London, was the first martyr in Queen Mary's reign, and was burnt at Smithfield, February 14, 1554. His wife with nine small children and one at her breast following him to the stake; with which sorrowful sight he was not in the least daunted, but with wonderful patience died courageously for the gospel of Jesus Christ."**

The American colonies could support very few publishing ventures. Consequently, most children's books were imported from England. These were usually very moral tales, often ending in an edifying pious death or a glorious martyrdom for the youthful hero. One such English import was James Janeway's *A Token for Children* ("being an exact account of the conversion, holy and exemplary lives and joyful deaths of several young children"). In each of Janeway's twenty stories, the youthful hero or heroine (aged 5 to approximately 15) dies after having led a short but admirable life. Aware of their approaching death and well-versed in Scripture, their final days are pious and eloquent.

Janeway's *Token* was one of the most widely-read books of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, so popular that Cotton Mather, pastor of Boston's Old North Church, published an American edition in 1700. To Janeway's text, he added accounts of the lives and deaths of an additional 10 New England children {"some examples of children in whom the fear of God was remarkably budding before they died in several parts of New England; published for the encouragement of piety in other children"}.

Two of Mather's pious children lived in the Old Colony area: John Clap of Scituate and Priscilla Thornton of Yarmouth.

Priscilla, who died at the age of eleven,

*was remarkably grave, devout, and serious, very inquisitive about the matters of eternity ... she pressed that some other pious children of her acquaintance might, with her, keep a day of humiliation together that (as she expressed it) they might get power against their sinful natures.*

Mather recounts Priscilla's religious growth and her final illness in some detail, with many edifying quotes.

*Mother, why do you weep when I am well in my soul? Will you mourn when I am so full of joy? I pray, rejoice with me.*

As morbid as the *Token* is, Mather's edition was the first book written for American children with stories about American children, all of whom were admired by adults and who, at their deaths at least, were the center of attention. The book was enormously influential and popular; it is regarded as the classic Puritan children's book, being reprinted and widely read into the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Another English book that quickly became popular in America was Dr. Isaac Watts' *Divine Songs for Children*. Published in England in 1715, this little book of poetry was first reprinted in Boston in 1730 and eventually went through over 300 American editions, remaining influential for over 100 years.

Watts' poems are an odd mix of the occasionally gruesome and the whimsical, always ending with an emphatic message. Children took particular delight in his vivid use of imagery, unprecedented in material meant for young readers. One of his poems, Song 16, "Against Quarreling and Fighting," invited children to compare themselves to barking dogs and growling bears.

*Let dogs delight to bark and bite,  
For God hath made them so;  
Let bears and lions growl and fight,  
For 't is their nature too.  
But, children, you should never let  
Such angry passions rise;  
Your little hands were never made  
To tear each other's eyes.*

Watts' best-remembered poem is "Against Idleness and Mischief."

*How doth the little busy bee  
Improve each shining hour,  
And gather honey all the day  
From ev'ry op'ning flow'r.  
How skilfully she builds her cell!  
How neat she spreads the wax!!  
And labors hard to store it well  
With the sweet food she makes.  
In works of labor, or of skill,  
I would be busy too;  
For Satan finds some mischief still*

*For idle hands to do.  
In books, or work, or healthful play,  
Let my first years be past;  
That I may give for ev'ry day  
Some good account at last.*

Watts was probably the first religious writer to advocate "healthful play" for children. His "songs" remained popular into the 19th century.

**From the title page of  
*The Child at Home*  
by John S.C. Abbott, 1834.  
Underneath the drawings  
are words from Isaac Watts  
"With books or work or healthful play,  
Let my first years be past,  
That I may give for every day,  
Some good account at last."**



This reflected the new ideas of the English philosopher John Locke, whose 1693 book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* revolutionized child rearing. Overturning the Pilgrim and Puritan belief that children were born in evil due to original sin, Locke's children were born innocent with an innate capacity for rational thinking. Locke believed that education should be made enjoyable, and that showing and explaining would lead to right behavior.

Locke's more light-hearted view of the very young was reflected in a growing acceptance of nursery rhymes. Like fables and myths, few nursery rhymes were originally written for children. Instead, they were randomly-remembered verses from old ballads, plays and adult songs, their hazy origins giving them a certain mystery. The first book of nursery rhymes was published in London in 1744, and the first surviving American book to include rhymes was published in Boston in 1768 (it was a reprint of an English version).

And who was Mother Goose? Perhaps, just perhaps, she was Elizabeth Vergoose, buried in Boston's Old Granary Burial Ground. Legend says her printer son-in-law heard her crooning old rhymes to her grandchildren and published them.

Also in response to Locke's theories, children's literature gradually began to emphasize rational thought, with instructive stories about science and the natural world. Virtuous behavior and hard work were now to be rewarded - not with Janeway's good death or the *New England Primer's* martyrdom - but with friends and material success. America's optimism and social mobility made this new type of children's literature particularly appealing.

The cultural influences introduced by the Pilgrims and the Puritans - an emphasis on hard work, a distrust of imagination and fiction, and a positive concern with family and home and parents - remained strong, however. The mind set of the 17<sup>th</sup> century continued to be influential in the ongoing evolution of American children's literature.