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## What do children do with their books

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**Emmanuelle Chapron, “What do the children do with books?”**, <https://liverpooluniversitypress.blog/2021/02/09/chapron-what-do-children-do-with-books/>

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### **What do the children do with books ?**

A key concept in childhood studies since the 1970s, children’s agency has recently returned to the heart of the reflections of a group of childhood historians. The conference [Se soustraire à l’empire des grands. Enfance, jeunesse et agentivité \(1500-1830\)](#) (escaping the empire of the grown-ups: childhood, children and agency (1500-1830)), organised by Sylvie Moret-Petrini at the Université de Lausanne, focused on the personal journals of children and adolescents. The aim was to tackle this source, often seen by historians as a surveillance and educational tool, or as ‘[panoptiques de papier](#)’ (paper panopticons), from a new angle and consider it as a space where young writers could reflect on their status as children and express forms of rebellion or indiscipline.

These reflections invite us to take a fresh look at another object that educators advised should be placed under the constant and close supervision of parents, namely the book. What kind of agency can be achieved in children’s and adolescents’ relationships with books, whether this was how they approached and absorbed texts, how they handled the book as a physical object, or the resources they drew from their reading to inform their present actions or future choices? This approach, as always, requires a cross-analysis of the rare traces left behind by childish handlings and the mass of adult, pedagogical, parental, medical and literary discourse. It is clear there was plenty of room for manoeuvre concerning ways of reading, places and times of reading, and the material uses of the book as a physical object. Those who enjoyed reading as a child recall their ability to fully immerse themselves into the imaginary world opened up by a text, like children who play at being a fairy or Robinson Crusoe. In adolescence, parents express the fear that certain books may cause their offspring to ‘emulate something unusual’ or to take up careers other than those they had envisioned for them. The ‘wild’ handling of books is documented by the volumes themselves, such as the practice of writing and drawing in the margins, either to pass the time or to convey messages to someone sitting nearby [fig. 1]. We find examples in literature and art of children making castles out of books or using them as stepping stones, like the Cholmondeley children painted by Hogarth in 1732 [fig.2]. However, beware of such overly euphoric representations of childish creativity. Alongside these noisy diversions, there were also quieter forms of agency, ‘weak uses’ of books such as interrupted or unengaged reading, or expressions of a dislike of reading (sometimes found in correspondence or in parents’ diaries), which were all ways of rejecting the pedagogical norms of consulting books as a means of self-improvement and learning.

As is often the case, most traces of or clues to the agency of young readers are available to the historian only through writings originating from the adult world (theoretical discourse,

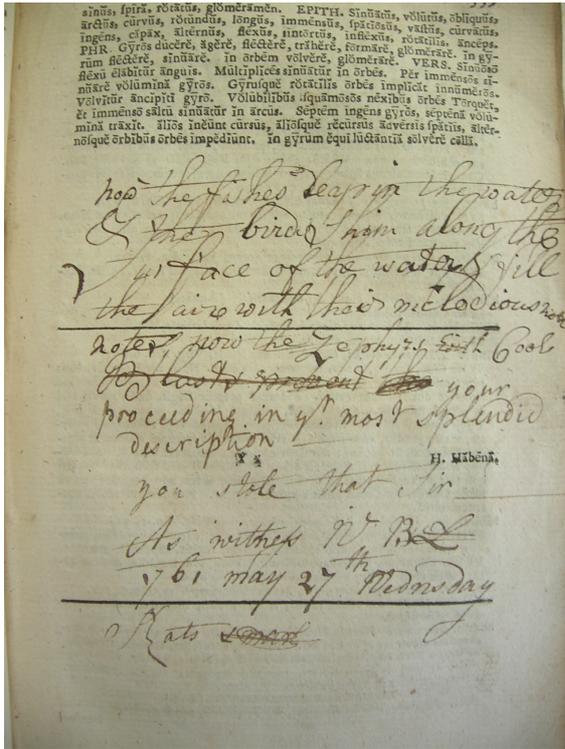
pedagogical literature) or produced under close adult supervision (children's journals). Even annotated books, which in principle offer the most spontaneous traces of children's reading, have only been preserved and transmitted to us as a result of adult arbitration. The discourses undoubtedly refer less to childish practices and more to the preoccupations and concerns about juvenile behaviour projected by the adult world. But it doesn't end there of course. The figures of child readers represented in eighteenth-century children's literature in particular pose a problem. What can literature teach the historian? Or, as Judith Lyon-Caen might say, what can history teach us about literature? There are two possible research avenues here.

The historian can first of all shed light on these literary figures through archives that document their reality in a more fragmentary and indirect way. The foolish vanity of the young Valentin, who waves his *Telemachus* under the nose of a gardener's son to clearly mark the social divide between them, is certainly ridiculed in [La vanité punie](#), but the episode also highlights the fact that the child has grasped the social advantage that he can gain from his small possession – albeit he uses it inappropriately here – at a time when children were given beautiful books as gifts at New Year and in a society where owning a library was a powerful symbol of social distinction. Agency, as we know, is never disconnected from [the socio-institutional contexts that are imposed on it](#) at the very heart of practices.

Similarly, in the short play '[Un bon cœur fait pardonner bien des étourderies](#)' (a good heart makes up for many careless mistakes) (published in *L'Ami des enfants* in 1782), Arnaud Berquin portrays a young man, Frédéric, who sells his watch and school books to give money to the poor. Police archives contain many files on peddlers convicted of acquiring books from schoolchildren in exchange for sweets or novels. Some had been unmasked as a result of the ex libris on the textbooks, as in Berquin's play. The practice of selling on is therefore well documented, but it is presented in literature as a form of children's agency rather than as the (female) street vendors' agency generally tackled by historians.

This example leads us on to the second research avenue. It reminds us not to present children's agency as a given, an a priori, but rather as a construction, an 'œuvre de reconnaissance et de re-présentation des enfants par les adultes' (work of re-cognition and re-presentation of children by adults), to borrow [Pascale Garnier's expression](#). The focus on childhood in the eighteenth century led to the valorisation of youthful inventiveness, including in its negotiations with the rules, as long as it remained venial, expressed qualities associated with childhood (innocence, impulsiveness) and did not constitute a threat to the established order. Children's literature thus presented a framework of acceptability for a number of uses of the book, regardless of the final judgement made on the protagonist. We still need to be able to document what was outside the scope of the representable, what the anecdotes left out, what the parents did not want to admit, what only serendipitous archives perhaps can tell us as historians.

[fig.1] Becoming a poet and settling accounts on the margins : the Berkeleys' *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Centre culturel irlandais, Paris, fonds patrimonial, B 1010, avec l'aimable autorisation du Centre culturel irlandais).



[fig.2] Building paper worlds: Hogarth, *The Cholmondeley family*, 1732 (Wikimedia Commons).

