# JUVENILE READERS AND VICTORIAN PERIODICALS

**Carol A. Bock**

The Victorian idea of the child is customarily said to have arisen from two opposing late-eighteenth-century doctrines—rational moralism and Romantic sentiment—which developed under the influence of evangelicalism in the nineteenth century to make an entire set of behaviours, needs, interests, ways of thinking, and even physical appearances newly recognisable as the characteristic features of a distinct phase of human life called childhood.[1] As this new idea gained acceptance a host of material objects deemed the necessary accoutrements of childhood were manufactured for juvenile consumption and use: particular types of clothing, furniture, cutlery, dishes, toys, books, magazines, and other paraphernalia all poured into the Victorian marketplace and into Victorian homes adding significantly to the rather cluttered physical environment our twentieth-century children have inherited from their young predecessors. According to this way of recounting the history of childhood two new ideas, Lockean rationalism and Rousseau's romanticism, led to the production of an equally new material reality—what we today might refer to as "children's stuff."

However, as cultural historians in the wake of Foucault would be quick to point out, the process may well have occurred the other way around. Perhaps childhood is better understood as the result of material reality and social practice than as the combined effect of ideas spontaneously generated in the minds of great thinkers like Rousseau and Locke. In this reading of the history of childhood it was the production and use of particular material goods at the beginning of the nineteenth century that elicited a category of individuals to consume those commodities, simultaneously delineating the features by which the individuals were recognised, and recognised themselves, as a distinct group. In other words, as a construct by which the Victorians defined children and by which Victorian children learned to define themselves, childhood was mediated from consumer items newly made available through the advances in production technology that occurred at that point in history.

The questions that underlie this materialist explanation of Victorian childhood are clearly worth considering. To what degree did the commodities made available to children in the nineteenth century determine their interests, needs, behaviours, ways of thinking, and desires? To what extent did such goods influence the development of self- and group-identity in Victorian children? And conversely how did the use of such commodities by younger consumers affect the production, form, and function of this "stuff" to which they had access? The questions are enormous of course, and my treatment of them here will therefore be limited to one commodity: magazines, and even within that narrower confine this discussion is intended to be suggestive rather than conclusive.

[1] For example see Susan Naramore Maher.

**The Cultural Work of Victorian Periodicals**

To scholars of Victorian culture, the body of British periodicals published between 1824 and 1900—more than 50,000 separate titles and literally millions of individual issues, many of them preserved and accessible to researchers—represents a large and rich source of primary evidence. As John North observed more than twenty years ago, "if we are to adhere to that first dictum of literary, historical, and scientific study, that we must read the primary documents, then whatever our area of interest in the nineteenth century, we are obliged to read the periodicals" (4). Fortunately, by virtue of their make-up and function, periodicals also turn out to be especially illuminating artefacts of Victorian culture. To repeat a frequently invoked remark by George Saintsbury, "there is no single feature of the history of the nineteenth century . . . which is so distinctive and characteristic as the development in it of periodical literature" (qtd Brake 1).

Saintsbury's observation is true in a number of ways. First the flourishing of periodicals coincided with the Victorian period itself.[2] Unlike the book trade, which floundered badly in the 1830s in the wake of the bankruptcy of the firm of Constable, publishers of periodicals at the beginning of the Victorian period aggressively seized opportunities for growth created both by recent advances in print technology, such as stereotyping and mechanised paper making, and by a marked increase in literacy. The latter provided not only a larger reading public but also a larger pool of authors who could contribute to the journals. Competition among rival periodicals had begun to stimulate this growth before the Victorian period—more than twenty new journals including *Blackwood's,* the *London Magazine, Colburn's New Monthly Magazine,* and *Fraser's* were established between 1815 and 1832. The real proliferation of magazines began, however, in the 30s and lasted through to the end of the century when advances in communication technology began to erode the discursive power of the periodical (North 5).

Thriving throughout the Victorian period the periodical was also one of the most pervasive commodities of the age. It cut across the boundaries of class, gender, age and geography to become a nearly ubiquitous feature of the culture. As improved transportation allowed for wider and faster distribution of goods the periodical publication industry centred in London and Edinburgh expanded its territory and rapidly increased circulation; these figures were swelled even further by the provincial presses which provided their own journals for local readerships.[3] Later in the century magazines like *Blackwood's* were shipped across the globe helping English people abroad maintain their Englishness while living in other cultures and spreading the values of the empire into those cultures as well (Finkelstein n.p. online publication).

As well as being geographically widespread magazines were also available to people in almost all economic classes in Britain. While the reluctance of book publishers to print large editions kept book prices relatively high and many book readers dependent on subscription libraries until well into the century, magazines were mass

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[2] For fuller discussions of the growth in periodical publishing in the nineteenth century see Altick (318-64) and the introductions to the second and third volumes of Sullivan.

[3] Beetham notes that more than 200 periodicals were founded in Manchester alone between 1860 and 1900 ("Healthy Reading" 172).

produced early on and as unbound ephemeral forms were less expensive to make. Consequently they could be sold at much lower prices. It is true that many periodicals remained too costly for working-class readers—quarterlies costing 6s. and the monthlies ranging from 2s. 6d. to 3s. 6d. in the early 30s (Altick 319)—but cheap magazines were increasingly available and were moreover less affected by the "taxes on knowledge" that were imposed upon newspapers until the mid-century. Also subscriptions could be shared in the way the ladies of Gaskell's *Cranford* shared a subscription to the *St James' Chronicle*, and well-thumbed issues were passed on to non-paying readers such as neighbours, household servants, and of course children: the Brontës for example, whose father regularly borrowed *Blackwood's* from Jonas Driver. And as individual magazines were designed and priced specifically for readers in different socio-economic classes, so too did they reach audiences distinguished by age and gender. The proliferation of magazines for women, and then for children, as the century wore on is clear evidence of this.

The appearance of the "family magazine," especially in the 1830s and 40s, forcibly demonstrates the potential of Victorian periodicals to act as a unifying cultural force, one that crossed boundaries to solicit individuals from different groups into a shared ideological norm. Targeting middle-class mothers as its primary readers the family magazine situated these women in a hypothetical reading context that supposed the participation of men and children. They thus identified an ideal audience which actual readers were encouraged to emulate or in effect to become.[4] Whether or not Victorian families actually read magazines together by the parlour hearth in the evenings, the *idea* of family reading was a powerful reality which extended beyond the middle class in the nineteenth century. As early as 1816 Richard Cobbett was describing the advantages of reading periodicals in the working-class home rather than in reading rooms frequented by men only; by this means "the *children* will also have an opportunity of reading" (qtd Altick 325). Moreover, unlike toys, magazines were not designed for children initially and never exclusively; periodical reading was an activity in which children joined their elders: it was a part of the social reality that all literate people, regardless of age, experienced.

So in part it is the way that magazines functioned in Victorian times—circulating widely among disparate reading audiences, saturating all parts of society with their presence and unifying the literate population by offering customised versions of the same activity to numerous different readerships—that make periodical literature such a potentially illuminating object of study for those trying to understand any aspect of Victorian culture. I stress in part because when I note that magazines brought disparate individuals together within a shared ideological norm, I am not forgetting that nineteenth-century periodicals were notorious for their partisanship. It is true that every periodical had its particular readership, outlook, and very often its cause; for example while *The Magdalen's Friend* (1860-1864) was a mouth piece for the reclamation movement, the agenda of *The Vegetarian Messenger* (1850-1859) is clear from its title.

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[4] Beetham discusses the family journal and reprints the frontispiece of *The Family Friend* which depicts idealised scenes of family reading, with men and children, as well as women, as active participants (*A Magazine of Their Own?* 45-48).

The political affiliations of the major quarterlies and monthlies are of course well known. But while periodicals served to reflect and reproduce the fragmented nature of Victorian society,[5] they also produced a different kind of ideological consensus by uniting an increasingly literate population in a common engagement with the same discursive form. And it was the magazine's form as well as its function that made it such an effective ideological apparatus in the nineteenth century—as powerful I suggest as the television, the computer, and the shopping mall have been in our own time.

As magazines crossed numerous divides to reach many audiences, so too did they formally pull together within the confines of each issue material from the various matrices of Victorian culture: politics, literature, art, religion, education, medicine, science, travel, entertainment, law and so on. Even specialised journals drew upon several zones of culture in pursuing their narrow interests: *The Magdalen's Friend* included original essays, stories, and poetry side by side with statistical reports on lock hospitals, workhouses, and half-way homes; it reviewed books of various types—novels, poetry, and non-fiction—all having at least minimal relevance to the problem of "fallen women" but distinguished by the different fields from which the issue was examined. The magazine also contained excerpts from sermons, pleas for donations, and letters from its readers (Logan 371).

Although each periodical was unified by a particular outlook if not agenda, and though that coherence was often reinforced by a pervasive, characteristic tone such as that provided by a presiding fictitious editor—Christopher North of *Blackwood's* or Nol Yorke of *Fraser's* for instance—nevertheless, as the term magazine implies, all periodicals are storehouses of many different things. They were the literary equivalent of that pervasive site of modern cultural production the department store or, to be more up to date, the shopping mall. They were thus a perfect medium for accomplishing the work of bringing together materials from various zones of culture and producing a particular social reality we call Victorian ideology. But unlike a literary work by a single unified subject—Dickens for example—the periodical does not pull this various material into a coherent design except minimally by containing it within a single material form. The work of comprehending an overall design was left, by virtue of the periodical's miscellaneous and open-ended character, for its readers to accomplish.

While all forms of discourse are more or less susceptible to interpretation in this manner, the periodical is especially so. Magazines are arguably the most interactive of print forms, the closest thing in Victorian culture to the personal computer today. Periodical publication makes it possible for the magazine to adapt itself promptly to indices of audience response such as sales figures and positive or negative letters from the readers. Readers are in fact potentially contributors too, and interactivity can be facilitated through the inclusion of such letters. Periodicals are endlessly open to interpretation because they have no endings, no formal closure that limits the possibilities of reading experience. Thus because of their miscellaneous, open-ended form, their interactive discursive mode, and their ubiquity, periodicals were one of the most productive sites for the construction of social reality in the Victorian age.

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[5] On the role of periodicals in forming middle- and working-class reading audiences see Klancher.

Moreover, like popular cultural forms today, the magazine as a literary form may have had a particular allure for the young. I realise that this sounds like an odd claim since most of the early children's magazines apparently had little of this appeal. We have no real evidence to suggest that children were eager to buy juvenile periodicals until rather late in the century; prior to 1850 the vast majority of such periodicals were distributed free, often given away as school prizes by organisations such as the Religious Tract Society, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Much of this periodical literature probably fell on barren ground. And yet there are features of the adult periodical that must have had been peculiarly attractive to young Victorian readers. Much like television today nineteenth-century magazines widely disseminated verbal and visual images of an engaging, quasi-fictitious social world, but having full access to these images required the new, somewhat prestigious and yet attainable skill of reading, just as accessing the Internet requires the computer skills that children today are learning so quickly and eagerly.

Reading was a new skill in the nineteenth century, one that had the stamp of social approval because it could be "improving," and yet it was also seen as potentially dangerous, particularly for young readers. Our enthusiasm and fears regarding children's television viewing and use of the Internet provide a striking parallel and suggest that the comparison might be extended. Neither television, the computer, nor the mall were originally designed with children in mind, but children had continuous access to them and quickly became avid user-consumers, though using them differently to meet their own needs and consequently effecting a change in what they were using. For example American teenagers in the 1970s began to use shopping malls as places to socialise and forge group identities, not originally their intended purpose; now in the 90s malls are designed to facilitate social gatherings and community events. By using the mall differently youngsters have changed it both physically and in terms of its function; they have been in short both consumers and makers of culture. This is surely also the case with television and computers. Was it also true of magazines, their cultural equivalent in the nineteenth-century?

### Histories of Children's Magazine Reading

Historical studies of children's reading have usually been driven by a strong tendency to sentimentalise children and romanticise their relationship with the printed word. Such studies have also generally assumed a progressive view of that history, one in which children's literature, including magazines, gets better as time goes by. In this view early periodicals for children were designed to fulfil adult agendas rather than meet the true needs of the child which supposedly were not really understood until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The strong infusion of religious and/or utilitarian biases in early English magazines for children has usually been regretted because it has been seen as coercive yet ineffective. We are told for example that the *Children's Magazine* (1789) ceased publication after only three monthly issues because it "concentrated too heavily on the sins of human error" (Schiller 15), and that *Every Youth's Gazette* (1842) was published for only about a year because its feast of information on "ostriches, tiger hunting in India, cinnamon trees, volcanoes, silk worms, and Anne Boleyn" was

obviously not interesting to its young readers (Crume 69). In 1951 Sheila Egoff seemed to shake her head in resignation over the benighted efforts of pre-twentieth-century society to raise children correctly when she asked: "If, for centuries, adults did not know enough to give children the appropriate clothes how could it ever have occurred to them to give children suitable books?" (7).

Although Egoff does not explicitly say so her essay implies (as does much writing on children's literature) that "suitable" books are highly imaginative stories such as fairy tales and tales of the supernatural. Children, because they are children, are assumed to prefer fiction to facts, and the more "imaginative" a book is the more engaging it supposedly will be to the child reader.[6] In the studies I have seen virtually no evidence is presented to support this assumption which of course derives from a romantic privileging of imaginative creativity coupled with similarly romantic ideas about the way children think, feel, and read. Relying on such unquestioned assumptions, histories of children's literature typically see the appearance of *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865 and the proliferation of fairy tales in the last third of the nineteenth century as signs that adults were finally figuring out how to write for youngsters.

As a miscellaneous genre usually containing a substantial amount of "non-imaginative" writing, the periodical supposedly lagged behind in this progressive evolution of children's literature, slowly releasing itself from its traditional preoccupations with religious moralism and utilitarian instruction to evolve near the end of the century as an appealing and influential print form. The following excerpt from a 1974 study nicely illustrates this romantic interpretation of the history of children's magazines in America:

> As a literary form, the periodical [for children] became an essential product of our growing culture. . . . The first children's journal seems to have been *The Lilliputian Magazine*, published in London by John Newberry in 1751. Although America did not produce the first such journal, it was nevertheless here that the genre was perfected. Our best specimen [*St Nicholas Magazine*] . . . indeed the best of any children's paper yet produced . . . secured its audience not through trickery, premium lists or colored supplement sheets, but rather by supplying a unified and artistic magazine for readers from youth to adolescence. (Schiller 38)

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[6] Egoff's assumption that children naturally prefer highly imaginative writing is evident in her frequent comments about fairy tales in particular. Like Egoff, Drottner, Mitchell and others I think that young readers are attracted to writing that facilitates fantasising which alleviates the anxieties associated with childhood and adolescence. However, I do agree with Egoff's assumption that highly "imaginative" fiction is always the best facilitator of such fantasies. She implies that it was a mistake for early writers of children's literature to "offer them books that were images of their adult world" (7), but I would contend that such images would have been very useful to juveniles as they entered the early stages of individuation and socialisation by providing them with the psychic materials from which to construct the social world they were preparing to enter.

The passage betrays the author's privileging of aestheticist values for judging literature (*St Nicholas* was successful because it was "unified and artistic" and did not pollute young readers by appealing to their material interests), and it relies on a questionable connection between the "growth" of a national culture and the supposed perfecting of its literature. To a late-twentieth-century critic what is most striking about this passage is its unconscious participation in the cultural work it purports to describe—the creation of a national myth of cultural progress based on a similar concept of progressively evolving literary forms.

In *English Children and Their Magazines, 1751-1945* Kirsten Drottner offers a more satisfactory explanation of the relationship between young readers and the periodicals designed for them.[7] She recognises the mutual influence that readers and texts have on each other and tries to understand how nineteenth-century children's exposure to periodicals contributed to their socialisation. Drottner's analysis is based on a clearly articulated materialist definition of socialisation. Socialisation, she explains, is "a complex process of interaction whereby personal needs and skills are formed by a specific reality . . . while the individual at the same time forms that reality" (23). She rejects simplistically romantic assumptions about the originative powers of the human mind yet steers clear of a cultural pessimism that sees individuals as passively determined by the material reality around them.

Studying children's reading of magazines from this point of departure, Drottner discusses the material and social contexts of such reading—for example, which magazines were read by what classes of children, in what circumstances—and tries to explain how magazine reading functioned in the personal lives of English children from 1751 to 1945. Her method leads to some important insights: for instance she is able to explain why a periodical read by middle-class boys contained so few of the public school stories that were a staple feature of magazines consumed by their working-class counterparts. In her view for boys actually attending Eton and Rugby the school story offered little opportunity for the fantasising they needed to do in order to get beyond their immediate problems, to develop a sense of self and potentiality that would carry them forward into adult life outside the school walls. However, for junior clerks and apprentices, whose education had of necessity terminated earlier, the school story—with its idealised depictions of middle-class boys' experiences, complete with adventures in the African jungle and the Australian bush—allowed for fantasising that gave expression to their personal and social aspirations. As young readers both groups of boys were motivated by the common desire to grow up and move beyond the psychologically stressful world of adolescence, but because they experienced socialisation in different socio-economic environments their needs were met by different kinds of reading. In *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England 1880-1915* Sally Mitchell takes a similar kind of approach, but because her book concentrates on a narrower slice of time she avoids the sweeping generalisations that sometimes weaken Drottner's survey. Focusing on a thirty-five-year period at the turn of the nineteenth-century, Mitchell explores the interplay between magazine reading and other zones of girls'

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[7] I have also drawn on Drottner's 1985 version of this work, her doctoral thesis "More Next Week!: English Children and Their Magazines 1751-1945," particularly the introduction.

culture—work, school, home, sports, college and so on; she is therefore able to explain more fully the ideological function of magazine consumption by this particular group of readers. Drottner's and Mitchell's works have paved the way for other scholars who must now confront the methodological problems that make research in this fertile area so challenging.

**Future Research: Some Problems and Possibilities**

Historical scholarship on children's periodical reading has understandably concentrated on the juvenile magazines themselves, but while this is a legitimate and productive approach it has significant limitations. Most obvious is the fact that children read periodicals not written explicitly for them, particularly before the flourishing of juvenile magazines in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.[8] While studying the *Boys' Own Paper* (1879-1967) or the *Girls' Own Paper* (1880-1956) helps us to understand late Victorian and early twentieth-century children, it tells us nothing about child readers in the early and mid-to-high Victorian periods. J.S. Bratton has usefully argued that religious periodical and tract writing for children between 1800 and 1850 was more influential than has been assumed and that this large body of primary evidence needs to be seriously reconsidered.

However, if we want to learn about the participation of Victorian children in the culture they were helping to create, it may be even more important to examine adult periodicals. As the contemporary examples of the computer and television demonstrate imaginary conceptions of self and social order, of individual and group identity, are most effectively "shaped through a relaxed fascination" with representations and images rather than through explicit teaching of ideas and values (Kavanagh 310). Unlike early children's magazines that aimed to "improve" juveniles, adult periodicals offered young readers just such an opportunity for uncritical engagement with the particular representations by which Victorian ideology functioned; magazines like *Fraser's* for example which ran its "Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters" in the 1830s and 40s, and the Annuals which regularly featured attractive engravings of prominent public figures. These illustrations, along with their textual commentary, are the early Victorian counterpart of the advertisements and celebrity photographs that dominate today's glossy magazines and offer our young readers alluring images of success, beauty, and position. Like modern magazines Victorian periodicals circulated visual images and verbal representations of individuals who had achieved distinctive identities within the public sphere: men and women who had gone through the processes of individuation and socialisation with stunning success. They thus provided the young reader with ideological material from which to imagine him or herself into existence as a unique member of a social order, abstracting from a welter of subjective juvenile experiences an identity that could be projected publicly as a social self. It would therefore be worthwhile to collect and examine records of childhood reading of these adult

[8] Egoff notes that children in the early nineteenth century "had not allowed themselves to be oppressed [by the unsuitable books and periodicals provided to them by misguided utilitarians and moralists] but had eagerly preyed upon books that had not been written for them, but books which, nevertheless, appealed to them" (7)

magazines and then to analyse, or in some cases re-analyse, the periodicals from the perspective of the Victorian child reader.

To invoke the figure of "the Victorian child reader" is, however, to raise one of the thorniest issues in the historical study of reading practices. Since the publication of Altick's *The Common Reader* enormous effort has gone into collecting, annotating, and analysing records of reading experiences by working-class individuals. The sufficiency and accessibility of evidence for reconstructing a history of reading responses of this particular mass audience led Jonathan Rose to predict confidently in 1992 that "these sources [will] open up a new scholarly frontier, . . . a history of audiences" (51). But bibliographic work on the juvenile audience has not yet been done and may be impossible. Autobiographical memoirs, on which such research must heavily depend, are almost always written by adults who, if they do refer to their childhood reading experiences, necessarily describe them from the distorting distance of time. While this is to some extent true of all retrospective accounts, the problem is greater for the study of children's reading since the recollecting adult is, in a very important sense, a different consciousness than the reading child who has not yet crossed the threshold of maturity and cultural subjection. Accounts of reading written in childhood are excellent sources of evidence for this kind of study, but they are relatively rare and tend to be by well-educated juveniles with strong literary interests. As reading historians frequently point out it is dangerous to generalise from an insufficient number of cases, particularly when the sample is composed primarily of one particular segment of the population. Memoirs and juvenile writing by literary professionals cannot provide sufficient evidence for identifying the reading diet and habits of the juvenile mass audience.

But perhaps that is just as well. Perhaps the hypothetical construct we call childhood does not really constitute a legitimate object of study in the history of reading audiences. Perhaps juvenile readers differed from each other more than they differed from the adults with whom they shared group identities based on distinctions such as class, gender, and religion. Certainly the daily life of a twelve-year-old working girl in 1840 was more like her mother's than that of her middle-class counterpart. Perhaps the construct of childhood does not cut evenly across such boundaries, so that we must make separate studies of different categories of young individuals if we wish to understand their social and cultural histories. I would argue that this is a legitimate response to the problem of reconstructing the historical child reader: accepting the fact that such a figure is a chimera and learning what we can about the categories of individuals for whom records can be found. Reading historians have often dismissed the memoirs of well-educated, middle-class literary professionals because they tell us little about "the common reader," the reader who did not read or write books for a living. But if we want to understand how children functioned as both consumers and makers of their culture, doesn't it make sense to examine the autobiographical evidence left by the juvenile readers who were maturing into professional authors? And if the most characteristic feature of Victorian culture is its periodical literature, then shouldn't we consider the relationship of these future authors to the magazines they read?

By the end of the century children's magazines were actively encouraging young readers to think of writing as a viable career, providing them with literary guidance and

a chance to see their own work in print.[9] But by that time the great flourishing of Victorian authors had already occurred, and the occupation youngsters were being invited to enter was typically seen as a debased journalism that conferred little social prestige and not much money. The day of the professional author had passed (not in reality but in cultural myth); literary real estate had declined, as it were, and children—especially girls—were now allowed to move in under the patronising escort of adult editors, the counterparts of the improving moralists and utilitarians who had produced children's magazines earlier in the century. But at the beginning of the Victorian period, when writers like Dickens, Gaskell, and the Brontës were growing up, adult periodicals circulated images of professional authorship that were alluring, controversial, and compelling (figs. 1 and 2). It would be useful to return to the literary memoirs from this time in order to determine how literate and literary youngsters responded to these images of the author as they formed their imaginary constructions of self and the social order. While it may be difficult (and perhaps undesirable) to generalise about children as a mass audience for periodicals, reconstruction of reading experiences by literary children may tell us much about juveniles as makers and consumers of print culture in the Victorian age.

**Figs 1&2 William Ainsworth, author of "Rookwood" " (*Fraser's Magazine* 1834) and Anna Maria Hall, author of "The Buccaneer (*Fraser's Magazine* June 1836)**

[9] See Little; Mitchell's "Careers for Girls."

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