Public libraries, independent bookstores, and big-box chain stores all have clearly designated sections of children’s literature, as does the New York Times best-seller list. But among those who study the texts so classified, the term “children’s literature” has proved much more slippery. In fact, since the 1970s, a central preoccupation of children’s literature scholarship has been defining the boundaries of the field. Perry Nodelman’s monograph The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature is just one (albeit a particularly compelling) example of this phenomenon. Despite its limitations in failing to account for teen-authored texts, co-authored picture books, and co-created children’s theatre, a definition of children’s literature like the one proposed by Nodelman is useful. It presents the idea that children’s literature is the only literary “genre” produced by one population for another, thereby capturing the overarching prominence of adults in the industry and raising the question “Where are the children in children’s literature?”

If children’s books are written, published, purchased, prized, promoted, and taught by adults, what does this grown-up influence mean for child readers? Can young people resist or reimagine (consciously or unconsciously) the messages or meanings of these texts? Through their interactions with authors via fan mail, school visits, and social media, can young people shape the production of books written and published for their peer group and for future generations of children?

In recent years, both children’s literature and childhood studies scholars have yoked questions of this sort to the concept of agency, a theoretical term that dominated historical studies between the 1970s and the 1990s, sparking an interpretative revolution centred on previously ignored populations by way of previously discounted sources. In the wake of this turn, women’s history, Black/African American history, and Native history, among others, flourished—and continue as vibrant subfields today. All of these
fields drew attention to their respective subjects as *actors in history* and all were connected to liberatory movements outside the academy. But while these subfields flourished, the history of childhood lagged. (Childhood Studies emerged later and is now a growing field; it differs from the history of childhood in that it is dominated by social scientists whose work focuses on the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, periods for which a wider variety of sources are available, including interviews with contemporary children who in fact might be co-researchers.)

Historians have found the interpretation of sources produced by children of the past, when they exist at all, complicated, often to an even greater degree than those produced by other ignored historical actors. This does not mean that children’s agency did not or does not exist, but rather that evidence of this agency is particularly difficult to locate and particularly challenging to interpret. In short, the issue of sources frustrates a search for children’s agency, particularly in a traditional, paper-based archive.

Consider historian Jill Lepore’s nuanced reading of Benjamin Franklin’s first letter to his favourite sister, Jane. On the brink of their respective, gendered adulthoods, a just-turned twenty-one-year-old Benjamin (now, on his birthday, officially “at Man’s estate”) cautions fourteen-year-old Jane to behave with virtue, borrowing from a host of letter-writing conventions, not least of which his theme (virtue), to do so. Benjamin writes cautiously, even cryptically, knowing that his letter to Jane will be read by their parents. His youthful missive has been saved through the generations because of his subsequent fame. And because it commenced a lifelong correspondence with his sister, it can be read within a rich personal as well as historical context, something Lepore does with a particularly adept eye and skilful hand. Doing so facilitates interpretation of the letter, but the adolescent Jane’s response to her brother’s words can only be surmised: in fact, the first of Jane’s handwritten letters to Benjamin still extant was penned when she was forty-five (Lepore 39–46).

Historical sources authored by young people are limited, particularly before the mid-nineteenth century and especially for young and very young children. While this is a problem shared by other historical subjects (the working class), there is an additional challenge in the case of children: the sources that are available, particularly from historical periods but also from the contemporary era, were created largely under the supervision of adults. Letters, school assignments, and even diaries were frequently read and approved by grown-ups. The context in which such sources were produced—in institutional settings of the school and home, for pedagogical and spiritual exercises, under the guidance of adults and with the earnestness of youth seeking approval—makes it especially difficult to tease out the ideas of child writers. The issue of
sources, then, is one of both quality and quantity, compounding factors when it comes to historical texts created by children.

While uncovering, via written sources, the ideas and thoughts children entertained when they were not performing for adults is difficult, it is perhaps even more challenging to excavate them through such non-written sources as play, a critical site for children’s learning (Lillard). What remains of this frustratingly ephemeral activity—toys and memories of childhood diversion—are mediated by adult manufacture and experience. Of course, children’s books with their smudged covers, bent pages, and scribbled marginalia also remain, testifying to the lived experience of children (Lerer; Sánchez-Eppler). Commercial children’s books function much like manufactured toys: they are created by adults but once in children’s hands may be used in ways both intended and not intended by their producers. Many of these innovative uses of children’s books—whether to build tunnels for toy cars to travel through or as fuel for imaginative play incorporating its characters—are, unlike the objects themselves, quite transient. Historians are left with the object and, as Robin Bernstein has argued for dolls, the script (199–222)—the intended usage, the intended meaning.

Given that the traditional subject of study for scholars of children’s literature has been the book, one might reasonably argue that questions about how children interpreted books written for them lies largely outside the field. Yet, because children’s literature is defined by its (youthful) audience, the reception history of children’s books intersects necessarily with the history of childhood, particularly the history of institutions concerned with the education and nurturing of the young. Discussions about the degree to which children have agency as readers of children’s literature have pointed helpfully to the ways in which children’s books were and have remained sources of socialization.
and control long after adults rejected the use of overt didacticism in literature for the young (see, for example, Stephens; Nodelman).

At this juncture, however, I want to argue that pursuing the question of children’s agency may lead to dead ends, in particular for children’s literature scholars. Agency as a theoretical concept served a crucial purpose in the field by pointing to the constructedness of children’s books and to their active participation in transferring culture across generations. But when we search for historical sources that reveal children’s literary responses to books as evidence of the way they have reframed or resisted ideologies present in text, we often come up short. If rich evidence about the lived experience of childhood in the past is difficult to locate and to mine—a reality that helps to explain why the history of childhood, as a field, has suffered in comparison to women’s history or Black/African American history—rich evidence of historical children’s reading in particular is even more elusive.

This point becomes clearer when we turn our attention to a best-case scenario, that of the school-aged child in the twentieth century. Evidence is abundant for this population, but it is also thin, formulaic, and produced for adult consumption. In other words, quantity is good, but quality remains poor. Those who have conducted archival research on a prominent twentieth-century children’s author know that repositories such as the Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota contain folders filled with students’ letters to the author. On occasion, these letters testify to the willingness and opportunity of readers to depart from adult-approved scripts, as children describe a favourite part of a book that does not, in fact, exist in the author’s narrative. But much more striking is the similarity between letters written by fifteen or twenty or forty classmates. They adhere to a formula, what various curriculum materials call the “Friendly Letter” (see Jarboe and Sadler). If you Google “write a letter to an author,” a number of websites pop up, detailing exactly how such a letter should be composed. (Instructions typically include a clean sheet of paper, a salutation, an explanation of why you liked the book, a question for the author, and a picture depicting your favourite scene. Such an Internet search also yields teacher rubrics—yes, rubrics!—for grading said letters to the author.) Popular novelists like Scott O’Dell and Elizabeth George Speare received thousands of these virtually indistinguishable student compositions. Researchers faced with such a pile realize quickly that the sources reveal children’s interpretative powers over literature much less than they reveal the institutional shaping of children’s responses to books in an instructive setting, the North American schoolroom. In a piece O’Dell wrote for Psychology Today (a periodical then edited by his partner, Elizabeth Hall), he describes one such letter he received from a boy in Minnesota: “Asked to write as a
class assignment, . . . this youngster penned a long and dutiful letter, full of self-conscious compliments, and ended out-of-breath with this rather startling remark, ‘Goodbye for now, you old jerk.’ But this was one letter among a multitude that stuck closely to script.1

As I have searched for author papers not yet in archives and met with the heirs and descendants of North America’s twentieth-century literary giants, a number of the grown children have asked me about these letters, which continue to arrive after an author’s death. Would anyone really want them, the descendants ask, or should they simply throw them out? “Don’t throw them out!” I plead. Then I struggle to explain their worth: they document the history of education, of etiquette, and of children’s ideas about authorship. Letters allow us to track children’s declining skills in handwriting with the rise of the computer; to plot the similarity of elementary school assignments across geographical space and over decades of time; and to watch as the author moves from respected adult (“Dear Mr. O’Dell”) to presumed soulmate and friend (“Hey John [Green]!”). But what the letters do not reveal is children’s agency: children’s genuine ideas about the books they have read or the ways they have accepted or rejected the world views presented in their pages.

Most existing sources that document children’s reading are opaque because they are produced within institutional settings. When children write about books—as opposed to when they act out or play with books or when they write within them—they typically do so for adults. Writing by school-aged children about literature, therefore, does not necessarily reveal their resistance to or embrace of the intended meaning of a novel or a non-fiction book. Young people assigned to write about books typically aim to please a parent, a teacher, or an author.

I can draw here on autobiographical evidence, namely the way I disguised for a middle school English teacher my deep revulsion to Bette Greene’s novel Summer of My German Soldier. Set during the Second World War, Greene’s story unfolds in rural Arkansas, where Nazi POWs have been sent to pick cotton. The protagonist, a thoughtful but unhappy Jewish girl with abusive parents, conceals in her playhouse an escaped Nazi POW on whom she has developed a crush. She first spies this handsome English-speaking man when he comes into her father’s store; the narrative, told through the protagonist’s eyes, depicts the soldier as gentle, loving, and a victim of Hitler’s Germany. More than a decade after I first read this young adult novel, I remembered the book with strong distaste. In a basement file cabinet, I located a summer reading essay on the book I had written just before I began the eighth grade. Striving to please my teacher, I wrote:

I think Summer of My German Soldier is a good book because it gives a different outlook on World
War II. I have read other books on the subject but they all take place in Europe and most are about Jews in hiding. Although I think this book is interesting, I didn’t like it very well. I didn’t like any of the characters (their personalities not the way they were developed). It seemed like there was something unforgivable about all of them except maybe the policeman or Freddy. It’s not the type of book I personally like to read. (qtd. in Schwebel, Child-Sized 160)

I wrote the paper as a Jewish student in an institutional setting in which Jews were not well represented, either in the curriculum or the student body. As this excerpt from my paper makes clear, I hid the personal anguish the book evoked in me, carefully spinning my analysis for the eyes of an adult stranger (whose written comments on the essay suggest that he did not understand fully what I had done).

When we talk about children’s agency in connection to children’s books and children’s reading, I do not think we speak enough about privacy. As Cathy N. Davidson has demonstrated in Revolution and the Word, the simultaneous rise of leisure reading and the novel in the eighteenth century caused alarm among social elites because the act of reading a novel was private; individual readers retreated into themselves with a book, communing directly with the author, not through the intermediary of ministers or teachers. Whereas reading for the masses, and particularly for women, had traditionally been instructive, “morally improving,” and associated with the public spaces of the church or schoolroom, the novel represented something new: a book read in the private home, in intimate spaces, facilitating identification with characters rather than internalization of didactic lessons (38–54). It is helpful to remember this history of reading practices when thinking about the twentieth and twenty-first century children who have the luxuries of economic security, education, and leisure, luxuries that allow them to interact with books for pleasure. Much of the reading done in middle childhood takes place in jealously guarded privacy. Knowing this impulse, sympathetic elementary school teachers and librarians often create “reading corners” or, more elaborately, “reading lofts” that encourage children to lose themselves in books, confident that they will not be disturbed by prying adult eyes. While many young children delight in being read to, in sharing books with beloved adults, there is a transitional point at which the adult becomes both extraneous and unwanted. When children first become competent readers, they relish the power shift that accompanies their acquisition of literacy. They no longer need adults to read to them; they can read what—and when—they wish. In this moment, reading ceases to be a highly public activity and instead becomes a private one. Opening a book allows for the opening of secrets; it facilitates an
intimate, private journey in which readers can fashion themselves on their own terms.

In middle childhood—between the ages of six and twelve—most children close off a portion of their inner world. As psychologists Max van Manen and Bas Levering explain in their book *Childhood's Secrets: Intimacy, Privacy, and the Self Reconsidered*, it is during this phase of life that many children build forts and otherwise claim small spaces as their own, shared, if at all, only with a small group of intimate friends. Secrecy in play can foster the development of self-identity. Books, in turn, can feed that imaginative play. Some children’s books introduce readers to imaginary worlds and secret spaces—Mary Lennox’s Secret Garden, the outdoor haunts of Anne of Green Gables, Narnia for the Pevensie children. But novels provide more than direct examples and models of secrecy; they invite the experience of privacy itself. As van Manen and Levering explain, “Novels are so attractive because they allow us to experience secrecy, to break through secrecy, to see what is hidden (but knowable), and also to see what is mysterious (and therefore unknowable in a direct way). In short, to be an author, or to be a reader, is to concern oneself with the secrets that humans share” (38).

If secret fantasy worlds and the books that feed them are most beloved in middle childhood, privacy becomes of even greater concern during adolescence. Contemporary teens frequently retreat into bedrooms and basements to read, in seclusion. The young adult books published for or claimed by them satisfy yearnings, answer questions, fuel dreams, and provide healing salves. The young adult author can function as a lay psychologist providing therapy—another site of intense privacy—as Kenneth B. Kidd argues in *Freud in Oz* (178) or as an adolescent peer inviting intimate conversation, as Sara K. Day argues in *Reading Like a Girl*. Either way, the work that readers and these books
accomplish together is rarely discussed with grown-ups and often is not discussed with anyone at all.

How, then, are children’s literature scholars to access child readers’ agency, evidence of the ways in which children imbibe, resist, and/or appropriate children’s fiction? For researchers, the best available option is often oral histories given by adults recounting their childhood reading from a vantage point at which it no longer needs to be intensely private. On the one hand, the very privacy of reading for pleasure during childhood—the fact that it was not discussed out loud—might render memories less open to corruption. On the other hand, memories are always incomplete and inevitably shaped by all that has happened between the event and the moment of recall (not to mention the context in which a memory is shared). Moreover, it is likely impossible for readers to remember how they resisted, reshaped, or perhaps swallowed a particular narrative whole unless they have revisited the text at a later point, a revisiting that likely alters the memory of the original encounter. The challenge of sources in connection to agency confronts us at every turn.

If, since the eighteenth century, child and adolescent reading for pleasure (like that of adults) has been largely a private act whose results go unrecorded, we may be on the cusp of change. Author websites and blogs combined with adolescent fan sites and fan fiction provide immediate reactions to young-adult books, reactions contributed by youth born at a historical moment characterized by new attitudes about privacy and sharing that have been forged in the context of ubiquitous social media. Fan sites for particular YA books can buzz with reader forums for months or even years before newer best-sellers draw readers elsewhere on the web. Although we cannot be certain who participates in such forums—are they really teenagers or are they adults in disguise?—it is clear that participants are writing largely outside institutional settings and the scrutiny associated with them. That is to say the scrutiny of parents and teachers, since undoubtedly, adult authors and members of their publicity teams monitor these sites.

In the early years of the current fad in dystopian literature, I regularly read the reader forum for Scott Westerfeld’s _Uglies_ and its sequels, a feature available on the author’s official website. The forum was a fan site: few who disliked the Uglies books contributed. Most comments posted were short, the length of a text message, but a number of participants were repeated posters who created an online conversation with other fans. Frequently, the posts took the form of play as participants adopted the speech patterns, slang, and mannerisms of the characters from the books. The language of the posts varied delightfully, depending on the particular book in the series contributors were discussing. As Westerfeld’s protagonists transform, through government-mandated operations, from “uglies” to “pretties” to “specials,” their language shifts; patterns
of language on the reader forums adjust accordingly, revealing how posters playfully imagine themselves into Westerfeld’s fictional world.

Does the fan forum provide evidence of the agency of child readers? Although the sample is necessarily narrow, it captures the personal engagement of one reader cohort with a specific author’s characters and with the issues (body image, peer pressure, technology, to name a few) raised in his fiction. Moreover, given that many current young adult authors include discussion forums on their official websites, there is the suggestion that child readers might influence fiction being written for and marketed to them—supporting the arguments of Marah Gubar and Richard Flynn in this forum about the ways in which children can act as co-creators of text. Fan fiction—much longer, imaginative work in which readers fully assume the voice of a beloved author’s narrators or characters—makes this suggestion even clearer. Rainbow Rowell (author of *Eleanor & Park*, *Fangirl*, and *Carry On*) has said that her own writing for teens has been shaped by reading fan fiction, the boldness of which she admires: “It’s incredibly experimental, and it’s very exciting for me as a writer to read a story that maybe I would never write or it would never occur to me to write . . . it’s very invigorating” (qtd. in Philpot; ellipsis in original).

The technology of the Internet and the cultural shifts brought about by social media have contributed to scholars’ ability to access sources written by children and teenagers who are thinking about literature. These sources, moreover, are less mediated by institutions of pedagogy than most of the sources scholars can access for earlier periods, including the pre-Internet twentieth century. This raises an issue that should be at the forefront of thinking for all scholars committed to the study of children’s literature and childhood: curation. What, if anything, is the field doing now to capture online responses to children’s and YA books? The comments from the readers’ forum on the Uglies series I described above, posted between 2008 and 2009, have already vanished from Westerfeld’s website, replaced (or, in computer language, “overwritten”) by reader comments made five years later. If the challenges of archiving the Internet are not solved quickly, the next generation of scholars studying children—and most likely anything else—may face insurmountable roadblocks in their search for rich evidence.

Yet, even as the Internet-based sources available today alleviate some of the challenges faced by researchers interested in the responses of young readers, one must ask: if, one hundred years hence, scholars can access the responses of children and teenagers to recreational reading as recorded online, will reader agency be apparent? It depends, of course, on how agency is defined—and whether conceptions of child agency remain stable over time (Baader). The fan sites of today suggest that young readers have the ability to influence the literary production of adults who
write for and market to them. They also suggest ways in which the young people who respond enthusiastically to the texts they write about absorb select messages and ideas from them. In the case of *Uglies* and its sequels, which feature adolescents who rebel against a paternalistic government, this means that young readers embrace narratives of teenage rebellion. (As this example makes evident, absorbing adult messages does not necessarily mean internalizing a script of docility and obedience.)

Posts to the *Uglies* reader forum, both five years ago and today, illustrate how readers engaging in online conversation have made adult-authored texts for teens their own. They also raise questions about the power of adult language, narrative, and marketing to constrain children’s imaginations and to shape, via fiction, children’s understanding of society, its ills, and solutions to them. The fun for these teen readers, it seems, is playing in the adult-imagined fictional world, not creating an imaginative world of their own, one that provides different answers to the questions raised by Westerfeld or that asks an entirely different set of questions. Thus, I share the caution Nodelman raises in his contribution to this forum: “Resistance to those forces [that is, to messages about how the world works] is not easy—even for adult critics.”

The study of children’s literature today remains largely distinct from childhood studies, a field that is trying to bring all disciplinary approaches to the study of childhood under a single tent. That process of centralization is not without difficulties. As Anna Mae Duane’s edited volume *The Children’s Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities* reveals, current disciplinary approaches to children and childhood are, at times, fundamentally at odds with one another. But one aspect that unifies much of the interdisciplinary work being done today, other than its focus on children and childhood as a subject, is a commitment to an activist agenda, a commitment often, but not always, tied to the concept of agency. In children’s literature studies, the impulse toward activism has taken one of two forms: an argument that draws from the work of childhood studies scholars and argues that children are not passive recipients of children’s literature but rather active shapers of it (see Gubar in this forum), and an argument that children’s literature is produced by adults largely for adult ends and that activism lies in revealing to children the ways in which ideology works in texts written for their enjoyment and edification (see, for example, Hollindale; Nodelman; Schwebel, *Child-Sized*). These two positions are not oppositional. I do not deny that children past and present have influenced, contributed to, and at times even authored texts most critics would characterize as children’s literature, but, when it comes to activism, my own leanings are firmly in the second camp: children gain agency when they understand how the texts authored for them work.
In my research and writing on children’s historical fiction, I illustrate how fictional narratives set in the past make explicit and implicit arguments that can be mapped onto different schools of historiography, linked to different moral and ideological stances (for example, the possibility of a “good” war), and read for inclusion of stock literary tropes (for example, the “Vanishing Indian”) (Child-Sized). Unless explicitly taught to step back from engagement with the characters and plot of a fictional text in order to analyze the story for argument, most child readers (and plenty of adult ones) will be susceptible to the logic of the narrative. Many times that is a good thing: being swept away by beautiful prose and riveting action is what enables readers to fall in love with books, and this romance between book and reader is a critical component of developing into what is commonly called a “good reader” during childhood. But given that texts of all kinds, including children’s literature, can convey undesirable (or, in Nodelman’s words, manipulative) messages, it is vital that children also be empowered to read texts critically. The ability to scrutinize text for its ideological position ultimately gives children the power to act on the knowledge and insights they draw from books, an important form of agency.

The question of agency in connection with children’s literature studies has been fruitful in that it has made scholars acutely aware of the adult influence evident in every aspect of children’s books. Attempting to measure, quantify, or describe the agency of child readers, however, strikes me as unproductive. Young children are unable to articulate their ideas about books whereas most school-age children prize the secrecy inherent in the reading experience; this makes it difficult to get at young readers’ uses of the books they have read, the way they make the books their own. This is particularly true when we speak of children of the past. What we can access and analyze, however, is the way in which adults consciously and unconsciously shape children’s interactions with books by the choices they make in writing, publishing, designing, editing, prize, adopting, and teaching. Doing so does not deny children’s agency; in fact, it is a means to cultivate it.
Notes

1 Thanks to Rachel Manuszak, who reminded me of this quotation.

2 I read this site in a concentrated way during the 2008–09 academic year. The forum is still active, but traffic has slowed considerably as fans have turned to newer publications by Westerfeld and other authors. My descriptions of the forum refer to activity in 2008 and 2009. The books in the Uglies series (Uglies, Pretties, Specials, and Extras) were published between 2005 and 2007.

3 I draw this argument, in part, from my reading of Duane's The Children's Table. I discuss this aspect of the field at further length in a review essay, “Childhood Studies Meets Early America.”

Works Cited


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