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# THE CHILD AND THE BOOK: IMAGINING CHILDHOOD READING IN ANGLO-AMERICA, 1899-1936

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## Abstract

This study examines four metaphors for the child/book relationship that circulated in Anglo-America in the early decades of the twentieth-century. These metaphors – Book Magic, Bookland, Book Friend, and Book House -- are found in texts designed for children and aim to describe and prescribe the value of childhood reading. They also serve as a means for understanding the aspirations and anxieties associated with childhood reading at this time. Studying these metaphors reveals complex understandings of the child reader as well as the cultural significances of the book as a material object and as an ideal in this period. They also reveal how a variety of forces including adult nostalgia, education, imperialism, sentimentalism, and aestheticism helped shape the child/book relationship and understandings of what could be gained from childhood reading. These metaphors span the literary cultures of the Britain, United States, and Canada, and are rooted in the works of children's fantasy by E. Nesbit, a home library for children entitled Journeys through Bookland edited by Charles H. Sylvester, three series for girls by L.M. Montgomery, and the children's book set My Book House edited by Olive Beaupre Miller. What links these metaphors is a cosmopolitan ideal: the belief that the child/book relationship can provide unity and tradition in a complex modern world and that it has the power to combat the perceived problems of modernity. This study argues that 1899-1936 marks a time when great ambition is associated with childhood reading: when it is viewed as having significant influence upon the child's development, upon the adult, as well as upon the future of society. Many of these metaphors endure for child readers well beyond 1936, but their goals and far-reaching intentions are tempered.

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