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Jessie Willcox Smith’s 1905 illustration for Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Picture-books in Winter” depicts an iconic scene: a middle-class child in a window-seat, absorbed in a book. In *Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America*, Patricia Crain asks: When and why did such “reading children” become objects of scrutiny and desire? How did literacy come to be understood as valuable, how did it circulate, and what were its powers and limits? Crain joins a conversation about childhood, republican citizenship, and literacy that builds on her first book, *The Story of A* (2000), while also engaging recent work by Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Anna Mae Duane, Courtney Weikle-Mills, and others. The Lockean social contract, with its emphasis on self-possession, casts (white) children as proto-citizens and affective investments. Even as children remained legally subject to adults, they emerged as emblems of autonomy and interiority. Crain’s particular intervention links interiority and autonomy to reading; she argues that nineteenth-century literacy worked as a property that could be owned, preserved, and leveraged by child readers as well as by adults observing or imagining them. For Crain, the child in the window seat is a vexed figure: autonomous yet dependent, opaque yet open to interpretation.

*Reading Children* resists the lure of the grand narrative, instead exploring its many questions through lapidary case studies. Each chapter is self-contained yet related in ways that invite juxtaposition. Chapters one, two, and four, for instance, work together because all three focus on popular nineteenth-century children’s texts: *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*, *Babes in the Wood*, and Jacob Abbott’s serial fiction. Crain’s remarkable reading of *Goody Two-Shoes* posits the novel as a key text in a transitional economy. The peripatetic Goody, with her portable wooden alphabets, is a knowledge-worker who owns not inherited property, but monetizable literacy. Yet there is something speculative about its value; literacy is a “mimetic form of property” that is “internalized, spacious, timeless,” but also harder to quantify than an aristocratic estate, so its worth must be continuously renegotiated (37). In her second chapter, Crain tracks this renegotiation in progress through the romantic textual iterations of the popular ballad “Babes in the Wood.” Echoing Carolyn Steedman’s *Strange Dislocations* (1998) but with a less psychoanalytic bent, Crain sees the children in the ballad, and the imagined ballad-reading child, as repositories for cultural fantasies of lost orality, timelessness, antiquity, and—eventually—white medievalism. Chapter four, “Selling a Boy,” traces the trope of the lost child (from *Babes in the Wood*) through other narratives, contrasting these hapless...
infants with the “self-made” youths in Abbott’s serial fiction. Crain argues that this author raises “questions that his plots then seem to implicitly settle or dispense with: What does it mean to own a thing? What does it mean to have property in oneself? To whom do children belong? What is their value?” (105). Abbott raises the stakes by including African American protagonists, but his vision of children as autonomous agents, splicing clotheslines or riding the pony express, is ultimately limited by the forces of consumer capitalism that fuel his plots.

Chapters three and five pair profitably because both engage with historical child readers rather than with children’s literature. Crain draws on two contrasting archives: records from the Brainerd Indian School in one chapter and children’s handwritten marginalia in the other. Both chapters address aspects of an important question: are “reading children” just social constructions, or can their lived experience be, at least partially, recovered or reimagined? At Brainerd, Lancastrian pedagogies framed Cherokee students not as interiorized or self-possessed, but as readers expected to accept and display white values. To learn to read was, essentially, to accept a donation in lieu of the self. Referring to letters written by students to benefactors, Crain shows how colonial literacy erased Native languages and knowledges, but also suggests that “such overwriting of personhood by the social, however aggressive, is never the whole story” (88). Even as they were educated for assimilation, Brainerd students sometimes leveraged their letters to assert themselves. Likewise, in the chapter on marginalia, Crain finds traces of lived childhood experience. While noting that children’s marks in books often assert ownership (“the property of Henry Copeland”), she never oversimplifies the relationship between literacy and property. Her readings of intimate ink blots, jokes, erasures, and even tears ultimately register textual meaning as a locus of affect that is not just transactional. In other words, reading children are also touching children, and Crain’s deft prose style reanimates the archive and its spectral inhabitants.

The book’s final full-length chapter, on Henry James, is unique in its focus on texts that were written neither by nor for children. Although it pulls thematic threads (self-possession, mediumship, timelessness) from elsewhere, its object of study is ultimately James’s texts. This is an unexpected but rhetorically useful swerve. Through James, Crain implicitly reasserts the extent to which “the medial child” often works—in history and in fiction—to filter adult desires, including the desire to safely access a preserved version of the self. Nineteenth-century childhood co-evolved with mass literacy, giving children access to certain models of interior selfhood but also making “childhood” a publicly traded commodity. Medial children like Maisie Farange or Miles from The Turn of the Screw might seem to have little in common with, say, students at the Brainerd Indian School, yet all must negotiate, with varying degrees of success, the potential “overwriting of personhood by the social” (88). The book’s multiple strands of cultural and literary
history are woven even more tightly together by a generous number of reproduced
textual artifacts. Traces of real children—Kate Anthony’s paper-doll clothes, a
photograph of Harriet Rose Chandler—appear alongside color prints of Goody and the
_Babes in the Wood_, underscoring how fictional and real subjects are always, to some
degree, coconstitutive. In a coda, Crain returns to Stevenson, identifying the bedtime
story or poem as a later nineteenth-century middle-class version of what Richard
Brodhead has called disciplinary intimacy. In Stevenson’s “To Any Reader,” a mother
watches a child playing while the child is encouraged (paradoxically) to imagine himself
obliviously absorbed in play. Crain’s interpretation of this poem articulates how adult
fantasies can shape—but never completely appropriate—children’s lived experiences.

While the relationship between children and property/commodities has been widely
discussed elsewhere, Crain’s understanding of literacy (not just literature) as portable
property is new and generative. Even as it takes up nineteenth-century subjects, _Reading
Children_ also implicitly charts the prehistory of present-tense anxieties about knowledge-
work, automation, and interiority. Certainly, there are resonances between what Crain
calls alphabetization and the current digitization of childhood, with its uneven
distribution of resources across racial and class lines. The intertwined technologies of
literacy and surveillance that put pressure on nineteenth-century children have become
even more subtle and pervasive; a child in front of an open laptop is also in a kind of
window seat, simultaneously watching and watched. _Reading Children_ leaps, quite
daringly, from the historical to the fictional and from the material to the metaphorical.
The result is a delightful and original book that redefines the power of reading.