

Stories & Books

Introduction

School Books

Books written specifically for school children were not common during the 1700s. It would not be until the 1800s that the familiar schoolbooks such as the *McGuffey Readers* appeared on the scene.

Instead, children were encouraged to read books of moral instruction such as *Pilgrim's Progress* and other books that were written for an adult audience. Particularly in the early 1700s, religious books were far more common than secular ones, with *The New England Primer* being considered one of the first "school" books written for children in America. It consists primarily of religious moral instruction, along with the alphabet and some spelling words.

By the mid- and late-1700s, more books intended for school instruction started appearing. You could find books for spelling, arithmetic, writing, and history. Most still included religious or moral overtones, but the shift in focus was towards the secular.

Education in general was shifting from a classical education including Greek and Latin, to a practical education to teach scholars what they would need to succeed in business.

Fun Books and Stories

A child looking for an amusing book not associated with school could get a chapbook. (The name comes from the early English word for trade: "ceap.") Chapbooks were small, cheap books printed with all sorts of materials. You could find histories, poems, stories, moral tales, riddles, and songs. These books were often aimed at adults (since few books of the 1700s were written directly to children), but children certainly enjoyed them too, either reading the books themselves or hearing them read aloud.

Oral storytelling remained important, even to the literate members of society. Journals and diaries of the time recount evenings spent with friends, talking: "When it grew too dark to dance, the young Gentlemen walked over to my Room, we conversed til half after six..." (Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773); "after Dinner I spent the afternoon



with him in conversation and hearing him play the Fiddle..." (Diary of John Harrower, 1774).

Many stories of the 1700s were not written down until later, when people interested in old stories started collecting them. *English Folk Tales*, while not written until 1890, contains many stories of much older origin. The stories that originated in the oral tradition tend to include repetition that looks odd in print but makes sense when you have to recall an entire tale by memory.

Works Referenced:

Christmas Entertainments, London, 1740.

Diary of John Harrower, 1773-1776.

Hartland, Edwin Sidney. *English Fairy and Other Folk Tales*, 1890.

Farish, Hunter Dickinson (ed). *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774*. University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville, 1990.

Monaghan, E. Jennifer. *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst and Boston, 2005.

Victoria and Albert Museum. "National Art Library chapbooks collection."

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/n/national-art-library-chapbooks-collection/>



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