

Children as Bookmakers: Solomon Drowne's Notebook

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In 1765, the twelve-year-old Solomon Drowne kept a notebook, but rather than reporting his daily activities, Drowne copied long passages of prose, drama, and poetry into the pages of his little book. Drowne's notebook is no ordinary diary or commonplace book—it is, as I read it, an attempt to create an illustrated literary anthology of the sort that would have started to populate nursery bookshelves toward the end of the eighteenth century.

We know that Drowne was not the only child to imagine himself as a bookmaker; sprinkled throughout early American archives are examples of children imagining themselves as writers, printers, illustrators, and binders of books. We find children fiddling with toy printing presses, sewing scrap fabric over the wrappers of ephemeral books, hand-coloring illustrations, and penning their own stories and poems. In particular, archives from the nineteenth-century are filled with examples of children inventing their own literary forms, making newspapers, writing stories, creating literary societies, and otherwise imitating and troubling adult attempts to control the way knowledge circulated among juvenile readers. And recent scholarship has followed suit, uncovering vast records of children's active participation in the literary scene, and revealing the depth and complexity of their engagements with the expectations and ambitions of the genre. (I'm thinking in particular, here, of work by Karen Sanchez Eppler, Nazera Wright, Robin Bernstein, Lara Langer Cohen, Sara Danger, and many others who are recovering evidence of children's active participation in shaping the nineteenth-century literary landscape).

But as Solomon Drowne's notebook demonstrates, eighteenth-century children were doing this, too, often in ways that anticipate the kinds of material, editorial, and didactic choices publishers would start to make as children's literature became a mass market cultural form in the nineteenth-

century. A close look at something like Solomon Drowne's notebook opens up the possibility that eighteenth-century children were participants in rather than passive consumers of the formation, negotiation, and contestation of literary genres for juvenile readers.

Before I proceed with the broader arguments I'd like to make today, I want to walk through the notebook and show you all what I think Drowne is doing. [SHOW SLIDES]. As you'll see in these images, he pulls passages from famous works introducing them with titles, and interspersing them with carefully captioned drawings and drawn imitations of common typographical flourishes. The book was filled in what appear to be one or two sittings, and is paginated to offer readers—whether real or imaginary—points of reference as they work their way through the volume. The excerpts Drowne chooses are not random; they are carefully selected and reflect what I understand to be Drowne's sense of the most urgent issues of the day—temperance, the moral dilemmas of slavery, the problem of material greed—and his interest in presenting literature as a conversation between genres and forms. Like the printers and publishers who would abridge and adapt famous works for children, Drowne is particularly interested in how subtle changes to context and narrative point of view can radically shift the didactic stakes of a work of literature.

There is, for example, an excerpt from *Shakespeare's Twelfth Night* that, when taken out of context, reads like a temperance lesson. Only someone intimately familiar with the play would immediately recognize the character of the drunk Sir Toby Belch as he staggers backwards across the pages of Drowne's little anthology draining his wine skin. An abridged version of *The Story of Inkle and Yarico* follows, but rather than selecting the popular satirical version from the *Spectator*, Drowne selects a poetic adaptation, likely copied from an American reprint of a 1734 piece that originally appeared in *London Magazine*. Drowne transcribes the entire poem, recording in painstakingly even letters the story of a shipwrecked English trader who falls in love with a woman he impregnates and eventually sells into slavery. This version of the story is the first to depict Yarico as an African woman rather than an

Indigenous American, and is thus a contribution to an emerging abolitionist literature calling attention to the perverse racial and economic logics used to justify the trade in enslaved persons. Drowne introduces the poem with a loosely drawn image of a white gentleman romancing a vaguely human black splotch in a grove of trees. Interested as Drowne may be in troubling the false binaries of racial capitalism, he has clearly been raised in a print culture that uses its own representative limitations to justify the visual reassertion of the opposition between Black and white. And his interest in mimicking the conventions of print persists throughout the volume. He concludes with a drawing imitating the kinds of typographical flourishes he may have seen surrounding the word “Fin” in his own reading life, and writes “thus ends the story of Inkle and Yarico”, between two careful lines.

That someone would choose material gain over moral obligation continues to be of concern to Drowne, as he transcribes an English proverb about a “wretched miser” who “strive[s] to heap up riches store and in the midst of plenty still [is] poor”. He draws this miser in a well-appointed study, counting bags of coins alone at his table beneath a tellingly cage-like window. Next, he offers a poem about a “witless” Hen who mistakenly attempts to adopt a clutch of duck eggs and is disturbed by the hatchlings’ proclivity for water, alongside an image of the rotting corpse of one of many foolish princes who died in vain fighting for “pompous names or wide dominance”. Drowne, like many later publishers of children’s books, is deeply invested in the didactic power of the cautionary tale and the ways in which illustrations can help to punctuate and emphasize its lessons.

From here, he turns to pastoral poems about the song of the lark, the joys of walking along the shores of country lakes, and other poetic explorations of nature’s beauty, resolving the volume’s many anxieties and injunctions into an implicit argument about the salutary effects of living a simple, nature-filled life. He even tries his own hand at writing and illustrating original material, concluding with a poem about a cat and mouse who share a fragrant loaf of bread, and a five-page comic strip about a dog’s daring adventures [pause to narrate what I think the story is about].

What Drowne assembles, here, is not the random, eclectic record of an eighteenth-century child's reading life. Instead, it is a carefully curated literary response to such a reading life; an eloquently staged conversation, in which Drowne's nascent ethical concerns about the violence of slavery, the rituals of courtship, the question of personal moral responsibility, and the trap of material greed are mapped onto a budding interest in the interplay of different literary genres, voices, and forms. Materially too, the volume resembles an eighteenth-century chapbook, bound in paper wrappers and small enough to fit in a child's pocket, and containing thirty pages—about the length of most printed chapbooks from the period. Whereas commonplace books are discontinuous compendia of musings and quotations, Drowne's notebook reads like a printer's dummy, the first draft of a chapbook anthology of instructive and useful literature.

Drowne would go on to become a renowned surgeon, botanist, and public official. He also nurtured his literary talents, publishing a travel journal, a farming and gardening manual, and number of his orations. Drowne's career and public life were defined by a lifelong ability to traverse genres and bodies of knowledge, but the seeds of this capacity are present in the notebook he kept at twelve years old. More importantly, Drowne's book gestures to an understudied past for children's literature, in which the genre's antecedents were produced not just for but in the confines of nurseries. Though Drowne's notebook is a rare example of a child assembling a literary anthology of his own, it is an example that provokes—at least for me—a desire to recover others like it.

In its unusually painstaking construction, its completeness, and its nuanced relationship to the genres with which it is in conversation, Drowne's book offers us an important provocation, an inducement to attend, as the title of this symposium puts it, to "historic children's voices" in all their range and dimensionality. It troubles narratives of both the inventiveness and agency of children—after all, most of the text included in the volume is not, in fact, Drowne's own writing—and narratives about their vulnerability to the epistemological dominance of adult gatekeepers of literary knowledge.

The texts included in this volume are not necessarily the texts an anthologist would choose; they are assembled in a way that seems unique to Drowne's own sense of the resonances between excerpts and genres; and they are recorded largely without citations or reference to the authors or sources from which they are pulled. Drowne's historic voice is, as a result, one poised between the impulses of ventriloquism, imitation, editorializing, and elaboration. He is a curator of information, ideas, genres, and material forms, as captive to the emerging conventions of children's literature as he is capable of transgressing and renovating them. And after priming his reader with the voices of his literary antecedents, he ends with his own words and images, which both hew to and depart from the broader stakes of the volume in fascinating and age-specific ways. In attending to historic children's voices like Drowne's, and the fascinating literary materials they produce, we gain a clearer picture of the role children played in shaping the future of the genres of children's literature, and a truer sense of the complexity of their history.