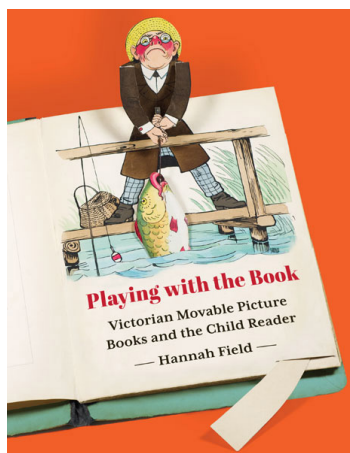


Review/Recension

HANNAH FIELD
**PLAYING WITH
THE BOOK**
Victorian Movable
Picture Books and
the Child Reader

Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 2019 (253 p.)



“All books are, of course, material objects, but not all books are ‘materialized’ – that is, not all of them show off and highlight and trade on their material form” (11). In *Playing with the Book: Victorian Movable Picture Books and the Child Reader* (2019), Hannah Field draws our attention to books that do exactly that. She examines books that show off their materiality, highlights the material aspects of “being a book,” and points to intended and actual use of books apart from reading the text and looking at the images: touching the book, moving parts of the book, playing with the book, tearing the pages of the book, writing in the book, and many other more or less unexpected acts. In contrast to ideas of the book as a respected and valuable object containing canonized knowledge and *Bildung*, Field draws attention to reading as an embodied, humorous, and transforming experience and to books and readers “behaving badly” from a conventional adult point of view.

The objects of Field’s study can be categorized as the “misfits of the library”: books that linger on the border of the codex format, which is defined as pages inscribed with texts and images, sewn or glued together and contained by a paper, cloth or leather binding. For most children in the nineteenth century such a “simple” or traditional book would have been a valuable and rare object, but Field shows how publishers and printers quickly began to play with the traditional design of the book medium on an expanding market for privileged child readers and parents. The result was an increasing production of a group of publications that she mainly refers to as “novelty books” or “movable books.” The term “novelty book” was

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indeed novel to me, and according to Field books in this category are often defined by what they are not: as “books that dramatically alter the form of the bound book” (2). I have looked in vain for more specific definitions in reference works, a fact that probably only proves Field’s point that “novelty book” is a slippery and overlooked category, which covers all kinds of experiments with format, shape, and movement in print, including pop-up books, panorama fold-outs and mechanical books.

Field has found most of her examples in the Opie collection at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and her main research interests are “the book as a material object; reading as a physical, embodied practice; and the child in the nineteenth century” (6). On an overall level, theory, concepts and methods from book history and picturebook studies are combined with some inclusion of theory from childhood studies. This combination of approaches is among the most interesting aspects of the books, and I will soon return to that.

In short, the book is divided into seven parts. The introduction is followed by a chapter on embodied reading, after which four analytical chapters focus on different kinds of novelty books: panoramas (one long piece of paper, in the Scandinavian countries often referred to as a “leporello”), movable books in 3D, dissolving-view books (books where one image can be transformed into another by the reader), and finally mechanical books. The conclusion presents a critique of book history’s neglect of certain types of books, especially the ones studied by Field. Book history *has* shown a keen interest in the book as a material and mechanized object, and has drawn attention to books being produced not only by an author but by a circuit of producers and co-producers. But according to Field, the novelty book has been “a too extreme case” for book history: too materialized, too mechanized, and too often produced by entrepreneurs at the margins of the traditional book circuit. In continuation of her analyses, Field outlines how her examples are intermedial objects, since the children’s panorama is linked to the production of wallpapers and decorations for nurseries, the movable book to the theatre, and mechanical books to toys and dolls. Against that background, Field concludes that “the precursors of the book might not be other book-texts, but other objects” and “the primary purpose of a book may not always be that special activity, reading, or rather that reading might encompass physical activities and motions as well as intellectual processes” (192 and 193). Field’s book seems to be a revised version of her PhD thesis and the structure of the book bears a resemblance to a thesis. I do not mind that,

but would have liked to see a comment on possible changes in the afterword – for instance, a chapter on paper dolls seems to have been taken out and published separately.

For a number of reasons, reading Field's book has been a playful and intellectually inspiring experience. First of all, it has been stimulating to see how the book explicitly combines book history with children's literature studies, especially picturebook studies. While children's literature studies and book history were combined in, for instance, Matthew O. Grenby's *The Child Reader 1700–1840* (2011) and Patricia Crain's *Reading Children* (2016), book history has to my knowledge not been the explicit theoretical framework for a monography within picturebook studies. Within this field there is, however, a long-standing tradition of paying attention to the format and the design of the book, from pioneer work by Perry Nodelman and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott to, in a Swedish context, Eli-na Druker's *Modernismens bilder* (Images of Modernism, 2008). The interest in picturebooks as a material object is increasing, with prominent examples such as Jacqueline Reid-Walsh's *Interactive Books: Playful Media Before Pop-Ups* (2018) and a focus on materiality, artists' books and pop-up books in *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks* (2018, edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer). Therefore it is extremely interesting to see how Field combines the two fields in her approach and in her analyses.

First of all, from book history comes a keen interest in children's use of books. In Field's case, her sources to knowledge about use are the books themselves: their materiality, paratexts, formats, illustrations, and texts. Furthermore she examines the traces of use that children leave, for instance in the form of ripping, tearing, coloring-in, and reconstruction, which point to what Field calls "children's nontextual understandings of their books" (23). Since picturebook studies mainly evolved out of departments of comparative literature, with its focus on close reading and aesthetic value, the child user has not been at the core of picturebook research, so far – again with noteworthy exceptions, such as Patricia Crain's and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh's books. Field's analyses show that it is indeed possible and fruitful to combine insight from the two fields, since there are so many overlapping interests, especially in relation to the materiality of the picturebook.

Secondly, Field's interest in novelty books as part of a larger circuit of co-producers and entrepreneurs is based in book history. While picturebook studies has paid a lot of attention to the interaction of illustrators and authors, words and images, little has been done in re-

lation to the interaction between, for instance, the history of technology and children's picturebooks and the ways publishers, printers, authors, translators, graphic designers and so on interact. Therefore it is most interesting to see how Field explores the works of the two influential German publishers Ernest Nister (1841–1906) and Lothar Meggendorfer (1847–1925). Field convincingly shows that in the case of Meggendorfer's pop-up books or Nister's dissolving-view books, it would make little sense to think of an "author" as the point of origin. From her point of view they are "entrepreneurs," integrated in a circuit that includes paper engineers, illustrators, writers, printers, publishers, and assemblers, where all links in the chain contribute to the co-production. Lissa Paul's *The Children's Book Business* (2011), and in Germany Sebastian Schmideler's articles on the development of a market for illustrations in Germany in the 19th century, address some of the same links and connections in the production process.

In continuation of this, book history and Field's book also draw attention to print culture across media. Let me in this context only highlight the section on the John Gilpin ballad across media – from text to lottery tickets to picturebooks – and the intersection between the production of picturebooks and wallpaper in chapter two. One only needs to Google "Pippi and wallpaper" or "Beatrix Potter and wallpaper" to see the contemporary relevance of reading the two media together. In this regard, book history shares interests with media studies, and thus with the exploration of intermedial and transmedial elements of children's literature and picturebooks in a recent Scandinavian PhD thesis, Sarah Mygind's *Børnelitteratur i transmedial bevægelse* (Children's Literature in Transmedia Motion, 2019, chapters in English).

A key concern of childhood studies is the agency of the child, which links the field to book history's interest in the child as an active user of the book. In Field's case, her examples stress interaction as a central part of the reading process, and both the original materiality of the books and the evidence of "destructive" readings – including tearing, ripping, and staining – point to children's independent appropriation of the medium as well as to intricate plays of controlling and being controlled. While many of the paratexts in novelty books very explicitly tell the child to be careful and control him- or herself in relation to the delicate paperwork and mechanics, Field offers many amusing examples of manipulation with books, including the switching of movable body parts of animal and human characters made from paper. In relation to these discussions, Field includes studies on children as producers, co-producers and perfor-

mers by Karen Sánchez-Eppler and Robin Bernstein among others, and it seems most relevant. Nevertheless, Field is mainly concerned with the objects, the users, to some degree the producers, and to a lesser extent with Victorian childhood in general, perhaps because the Anglo-Saxon reader knows more about that than readers outside that particular geographical and linguistic context.

Hopefully, it is obvious from my review of Field's book so far that I have read it with huge interest. It is well-informed in a number of fields, it paves new methodological ways, it includes many interesting examples and in-depth analyses, and it is bold in its criticism of book history's neglect of novelty books. Nevertheless, I have asked myself "Why not ..." a couple of times during my reading – not because the book does not do a lot, but because it gives ideas of how some parts could be developed. Most of all, I miss a stronger focus on the transnational character of Field's examples. She is indeed aware of the transnational character of her objects of study – after all, the full title of her first example is *Novelty! Metamorphoses Picture-Book/Neustes Verwandlungs-Bilder-Buch/Nouveauté! Livre de metamorphoses* (1895). She also notes that Nister and Meggendorfer in particular were actors on a highly international market, and in some cases she also points to the different translations of the same books. However, it makes the reader curious about how the books travelled – how did transnational publication function more specifically on the transnational market of children's literature at this point in history? In continuation of this, it is a pity that there is no dialogue with research in German on *Bewegungsbücher* (movable books) and illustrated books during this period, though it probably has to do with Field's background in Victorian studies.

Another "Why?" popped up in my mind when reading the references to influential book historians and their approaches in the conclusion. Here McGann, McKenzie, Chartier, and Hayles are mentioned, but their influence on Field's work is not made explicit, which would have been useful, for instance for a student of children's literature wanting to learn more about their connection to Field's analyses. An explanation to this might be that either some of the theory from the thesis had to be left out, or that in a book history context the reader is expected to be familiar with their positions. In this case, too, a note on the changes in the editorial process would have been helpful.

Reading Field's book has often led me down sidetracks: it has made me search (in vain) for Scandinavian translations of specific terms for innovative formats, made me scribble "Find!" many times

in the notes where she refers to what seems to be valuable sources from a number of fields, and it has made me think of ways to increase the interaction between book history, children's literature and childhood studies in the future. In sum, it is a well-written, thought-provoking and timely book, and I have enjoyed tremendously joining Hannah Field on her explorative journey through the field of novelty books.

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