

## A Child-Centered Universe: Growth and Development in Nineteenth-Century Children's Nonfiction

This essay uses water travel to introduce a theory of 19thC children's nonfiction books. Whether biography, geography, or natural history—19thC children's nonfiction on a broad spectrum of topics positions children at the center of their universe, then guides readers outward, as active observers who ask questions, then inward, as reflective recorders who generate new knowledge. Influenced by developmental theories of education, these books narrate their subject matter to match readers' growth, using increasingly technical language, and slowly transitioning from local settings and direct observation, to unfamiliar places and abstract ideas. By organizing knowledge spatially and cognitively in relation to readers, children's nonfiction was literally child-centered.

I begin with geography books that use water travel: In *Paddle-to-the Sea* by Holling Clancy Holling, a wooden figure of an American Indian in a canoe travels the Great Lakes to the Atlantic ocean. Illustrations celebrate an American technological sublime, with waterways controlled for commerce and electricity. Published a century earlier, *Evenings with the Children; or, Travels in South America* by Mrs. V. G. Ramsey, two siblings "travel in imagination" by riverboat and rail from Mexico to Brazil. The continuities between these two books published 70 years apart suggests their adherence to essential features of children's nonfiction established during the 19thC. Where Holling and Ramsey use water travel across continents, exploration is confined elsewhere to a curio cabinet, a nearby wood, or London.

Using examples from little-examined 19thC nonfiction books, I show how this formula—outward exploration, inward reflection—provides a practical way to evaluate whether texts promote child agency. By depicting which children learn, create, and teach new knowledge, children's nonfiction became a site for negotiating information and power. Over the century, the power to move outward became increasingly gendered, with books for girls favoring imaginative movement. In *Evenings with the Children*, Henry declares that one day he will explore South America for himself, but laughs when his sister Laura announces the same. Laura conceded, "although I suppose girls never go to these places" (202). Nonfiction books showcase the period's innovative pedagogies, but also the origins of prejudices that remain visible today.