

**Pretty Little Schoolma'ams:
Age Ambiguity in Nineteenth-Century School Fiction**

In *St. Nicholas*, one of the most popular children's magazines of the nineteenth century, editor Mary Mapes Dodge offered monthly commentary to readers under an unusual guise: via an anthropomorphized flower, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, and his friends, the Little Schoolma'am and Deacon Green. Though, as her successor, William Fayal Clarke, declared, Dodge herself was all three characters "in one," to many readers, they were "quite as 'real' as many of the living, breathing folk whose voices we hear and whose hands we touch."

Over the course of 22 years (1874-1896) and 180+ appearances, the Little Schoolma'am emerges as both real and ideal. Her namelessness invited identification: child-correspondents refer to their teachers as "little schoolma'ams," while adult-correspondents sign themselves with her name. She is an aspirational character, equal parts mirth and erudition. She is also, of course, *little*. A figure of ambiguous age, the Little Schoolma'am occupies a position between that of the child-reader and full maturity: after fifteen years the Little Schoolma'am is "alive, happy, young as ever" (11.1890).

This emphasis on the schoolma'am's youth is noteworthy because of her exemplary status and because she isn't the only little schoolma'am to grace *St. Nicholas*. Indeed, girl-teachers appear regularly in mid-to-late nineteenth-century children's literature. This is a significant acknowledgement of child agency, but does the little teacher belittle teaching itself? In this paper, I read the Little Schoolma'am alongside her peers, fictional girl-teachers like elementary-aged Kitty Brown in *Kitty Brown's Little School* (1852), 12-year-old Louizy Lou in "A Funny Little School" (1897), and 14-year-old Ruphelle Preston in "The Little Teacher" (1868). Like *St. Nicholas*, these stories insist obsessively on the teachers' littleness, although these girls take on big jobs, teaching those who otherwise lack access to education. I argue that through their depictions of girl-teachers who struggle—and sometimes succeed—in reconciling their age and status, these texts call attention to the age ambiguity inherent in the teacher's role. Through the girl-teacher, these stories imagine the school as a space of age hybridity, even as the spread of age grading was turning schools into prime sites of age socialization.