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Indestructible, Destructible, and Destroyed: Nineteenth-Century Novelty Picturebooks and the Embodied Child Reader

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ABSTRACT

This article presents parts of *Playing with the Book: Victorian Movable Picture Books and the Child Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/playing-with-the-book. Thanks to the press for their permission to republish here.

KEYWORDS

Movable picturebooks, Victorian literature, child readers, agency, defacement

CITATION

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One of the earliest and strictest lessons to the children of the house being how to turn the pages of their own literary possessions lightly and deliberately, with no chance of tearing or dog's ears.
(Ruskin 1905, 34)

And my ambition *now* is (is it a vain one?) to be read by Children aged from Nought to Five. To be read? Nay, not so! Say rather to be thumbed, to be cooed over, to be dogs'-eared, to be rumpled, to be kissed, by the illiterate, ungrammatical, dimpled Darlings, that fill your Nursery with merry uproar, and your inmost heart of hearts with a restful gladness!
(Carroll 1890, dedication)

Two prefaces to Victorian texts by canonical authors. Both are addressed to parents, and both lay out particular visions of the young reader—but they could not be more different. For John Ruskin writing in the preface to the 1871 edition of *Sesame and Lilies,* learning to read means learning not to dog-ear pages as part of a fastidious socialization process that involves subtle modulations of children's behavior and movement as they come to handle books "lightly and deliberately." By contrast, in 1890 Lewis Carroll envisages a whole host of unconventional usages—thumbing, cooing, dog-earing, rumpling, and kissing—that an audience too young to read will find for *The Nursery "Alice,"* the last installment in his Alice series. Despite their varying viewpoints, though, both quotations offer moments of instruction in reading that are also instruction in *not* reading, if reading is conceived of as a purely mental activity: each writer imagines a child's ideal *physical,* rather than intellectual, engagement with a book. Ruskin and Carroll represent two poles in the cultural attitudes toward children as readers in the Victorian period, pointing to the gradual relaxation of the widespread "injunctions against children's physical relationship with books" that often characterized earlier periods (Grenby 2011, 255).

Novelty picturebooks court such propensities in the child reader, constructing a process of reading that is dependent on both physical action (pulling a tab, lifting a flap) and intellectual activity—they *embody* reading, so often thought of as a dematerialized and disembodied experience. They supply a means of refining and adjusting many of the assumptions commonly made about the manner and motives of reading: the conception of reading as absorbing, for example. There is sometimes archival evidence in particular copies of how child readers disobeyed these dictates—either deliberately or inadvertently. This archive of damaged novelty picturebooks undermines the reasoning that has—historically and in our contemporary moment—justified support for children's reading and intervenes in the power structures that concern much contemporary scholarship on children's literature (Sánchez-Eppler 2011, 151). This is because Victorian novelty books for children provoked a physical reader whose actions on or with the book dispelled or even destroyed the messages given by word and picture.

With these propositions in mind, in the first part of this article I consider nineteenth-century worries over children's physical behavior as readers, in general and in specific relation to movable books (where instructional poems are a generic feature). I then counterpoint these worries in the second part with unconventional archival traces of children's reading—coloring-in, rips, tears, and other marks of damage. Such evidence shows the distinctive ways that children read (and did not read) the novelty book in the

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nineteenth century, while also suggesting what such specific practices might have to do with children's reading more broadly.

Destructible and Indestructible

Fig. 1 Pop-up page opening from Surprise Model Picture Book [1891]. © the British Library Board, General Reference Collection 12806.l.74.

When we think about didacticism in children's literature, it is often in relation to abstract lessons or values that books seek to impart. Nineteenth-century novelty books, though, seek also to impart practical meta-advice about how to handle a book, as they provide very specific exposition and hints on physical positioning. These works require both a set of unfamiliar movements for reading and an increased level of care in executing these movements.

For instance, a bright-red instruction is printed at the top of every page in the four titles in Dean's noteworthy Surprise Model series of rounded pop-up books: "BEFORE OPENING EACH PAGE PLACE THUMBS WHERE MARKED, HOLD FIRMLY AND OPEN WIDE" (*Surprise Model Picture Book* [1891]). Color illustrations of thumbs appear on the outside edges of the page opening, inscribing the reading body on the book itself (**Fig. 1**). But Dean's instruction is striking for its concision when compared to the directions given in a range of other novelty books from across formats and across the century. Take, for example, The Motograph Moving Picture Book ([1898]): an unusual movable that shows the link between novelty formats and avant-garde art movements in the nineteenth century. (Its cover image is designed by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, although contemporary reviews show that despite its sophisticated cover the book was understood as children's literature). Motograph gives an instruction on each page: "Place the star on the Transparency exactly over the star above the picture, and see that the Transparency comes directly in contact with the paper; then move the Transparency slowly up and down over the picture." Across examples,

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novelty book instructions imagine children's reading in terms of movement, assembly, recipe, or spell, depending on the format.

A particular subset of such instructions explicitly prohibits ripping and tearing. As Dean's midcentury title *Living Nursery Rhymes* reminds the reader with a motto that evokes the book's own fragility (an ironic inversion of Edward Bulwer Lytton's "The pen is mightier than the sword"), "PAPER IS NOT IRON" (Wells [not before 1873]).[1] Nonetheless, the historical paradigm of children's reading proposed by Grenby—the "relaxation" of rules regarding children's book use—actually allows a certain joy in such destructive acts in the nineteenth century when they are undertaken by children, as opposed to the well-regulated horror that Grenby and other critics, such as Andrea Immel (2005), detect in the eighteenth. The transgressive pleasure associated with children's more vigorous styles of reading gives us both Carroll's dog-eared *Nursery "Alice"* and Becky Sharp's rapid defenestration of her presentation copy of Johnson's dictionary from Miss Pinkerton's Academy (see Grenby 2011, 177, 27). In a less well-known example, even a seemingly conservative writer such as Charlotte Mary Yonge might gleefully imagine a scene of book destruction:

> "There, it is not indestructible!"
> "What mischief have you been about?" The question was needless, for the table was strewn with snips of calico.
> "This nasty spelling-book! Lucy said it was called indestructible, because nobody could destroy it, but I've taken my new knife to it. And see there!"(1861, 309)

Yonge's destroyed "indestructible" book is a dig at a particular Victorian publishing trend with F. J. Harvey Darton suggests that Dean invented "printing on untearable holland" (1999, 208), and the firm made such printing a feature of its marketing: a later incarnation of the Dean firm trademarked an image of two dogs fighting over a rag book as one of its logos. But it also imagines that the child reader may respond to such a book as a challenge, as the phrase *indestructible book* presents not so much a promise as a stern imperative (You will not destroy this book) and a hopeful entreaty (Please, please do not destroy this book).

So-called indestructible books provide evidence of persisting anxieties around children's material understandings of their books in the nineteenth century—anxieties that the specific properties of the novelty book heightened. Even when attempting to advertise movable books as, if not indestructible, at least sturdy, publishers made concessions to the fundamentally fragile material dimensions of the book and the likelihood of its destruction or malfunction. For instance, in the 1860s, Dean denounced its competitors by claiming that the movements in its mechanical books "*are, by an improved plan, worked upon thin Copper Wire, and, therefore, are not liable to get out of order*" (*Dean's Galanti Show ca.* 1861, endpapers). Again, the advertisements might have had the opposite effect to the desired one, as they introduced by antithesis the idea of a movable book "liable to get out of order." The movable book comes to seem a work in progress.

When publishers failed to make an indestructible movable book, prefatory material exhorting the child reader to cautious handling was the next line of defense. Most notably, there are countless versions of such demands in Lothar Meggendorfer's publications. (As the ingeniousness of movable books increases, so too does their fragility.) For example, *Always Jolly!* (*ca.* 1891) writes of its mechanical figures:

> But still they are of paper made,
> And therefore, I advise,
> That care and caution should be paid,
> Lest woe and grief arise.

Meggendorfer's "Introduction" provides very specific information about the physical book, the content

[1] The phrase "The pen is mightier than the sword" come from the verse drama *Richelieu,* first published in 1839. For other discussions of the motto "RECOLLECT THAT PAPER IS NOT IRON," see Faden 2007, 74; Haining 1979, 32.

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of its words and pictures, and the usage to be made of it. As is well known, Meggendorfer released his movables in different languages, often with considerably different content, but instructional verses appear across editions, making them—and the destructive energies they foretell in the child reader—something of a stable generic property.

Destroyed

The joke a hundred years later is that novelty picturebooks bear witness to treatment quite different from what the books themselves exhort. In the second part of this article, then, I shall examine such material evidence in individual novelty books contained in the Opie Collection of Children's Literature at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Ripping and tearing, coloring-in, dirt, and reconstruction—the material traces of how children read novelty books—are not the types of evidence commonly invoked by historians of reading who discuss children; these works focus often on marginalia and occasionally on doodles (see Adams 2005; Crain 2016; Grenby 2011; Jackson 2001; Lerer 2012). But writing is only one mode of damaging a book. "For every pencil mark in the margin," remarks Leah Price, "ten traces of wax or smoke; for every ink stain, ten drink spills" (2012, 5). Paying attention to nontextual marks in novelty books challenges a privileging of the written over the drawn, the ripped, or simply the "thumbed," recognizing in the process that children's material and physical engagements with their books reconstitute the meaning of children's literature.

Fig. 2 Mutilated page from mechanical book *This Is the House that Jack Built* [1860]. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, shelfmark Opie EE 117.

To begin with ripping and tearing in the Opie Collection's novelty book holdings: Dean's mechanical book *This Is the House that Jack Built* ([1860]; shelfmark Opie EE 117) is full of dismembered mechanical figures. Legs with no torso disappear into the blackness of a doorway. Jack pats a headless and tailless cat—the same one praised in the rhyme for killing the rat that ate the malt, a feat it is patently unable to do in its present condition (**Fig. 2**). A copy of the Meggendorfer mechanical book *Curious Creatures* (1890, shelfmark Rec. d.516) has been so decimated that the instructions to the original factory assembler, which should be concealed beneath movable parts, are clearly visible. Whole transformations in Nister dissolving views are broken—in *Playtime Surprises ([189-], shelfmark Opie EE29), Pleasant Surprises (ca. 1891, shelfmark Opie EE 30),* and *Something New for Little Folk* (ca. 1899, shelfmark Opie EE 31), to name three examples. (In each case, the revelations promised in the title may not be quite what the reader expects.) The movable book is a site of destruction and malfunction; its familiar

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spirits are ripping and tearing. This state of affairs is paradoxical, as ripping and tearing are in some cases unavoidable offshoots of handling the book, however carefully one does it— symptoms of the book's material configuration.

The title page of a ripped and torn copy of another Surprise Model pop-up, *A Visit to the Country* (ca. 1891) reproduces the gloriously chromolithographed cover image in black-and-white line, much of which has been colored-in in pencil (**Fig. 3**). The very presence of coloring-in tells us, as Grenby points out, that books were used "in fairly informal settings where there was ready access to writing materials—most likely in nurseries and schoolrooms" (2011, 205). Presuming the child who colored *A Visit* had access to more than orange, red, blue, and brown pencils, the choice of colors could be suggestive: the colorer has not followed the cover template, making, for example, the sky in the image blue, not orange (the cover shows a sunset scene), and leaving the little girl at the center of the image uncolored. The contrast between this picture and the rest of those in the book suggests that coloring-in could be a usage approved by the publisher. Considering the damage to the book elsewhere, what is the relationship between sanctioned and disallowed treatment of the book here, between children's constructive and destructive book use—what Seth Lerer (2012) calls devotion and defacement (see also Sánchez-Eppler 2011, 153)? Does coloring-in span the two?The many dirty marks on movable books are an indicative second example. Dirt and grime feature often in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anecdotes concerning children's reading.

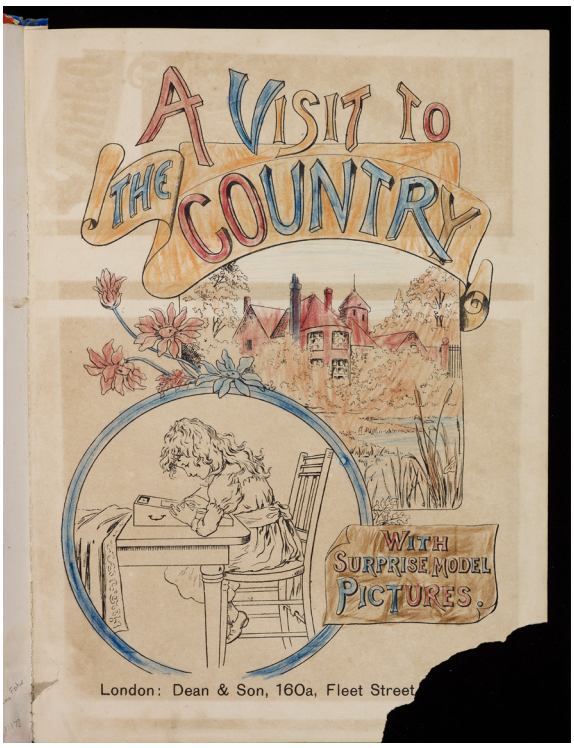

Fig. 3 Colored-in title-page from pop-up book A *Visit to the Country* [1891]. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, shelfmark Opie EE 300.

On a speculative level, "dirty books" may designate uniquely childish reading practices.

The dirty marks of children's usages of their books, Walter Benjamin suggests, are apotropaic: "It is good that the patina that has been deposited by unwashed children's hands will keep the book snob at a distance" (1996, 406). At the same time, references to "dirty books" expose the pronounced class implications borne by children's reading in Victorian Britain: disordered or materialized reading might be tolerated, encouraged, or rhapsodized when it takes place within Carroll's nursery filled with "dimpled darlings," but be viewed as evidence of slovenliness and social decay when enacted by working-class children. Thus, Randolph Caldecott writes in dismay at the "dreadfully grimy, be-thumbed, greased, torn, tattered, part-mended, and odorous" condition of one of his picturebooks in a boys' reading room library in Manchester (qtd. in Trumpener 2002, 362), and in 1922 slum children were forced to wash their hands before entering David Copperfield's Library, a charitable institution established by John Brett Langstaff (Curtis 2002, 274). These are responses to an expanded reading public: there is a sense that children should have books but an anxiety over what some of those children will do with them. (It is important to note in this context that novelty and movable books largely belonged to privileged owners in the nineteenth century, so their use as a document in social history of reading is limited.)

Nonetheless, from the evidence left by those privileged children who did acquire novelty books in the before social nineteenth century, dirty marks and "patina" are constitutive, not incidental. They were the results of the repetitive movements the books solicited. The begrimed tab that appears on the double-page

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Fig. 4 Dirty and annotated tab from dissolving-view book *Transformation Pictures and Comical Fixtures* ca. 1896. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, shelfmark Opie EE 32.

opening "My Kittens" in Nister's dissolving-view book *Transformation Pictures and Comical Fixtures* (*ca.* 1896, shelfmark Opie EE 32) could be read in conjunction with the direction "pull," which has been written by hand on the tab by an older child or by an adult (**Fig. 4**). Moreover, the fact that this tab is the only one in the book that is torn evokes a handler who may have too zealously followed the double cue to pull in print and in marginalia. Working with the material evidence of novelty books, the mind wanders: the British Library's copy of *Tale of an Old Sugar Tub ([1891],* shelfmark General Reference 12806b.l.74), another of Dean's Surprise Model books, was suggestively caked with powdery dust the last time I called it to the reading room. Where had this book been? An extravagant reader might imagine that the book's tales of derring-do, in which Freddy and Jack accidentally set sail in a sugar tub only to be rescued by an old sailor, prompted equally adventurous usages. The book seems to have traveled *with* Freddy and Jack, becoming coated in sugar on the way—although I was not brave enough to lick it and confirm my suspicions.

For a third and final case, consider the evidence—scattered, perplexing, and entrancing—of *reconstructions* of movable books from the Opie Collection. Given their haphazard quality, such repairs are unlikely to have taken place at the Bodleian, or indeed in the hands of the volumes' previous private owners; Sánchez-Eppler remarks that provenances in private collections make the children's archive a home for "the scrap and the scribble as well as the tome," even in the most august libraries (2013, 215). Instead, they might be viewed as part of what Jacqueline Reid-Walsh calls the do-it-yourself culture of early interactive books (2017, chap. 5). One of the cardboard tabs in *Dean's Moveable Cock Robin* ([1857], shelfmark Opie EE 57) has been replaced with a strip of paper annotated in flowing script; close inspection of the tab reveals what seems to be a handwritten name and address (**Fig. 5**). Part of a French broadsheet newspaper has been pasted onto the back of a page in Dean's mechanical book *The History of How Ned Nimble Built His Cottage* (ca. 1859–1860, shelfmark Opie EE 113) in order to strengthen it. Attempts have been made to reinforce the Routledge panorama *A Morning Ride mid Country Scenes* (1852, shelfmark Opie EE 190) in similar fashion, with paper from an old letter written in a childlike hand, although each panel is now separate, and the panorama has to be put back together with detective work.

Strangest of all, in one movable illustration from the mechanical book *A New Story about Mother Hubbard and Her Dog* (Martin [between 1854 and 1861], shelfmark Opie EE 198), produced by Ward and Lock, Mother Hubbard's body parts seem to have intermingled with those of her dog (**Fig. 6**). Was this an error on the part of the publisher, perhaps a miscoloring of the original part, or a joke by a reader who mended the book in her own way? Dean's promise to deliver movable books "not liable to get out of order" takes on new meaning in light of such evidence, as child readers and their parents scissorize and remake novelty books when they break down.[2]

[2] The term *scissorizing* comes from Garvey 2012.

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Fig. 5 Makeshift paper tab in mechanical book *Dean's Moveable Cock Robin* [1857]. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Opie EE 57.

Fig. 6 Reconfigured movable dog in Martin [between 1854 and 1861]. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Opie EE 198.

Coda

Of course, I cannot prove definitively that the damage discussed in the previous section is the work of children and not adults—parents and caregivers, or later catalogers, scholars, and collectors. While I included this caveat in the original version of this research, it has been brought home to me since as I have corresponded with the fine and antiquarian books collector and dealer David Temperley, who regaled me with anecdotes about the damage caused to movables by eager adult collectors and patrons; he also pointed out that, as luxury items, movables were often brought out under adult supervision (pers. comm.). From another angle, if child readers did indeed inflict the damage documented here, I cannot state what they were thinking in the process; in childhood studies, "any claim of agency or assertion of desire just has to be hedged around with mediations" (Sánchez-Eppler 2013, 223).

These hedges are significant, but my project here and in the monograph from which this piece is drawn is to work in a declaredly speculative and theoretical manner with the recalcitrant evidence of children's reading. Sánchez-Eppler jokes about the impossible project of tracing children's book destruction: "Here is a method—search book dealers for children's literature in poor condition" (2011, 155). Despite such jokes and despite all of the caveats, then, a number of factors make damage of significance in the case of movable picturebooks. In books aimed at such small (possibly preliterate) readers, it makes sense that defacement would often occur in nontextual forms. Moreover, in the ways novelty books themselves try to forestall defacement and destruction in text and picture, we find a sort of physical implied reader, which suggests that author, illustrator, and publisher are wise to the types of usages that may be visited upon a book. The books' own postulation of a reader who would rip or alter books in the ways I discuss here proleptically shaped those books, setting aside for a moment the actions of actual readers.

Moreover, as in the larger archive of children's literature, *absences* from the movable picturebook record—the scarcity of many of these nineteenth-century books—are themselves important. Lerer writes of the archival experience of studying children's books: "To hold one of these books in our modern hands is to realize not that old texts were lost, but that they were so used and handled, pocketed and plucked out, that they must have fallen apart. Worn away by countless children, these books were, quite simply, read to death" (2008, 90). Victorian movable picturebooks attest to this state of affairs and invite us to think about how it might be reflected in scholarly work on children's reading.

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