A Movable Art: Making Books Pop

In the middle and late eighteenth century, a dazzling array of new toys, games, and play things for children was entering the market. One of these was the movable book, which required ingenious innovations combined with literary and artistic talents for a publisher to pull off to good effect. These books were designed to delight, astonish, and, perhaps, even to educate children—and they did all of these very well. Noted children’s literature historian Percy Muir called nineteenth century children’s movables “one of the most remarkable chapters in the development of children’s books,” and wrote of them: “they show considerable superiority over the generality of children’s books of their period.” Yet his entry on them in his reference work in children’s literature is less than a page, and there is little in the way of cohesive, interpretive history on the topic.

Movable books of the Victorian era were an important episode, not only for what they say about the history of publishing, or more specifically, children’s publishing, but for what they can tell us about the nature and role of childhood in Victorian society. Although there were many movables that came before, an active business of movable books for children had never been taken up before the mid nineteenth century. This was a time of important cultural shift in the perception of childhood and the value of play. Childhood was becoming something cherished as a time to honor and protect rather than to overcome, and children were associated “not only with

cultural authenticity but with the transformative power of nature.” In a time when childhood and child play were increasingly valued, entertaining and morally upright books like the new movables began to be developed, and business quickly boomed.

The history of books with moving parts is thought to go back to the thirteenth century with an early example coming out of Catalonia. Movable book parts were used for explication of anatomy, astrological forecasting, and architectural rendering. Later examples included paper dolls, “Harliquinades” that featured folded flaps with hidden drawings underneath, and paper dolls with interchangeable heads. Some of these books were for children and some for adults. But a true trade of publishing books with movable parts, specifically geared toward children did not begin until the mid nineteenth century.

Publishing of movable books for children began in earnest in England by the publishing firm, Dean and Son. Although Dean and Son began operation in the eighteenth century, its work in movables began in the late 1850s or early 1860s, with the publication of a series of “scenic books” that included the titles Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Robinson Crusoe, and Aladdin.

These movables were based on the principles of the earlier peep-show, a series of paper cut outs held lengthwise in the grooves of two parallel paper accordions. When the accordion was pulled apart, the separated cutouts gave the illusion of a three dimensional picture.

Dean and Son’s scenic books used a similar principle of layering cutouts to provide the illusion of depth. Two or more layers of paper cutouts were pasted to the page with a backdrop layer behind them to provide the image of a setting. These cutouts and the backdrop were

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attached by a hidden ribbon so that they moved as a unit. The cutouts were folded down over the page with the backdrop layer folded over them to form a flap over the entire page, and when the reader lifted the flap, a three dimensional image was revealed with the printed text underneath.

In 1860 Dean and Son claimed to be the originator of movable books for children, and this seems accurate. Although there were certainly movables before Dean and Son, and there were books (and even novelty books) published specifically for children, Dean and Son was the first publishing house to publish movables specifically for children.

In his important book, *Children’s Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, Harvey Darton wrote that Victorian England produced “the most diverse children’s literature in the world.” This coupled with the Victorian affinity for novelty leaves little wonder as to why movable books for children would have flourished in London. However, in the second half of the nineteenth century German techniques for color printing and book illustration were some of the finest in the world, and when Germans began to enter the movable book business in the 1880s, they gave Dean and Son and other English men a run for their money. In fact, apart from Dean and Son, the most notable publishers of movable books for children in the late nineteenth century had their roots in Germany.

Lothar Meggendorfer (1847–1925), who worked in Munich, is widely acknowledged to be one of the most ingenious publishers of movables. Noted both for his comic wit and his mechanical genius, Meggendorfer employed a pull tab techniques to delightful effect. In 1887, Meggendorfer produced *Internationaler Zirkus*, published in England as *Lothar Meggendorfer’s*

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4 Haining, 20.
*International Circus*, which presented six scenes of circus acts from around the world.⁷ These scenes did not pop-out in three dimensions, as Dean and Son’s scenic books did. Rather, pull tabs at the bottoms and sides of the page enabled two dimensional motion—animals performed tricks and complicated routines.⁸ Often, pulling one tab in a Meggendorfer book caused a range of motions, sometimes at different times, leading to his reputation as one of the most ingenious movable book makers. Limbs, mouths, umbrellas, boats, and much more were attached to the pull tabs by paper strips and copper springs and wires. Additionally, his artwork and coloring were known to be some of the finest quality among movable books for children.

Ernest Nister (1842–1909) was another German publisher who made important advances in the English movable book trade. After work in Nuremberg as a printer for London publishers, Nister moved to London himself in 1887 or 1888 to set up his own company for publishing books to be distributed in England and Germany. Nister also worked closely with the German publisher Theodore Stroefer, and the two men published each other’s books in their own countries.

Stroefer had a strong children’s picture book publishing program, mainly influenced by English writers who he was already re-publishing in Germany. Through Stoefer’s influence and connections, Nister quickly became an important figure in the English picture book market. His *Magic Toy Book* was a smash hit in 1891.⁹

Nister employed and improved on a technique used by Dean and Son to produce what they called “dissolving pictures.” Dissolving pictures were made using a technique called jalousie or venetian blinds, in which one picture dissolved into the slats of another when a tab

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⁸ Haining, 64 and Montanoaro, *Pop-up and movable books*, 170)

was pulled. The book, *Come and Go: A Book of Changing Pictures*, published in about 1890 presented a series of vignets in which a rhyming story was printed on one page, and on the facing page, a dissolving picture offered two illustrations for the same rhyme. Later, Nister improved on the venetian blind technique further by putting it in the round with two slatted wheels dissolved into each other at the revolution of a tab that moved in a semicircle. Nister applied for and received patents for this technique in England and Germany in 1899.

In 1895 Nister began to improve on Dean and Son’s successful pop-out technique used in their peep-show inspired scenic books. With the publication of *Peeps into Fairy Land* Nister produced what some consider to be the finest of his movable books. Rather than pull up or down on a flap to open out the stand-up artwork, the reader had only to open the page, and linen tabs would pull the three-dimensional artwork to life. Each of the six panoramas shows two children walking into a beautiful, vibrant, and complex fairy land, each with their own customs, climates, and types of fairies.

Among publishers of movables at this time, Nister remains in some ways the most mysterious because it is unclear how much of the artwork is his own. Nister was known to alter his contributors’ artworks, add to them, re-create them whole-cloth, and even to remove artists’ monograms. But Nister is also known for his strong, uniform artistic vision across his books, especially for his “exquisite sentimental beauty.”

Another important German in English children’s movable book publishing was Raphael Tuck (1821–1900). Having moved from Germany to London as a young man, Tuck sold

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10 Krahé, 75.
11 Haining, 45.
12 Krahé, 75
13 Ibid, 77-78.
14 Ibid.
furniture, art, and fine papers, but soon got into children’s book publishing and was seen as one of Dean and Son’s early competitors. After “Father Tuck,” as he was known, retired, his sons carried on the business and continued his tradition of creating finely illustrated and complex movables. Notable among the Tuck company’s publications was *Fun for Little Folks* (ca. 1890), which offers Dean and Son’s style of pull-down flap scenic book, but with increased color and complexity. The scenes in this book depicted children in various fun and games at the seaside.\(^{16}\)

Also notable among the Tuck company’s books is *Slovenly Peter* (also ca. 1890), based on the German folk tale, *Struwwelpeter*. *Slovenly Peter* employed the same pull-tab technique as Meggendorfer had, but the Tuck company’s advance for this technology was to put two images on one page so that the tab changed two images at once.

Although these books were often ingenious and always novel, they were not part of the artistic avant garde. Movable books for children were consumer items for those with some extra spending money and free time, and so they were made to appeal to the norms of the culture. In general, movable books, like other books for children, reflected Victorian culture’s ideas about childhood, its role in society, and society’s role in the development of its children. In her online exhibit at the University of Virginia Library, Johanna Drucker notes that rather serving as lesson books in the traditional sense, early children’s movables provided entertaining instruction on the moral and social codes of the day. Drucker writes: “These works aimed at providing amusement and pleasure for children, rather than simply serving as tools for instruction. Interestingly, however much these books delight children with their advanced technology, they firmly reinforce the moral and social context of the day.”\(^{17}\)

\(^{16}\) Haining, 36.
\(^{17}\) Drucker.
Certainly the entertainment value of these books is clear, and publishers like Dean and Son, Meggendorfer, Nister, and Tuck used that value to their advantage in selling new and innovative books. Whether the additional value of moral instruction was intentional cannot be known. Perhaps publishers were keenly aware of the messages that adults sought in books for children, or perhaps they were simply playing their own ingrained moralism. However, as artifacts of Victorian ideals of childhood, these books transcend publishing history and become useful tools for understanding culture.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, there emerged in English mind a new way of looking at childhood as being an important stage of life distinct from adulthood. Although movable books of one type or another had been around for centuries, Gillian Brown notes that by the end of the nineteenth century they were made primarily for children—just one example of an emerging separation of child and adult markets in business, and in the minds of the English.  

This changing ideal was borne out in new ideas about the importance of play and the ways that it did (and did not) relate to education and instruction. In his 2009 article on the Victorian idea of play, Matthew Kaiser notes a new ideal in Victorian England of child-play being “intrinsically productive and normative, that children and young animals in particular learn, adapt, and develop through life-enabling play.” Kaiser writes that play among children was seen as “an expression of futurity: a preparatory drive to acquire physical, cognitive, and emotional skills that advanced both the organism and the species.”

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positive qualities of child play resulted in new games and toys meant not only to entertain, but to instruct; or as Ira Bruce Nadel puts it: “to release play from its stigma as a frivolous pastime.”

More German influence comes into play here, as the English began taking up the idea of kindergarten, the principles founded by the German educator Friedrich Froebel. The first school in England to use Froebel’s principles was established in 1851 (around the corner from Charles Dickens’s house) by Johannes and Bertha Ronge. A sympathetic observer noted that “instruction in the ‘infant garden’ was always by means of play and that the garden was meant to ‘assure more perfectly the association of wholesome bodily exercise with mental activity.’” But the infant garden was not meant for completely unguided play. The Ronges believed in the moral value of their adopted education system as well. In their 1855 book, *A Practical Guide to the English Kindergarten*, the Ronges wrote about the various activities available to children at their school, noting: “This occupation has a moral effect, because when children know that they can do something useful, their self reliance increases.”

Although kindergarten may not have been accepted by all, the idea of instruction through play certainly became widespread. Instructive games and toys for children abounded in the nineteenth century, including optical toys and the peep shows that inspired Dean and Son, with images of important historical moments in English history. Paper dolls taught children about proper attire. Board games were based on the thriving English manufacturing industries.

Amidst this burgeoning interest in children’s play and education, it seems fitting that books for children that entertain would flourish. Writing in 2006, Brown argued for movable books’ value beyond delight and entertainment, stating: “The materiality of the movables

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21 Ibid, 21.
22 Ibid, 23.
enhances and it extends the literary experience.” Brown continues: “[movables] exhibit the animating process of reading: the sensory interplay through which symbols on a page become real objects for the reader…The tactile experience of movables heightens both the material status of books and the reader’s role in animating literary objects.”

When understood as enhancements for a tactile understanding of the written word, and enforcement of literature’s imaginative power, the movables of the late nineteenth century must surely have seemed like a perfect learning tool for the Victorian child. Certainly one cannot ascribe an intention to the publishers of movable books. But one can see that these books had cultural value, beyond mere entertainment—whether they were intended to have that value or not. As innovative tools that invited children to engage with books and stories in novel ways, these books fit into an environment that was hungry for them.

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23 Brown, 359.
Works Cited:


Professor of Theatre Kate Bredeson is a theatre historian, a director and a dramaturg. Her recent conversation with Lars Jan was chronicled by the LA Review of Books. Darius Rejali from Reed College, author of Torture and Democracy is the guest of Stanford professors John Perry and Ken Taylor who host the philosophical chat show that airs in Oregon on OPB Thursdays from 9 to 10 p.m. KALW. November 20, 2017. How the GOPâ€™s Tax Plan Puts Other Countries Before Americaâ€œ. Kimberly Clausing is the Thormund A. Miller and Walter Mintz Professor of Economics at Reed College wrote the following commentary. â€œThe international features of the Republican tax bills make an odd pairing with the nationalist rhetoric of President Trump. In his letter, Professor Manchin asked whoever responded to do so by e-mail, and gave a private Gmail address. He said he rarely checked his university address. Ed thought, â€œThatâ€™s because youâ€™re just a lowly adjunct professor and probably donâ€™t even have a real office.â€œ He often had these thoughts, but, of course, was too professional to utter them to anyone else. Out of caution, the next day he sent a response through the Portland State server. He thanked Professor Manchin for his letter and invited him to the Princeton campus. He asked for a general idea of when he might arrive and laid out Kate Read (also known as Baby Kate) is the one year-old baby of Jane Read and David Read and the younger sister of Arthur Read and D.W. Read. Kate was first seen as a newborn in "Arthur's Baby" and "D.W.'s Baby". On her first birthday, Kate puts her face on her birthday cake. First revealed in "Paradise Lost," Kate is getting older and becoming less able to talk to Pal and other pets and more able to talk to other anthropomorphic animals. "Mei Lin Takes a Stand" also shows she is able to Kate Reed. Director, Clinical and Continuing Education Program, The Jackson Laboratory. Verified email at jax.org. W Burke, M Fesinmeyer, K Reed, L Hampson, C Carlsten. American journal of preventive medicine 24 (2), 160-169, 2003. Preparing health professionals for individualized medicine. JD McInerney, E Edelman, T Nissen, K Reed, JA Scott. Personalized Medicine 9 (5), 529-537, 2012. Social Work and Genetics. A werner-lin, k reed. Praise for Handbook of Health Social Work, 557, 0.3. Educational initiative to encourage evaluation and integration of genetics into social and behavioral research. K Reed, H Peay. Annals of behavioral medicine 39, 214-214, 2010. Kate Reed. University of Essex Â· School of Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Science. PhD. Schoenmakers, PPJM, Crisell, JJ, and Reed, KE. Physiological and perceptual demands of running on a curved nonmotorized treadmill compared with running on a motorized treadmill set at different grades. J Strength Cond Res XX(X): 000-000, 2020- The current study compared the physiological and perceptual demands of running on a commercially available