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Book Review: *Imaginary Citizens: Child Readers and the Limits of American Independence, 1640–1868*

Imaginary Citizens: Child Readers and the Limits of American Independence, 1640–1868. By Courtney Weikle-Mills. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. xii, 265 pp. \$55.00.)

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No children appear in *Imaginary Citizens* until chapter 4, and then just barely; their presence would have made this a very different book. Yet they remain central to Courtney Weikle-Mills's argument that during the 250 years after Europeans came to the New World, children and childhood provided real and metaphorical meanings to freedom and citizenship and reflected the ways democratic values could actually be shaped by words.

Weikle-Mills has creatively integrated literature studies and legal, family, and children's histories to show the evolution of thinking about democracy, child rearing, education, the development of free-market ideas, and the effects of the Fourteenth Amendment's insistence that birth—not blood—was the chief criterion of citizenship from the colonial period through the nineteenth century. *Imaginary Citizens* shows how similar questions have

threaded through the histories of religion, politics, and family: When does a child attain the capacity for reason? What is a child's capacity for independent thinking? What is the relationship between a child and the larger community? What imperatives should guide that community's raising of its children? "The notion of a child citizen was so powerful in structuring citizenship for all individuals," Weikle-Mills writes, "because childhood offered a way to explain and balance citizenship's limits and potential as a political means to produce freedom" (p. 7). Along the way she roots her ideas solidly in the work of historians such as Holly Brewer and Michael Grossberg; provides a nuanced reading of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Washington Irving, and a host of lesser authors; offers useful insights on the histories of reading and printing; and puts forth a provocative interpretation of "faithful slave" stories.

Imaginary Citizens is slightly overburdened with jargon (at least for this historian). Frequent references to "imaginary" and "fantasy" children and freedoms, to "readers" (of books and as characters in books), to actual and imagined reading, and to "bad reading" and "good reading" can cause confusion. A historian might also sense that Weikle-Mills does a bit of cherry-picking among the literary evidence. Although the author makes effective use of children's correspondence with magazines and a handful of diary entries in which children recorded what they read, a natural source of youngsters' points of view would have been the "amateur newspapers" published by juveniles from the 1850s into the late nineteenth century. These often channeled the values and prescriptions of youth-focused magazines.

Weikle-Mills's striking analysis of the legacies of the Fourteenth Amendment makes a case for reimagining children as citizens and seemingly suggests that they should be more integrated into the body politic. Although certainly food for thought, such an idea ends the book on a rather jarring note; historians would not necessarily follow the arguments made in the first two hundred pages of the book with such a daring, sweeping comment looming at the conclusion.

Such quibbles aside, this tightly argued and convincing book reflects the extraordinary ambiguity that has almost always surfaced in thinking and writing for and about children, and it shows the extent to which the study of history and literature can inform each other.