

Sport Literature and the Young Reader in the Nineteenth Century: Movement, Merriment and Morals

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Of the varieties of literature available for the young reader, fiction and non-fiction reading materials about sport and sport figures have been the most popular for many years. Sport literature for youth (the child and the adolescent) has had a brief history in comparison with other forms of youth literature. Although there were a few exceptions, such as Johnson's *Juvenile Sports And Pastimes*, 1780, sport literature geared specifically to entertain or to provide information concerning the varieties of activities and the skills necessary to play them appeared on the scene and began to flourish during the 1800s. Printed English language sport materials geared specifically for the young reader during the nineteenth century were studied to determine the types of literature available, the activities recommended by the adult sport writer for males and females, and the social attitudes toward sport inherent in the printed works. The term, sport, in this context, refers to the broad spectrum of active pastimes, games and athletic contests.

Most of the reading materials in the first half of the century were non-fiction, informational books that the young person could utilize for self-instruction and amusement such as *Juvenile Pastimes*, 1830. A few information books appeared under the guise of fiction, notably, Tarbart's *The Book Of Games*; or *A History of Juvenile Sports Practiced At The Kingston Academy*, 1804. This is an account of a young boy who goes to school to learn how to play games. In the 1860s, juvenile magazines appeared, which included fiction and non-fiction sport articles. The *St. Nicholas Magazine For Boys And Girls* provided information concerning the techniques and skills to play a variety of sports and fictional accounts of young people playing these activities.

Fictional books that denoted the character building aspects of sport participation, such as *Tom Brown's School Days*, 1857, set a trend that led to the emergence of books focusing on realistic male characters who were imbued with the qualities of good sportsmanship. The athlete-hero, such as Frank Merriwell, remained a popular subject for sport fiction for years.

Throughout the 1800s, sport activities for males were given society's approbation; this was evidenced in the number of fiction and non-fiction written with the young male in mind. Informal activities and low-organized games were thought worthwhile by most writers for girls until the late 1890s when the literature began to reflect society's acceptance of their involvement in some athletic contests. Very little reading materials specifically for females were available until about this time.