

Children's Books and Childhood Reading in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Denmark

Memoirs and Autobiographies as Sources for Children's Media Repertoires

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This article sets out to demonstrate the potential of memoirs and autobiographies as sources to study children's use of books and other media in Denmark between around 1750 and 1850. Research on historical children's reading cultures in the Nordic countries has been limited, and knowledge of children's own experiences of reading, including how, when, where, what and with whom they read, is scarce. Despite the fact that most autobiographical writings were put on paper late in the authors' lives, and even though most were composed by privileged or exceptional individuals, these sources can open up aspects of children's book and media history which are otherwise largely inaccessible. Inspired by media scholars Hepp and Hasebrink's concepts of *media repertoires* and *media ensembles*, we point to the importance of studying individual children's selections of media ("repertoires") in relation to those available in specific social contexts ("ensembles"). The article looks at six memoirs, representing boys and girls, urban and rural settings, and rich and poor families. We consider how these ego-documents may tell unexpected stories about children's media repertoires in practice and about the social life of children's books and reading.



CHILDREN’S BOOKS AND CHILDHOOD READING IN EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY DENMARK: Memoirs and Autobiographies as Sources for Children’s Media Repertoires

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to demonstrate the potential of memoirs and autobiographies as sources to study children’s use of books and other media in Denmark between around 1750 and 1850. Research on historical children’s reading cultures in the Nordic countries has been limited, and knowledge of children’s own experiences of reading, including how, when, where, what and with whom they read, is scarce. Despite the fact that most autobiographical writings were put on paper late in the authors’ lives, and even though most were composed by privileged or exceptional individuals, these sources can open up aspects of children’s book and media history which are otherwise largely inaccessible. Inspired by media scholars Hepp and Hasebrink’s concepts of *media repertoires* and *media ensembles*, we point to the importance of studying individual children’s selections of media (“repertoires”) in relation to those available in specific social contexts (“ensembles”). The article looks at six memoirs, representing boys and girls, urban and rural settings, and rich and poor families. We consider how these ego-documents may tell unexpected stories about children’s media repertoires in practice and about the social life of children’s books and reading.

Cet article explore ce que révèlent les mémoires et autobiographies quant au rapport qu'entretenaient les enfants avec les livres et d'autres médias au Danemark entre 1750 et 1850. Peu de travaux de recherche ont porté sur la culture de la lecture chez les enfants des pays nordiques dans une perspective historique. On en sait peu, dès lors, sur leurs expériences : Que lisaient-ils? Comment lisaient-ils? Où, avec qui et à quel moment s'adonnaient-ils à la lecture? Ces écrits sont pour la plupart l'œuvre de personnages éminents ou privilégiés, dont les mémoires ont été couchées sur papier des décennies après qu'eut pris fin l'enfance dont il y est question. Néanmoins, ces sources ouvrent des perspectives en histoire du livre et des médias qui sont autrement difficilement accessibles. Nous appuyant sur les concepts de « répertoires médiatiques » et d'« ensembles médiatiques » élaborés par Hepp et Hasebrink, nous insistons sur l'importance que revêtent les médias qu'une personne choisit de consulter (le « répertoire ») parmi ceux qui sont disponibles dans un contexte social donné (« l'ensemble »). Nous analysons ainsi les mémoires de six auteurs, tant des garçons que des filles, vivant à la ville ou à la campagne, issus de familles aisées ou modestes. Il émerge de ces « écrits du soi » des histoires inattendues quant aux répertoires médiatiques obtenant la faveur des enfants, et quant à la dimension sociale du livre et de la lecture chez les enfants.

Keywords

Reading Culture, Children's Literature, Autobiographies, Media Repertoires, Agency, Eighteenth Century, Nineteenth Century

Mots-clés

Culture de la lecture, littérature pour enfants, autobiographies, répertoires médiatiques, agentivité, dix-huitième siècle, dix-neuvième siècle

In the late 1830s, a young Anton Nielsen would often come home “skipping and dancing” with a book in his hand, borrowed from the local pastor's daughter. Anton was born in 1827, the son of a poor schoolteacher in a village in Eastern Denmark. His father managed to borrow some books for him, but Anton also worked out for himself how to find books in the local farmers' chests and cupboards, mainly religious tracts and chapbooks. At the age of 10, he turned into “a true devourer of novels,” and his friendship with the pastor's daughter, whose father was part of a reading society, meant that the young boy suddenly gained access to a variety of reading materials. This information can be found in Anton Nielsen's autobiography, published in 1894, in which the 67-year-old man looks back at a long and in many ways successful life as a teacher and an author himself.¹

Book historians and children’s literature scholars have rarely studied children’s reading culture and the role that books played in their everyday lives.² In this article, we wish to highlight the potential of memoirs and autobiographies as sources for learning about children’s reading and media usage. Our starting point is a general research interest in encounters between children and books during the period around 1750–1850, when books for children emerged as a new phenomenon on the Danish book market.³ Traditionally, research in this area has focused on the actual books published for and targeted at children, and on the intended child reader.⁴ Such studies are obviously of great importance, and many books—especially prefaces and other paratexts—contain valuable information on suggested reading patterns. However, if interested in the *practices* of childhood reading and children’s own experiences with books, researchers must find alternative avenues.

As a way to approach memoirs and autobiographies as promising sources, we introduce a set of concepts and research methods, put forward by the German media scholars Andreas Hepp and Uwe Hasebrink, which identify the *media repertoires* of individuals and the *media ensembles* of specific social domains. We argue that, despite being developed to study complex contemporary media usage, these concepts may also prove fruitful in historical investigations, as they help us to identify the variety of genres and written media read and used in different ways by children—including books, chapbooks, newspapers, and broadsheets—and to notice different media and modes of expression in children’s lives, including printed, oral, visual, and performative media.⁵ Gaining insight into such general patterns and interactions will help researchers access dimensions of children’s reading culture that remain invisible when specific texts or genres are studied one at a time. In this article, we analyze a small but varied selection of nineteenth-century autobiographical accounts of childhood: about girls and boys, about growing up in the town and the countryside, and about being raised in affluence and poverty. What can these sources tell us about children’s reading cultures and media repertoires? And what important perspectives emerge when we adopt this approach?

The Potential of Autobiographies as Sources

In recent years, new approaches have been tested in international research on children as users and producers of texts in historical contexts. In some cases, scholars have located sources produced by children themselves, such as the diary of a seventeenth-century Dutch schoolboy, discussed by Arianne Baggerman, or the homemade reading materials constructed by three American brothers in the late nineteenth century, discovered by Karen Sánchez-Eppler.⁶ In the Danish context, we have found original children's letters, notably from the young Ida Thiele, born in 1830.⁷ Such diaries, letters, and other self-produced texts are particularly interesting as they provide us with contemporary expressions of children's experiences. For example, the letters from Ida to her father reveal that she not only read books in Danish but also in other languages, and they open our eyes to the roles played by other media, especially drama and drawing. Furthermore, the letters between Ida and her cousin Nikolai show that they exchanged pictures and homemade books as presents.⁸ It is therefore clear that their reading culture extended far beyond the reading of children's books. However, these contemporary sources mainly help to document the lives of relatively privileged children, while the reading culture and media usage of children from less affluent backgrounds remain hidden.⁹

Another key approach in recent international research has been to study inscriptions and marginalia, often combined with other sources such as library catalogues.¹⁰ Much can be learned through such studies, especially regarding the material aspects of children's books and the ways in which these books were used. However, if we wish to approach the variety of media experiences available to children at the time—surrounding and beyond books—and to learn about children in different environments, we must also pursue other research strategies.

This is where memoirs and autobiographies come in. Traditionally, many historians—including in Denmark—have been somewhat skeptical of the value of memoirs and autobiographies as historical sources, because such documents are often composed decades after the events they describe. Their authors are thus bound to forget or confuse events as they—either consciously or unconsciously—construct specific narratives about the past, inevitably selecting, highlighting, or omitting certain occurrences. For these

reasons, historians have avoided autobiographical sources whenever possible.¹¹ Danish literary scholars have tended to use memoirs more frequently, particularly when researching the childhoods of renowned authors such as Hans Christian Andersen, but also, at least since the 1970s, when conducting more general research into the sociology of reading.¹² From the 1990s on, a number of “turns” in the so-called new cultural history have led to an increasing use of memoirs and other ego-documents.¹³ These sources are particularly important for research into past identities and memory work. In fact, the blossoming and theoretically well-founded field of memory studies has resulted in renewed attention being directed towards autobiographical texts: not as evidence of past events but primarily as testimonies of how past events and experiences are recalled, recorded, and commemorated later in life.¹⁴

Reflections on the importance of childhood reading are clearly of great interest, as is the double gaze provided when individuals recall and comment on the media they encountered as children.¹⁵ Quite clearly, Anton Nielsen—as an adult author—had an interest in emphasizing his early engagement with books, but, alongside this, his account contains an abundance of information that would be difficult to find elsewhere. Even if we cannot rely on every detail in his account, there is no reason to doubt his description of the variety of media he encountered or the people and situations involved in giving him access to books—that is, his account of what Abigail Williams has termed “the social life of books.”¹⁶ When attempting to learn more about children’s own activities in finding reading materials and demonstrating agency in relation to media, autobiographical sources are thus exceptionally rewarding.¹⁷

Autobiographical texts also hold a great deal of potential when it comes to tracing media usage and experiences among children from a variety of social backgrounds. According to our estimate, around 500 memoirs and autobiographies were published in Denmark between 1750 and 1850, and this number increases if unpublished manuscripts are included.¹⁸ Most of these texts were composed by men and women who had led privileged lives since their childhood, but a considerable number were written by individuals who had grown up in fairly humble families. This does not mean that such authors were typical representatives of their environments—often the contrary. Many of them managed to break social barriers and climb the

social ladder, and their autobiographies were often intended to document their extraordinary lives. Still, when describing when, where, how, and with whom they had access to books and other media, these authors describe (their own) unusual as well as more usual media usage in specific social environments. In this way, autobiographical sources may provide unique information and insights on children's cross-media practices in different social environments.

Media repertoires and media ensembles

In a number of articles and books, the German media scholars Andreas Hepp and Uwe Hasebrink have called for research into cross-media practices by applying the concepts of *media repertoires* and *media ensembles*.¹⁹ Although these concepts and their underlying methodologies are generally used to address the media culture of today, we intend to show that they can also be adapted and used to study media cultures of the past.

Hepp and Hasebrink point out that media research has traditionally specialized in studying the use of particular media or genres, such as newspapers, soap operas, or specific social media platforms. However, as audiences are “inherently cross-media,” because hardly anybody uses just one or even a few, but more often a variety of different media, there is an obvious need for cross-media research.²⁰ This need has increased dramatically thanks to the recent development of so-called “deep mediatization,” which refers to the increasing entanglement of various social domains with media.²¹ Instead of focusing on media use either by individuals or in larger social domains (such as families, companies, or organizations), Hepp and Hasebrink aim to combine these approaches by suggesting a conceptual framework for studying media constellations at three different levels: the entire media environment, the media ensemble, and the media repertoire. They write:

These [levels] are, firstly, the level of *the entire media environment*. ... [W]hat we mean by media environment is the entire body of available media at any given time. Secondly, there is the level of the *media ensemble*. This is the subset of the media in a media environment as it is used in a particular social domain (family, company, etc.), with respect to the available options. Thirdly, there is the level

of *media repertoire*. This is the individuals' selection of the media as they use and appropriate them as part of their everyday practices.²²

While researchers should be aware of all three levels and the connections among them, Hepp and Hasebrink argue that the levels must be studied in different ways. When researching an individual's *media repertoire*, it is necessary to apply a user-centred perspective that focuses on the combination and variety of media regularly assembled by one person. Researchers should ask open questions concerning all media and how they are used by the individual, thereby focusing on relationality—that is, how the media are used in relation to each other and serve different functions in relation to different domains in the individual's life.²³ This again rests on the assumption that “the media repertoire of an individual is not just the mere sum of the different media they use, but a meaningfully structured composition of media.”²⁴

According to Hepp and Hasebrink, when researching a *media ensemble*, a fundamental shift in perspective is required.²⁵ Hepp and Hasebrink describe a media ensemble as “a social domain” (see above), but also—with reference to Norbert Elias's process-sociological approach—as “a communicative figuration,” involving a constellation of actors as well as “relevance frames or certain communicative practices.”²⁶ With regard to the relationship between ensembles and repertoires, the two scholars point out that while the media ensemble of a particular figuration can sometimes be more limited than an individual's media repertoire, “the media ensemble in its totality might include media that certain individuals do not use.”²⁷

Hepp and Hasebrink's concepts are clearly developed to grasp complex media uses in a contemporary era of “deep mediatization,” so how can they be adapted to the study of children and media in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? The entire media environment two hundred years ago was obviously not as varied and complex as the media environment investigated by Hepp and Hasebrink, and several of their methodological tools cannot be directly applied in relation to children's media use around 1800. Nevertheless, the idea of following specific individuals and their media ensembles has inspired us to look beyond the traditional focus on children's books and to investigate—with autobiographical texts as our

sources—how individual children engaged in a number of activities involving different media, thus creating their own media repertoires. Through this approach, several open questions about the cross-media practices of different children can be asked: Which media (and specific genres) did the children in question engage with? When, where, and how? Through and with whom? In other words, how were different media, contents, contacts, and contexts combined? And which social domains and media ensembles did they tap into? Given our choice of sources, individual media repertoires will obviously be at the centre of our investigation, but we shall also examine how these repertoires are connected with different media ensembles—though it will not be possible to relate our findings to the entire media environment of the period 1750–1850 within the scope of this article.²⁸

From the large number of Danish memoirs and autobiographies, we have selected six sources that enable us to examine the potential of studying the media repertoires of individual children from different backgrounds. We begin with two girls from fairly privileged families, followed by two boys who grew up in poor urban families, before returning to Anton Nielsen and another boy, who spent their childhood years in the countryside.

Two Privileged Girls and Their Media

In this section, we present two privileged girls who grew up in academic homes. These cases provide insights into reading practices in families where books and reading played an important role, but they also reveal different approaches adopted by parents to familiarize their daughters with reading culture. Benedicte Arnesen-Kall (1813–1895) grew up in Copenhagen. Her father, Paul Arnesen, was a philologist who taught part-time at a civic school but was primarily engaged in his philological studies. Christine Daugaard (1831–1917) was born a few decades later, and, as the daughter of Jacob Brøgger Daugaard, the pastor in the parish of Thorstrup, she grew up in a parsonage in the remote heathlands of Western Jutland. Both girls received their early childhood education at home. Christine seems to have been solely home-schooled, which was common in privileged families, especially for girls. Benedicte also received her early education at home but was later enrolled in an esteemed civic school in Copenhagen.²⁹ Later in life, both women became authors. Benedicte Arnesen-Kall wrote several novels and

short stories, while Christine Daugaard mainly published historic and religious poems and psalms. The following account is based on descriptions in Benedicte Arnesen-Kall's memoirs and in Christine Daugaard's biography of her father.³⁰

Christine remembers her parents as dedicated to her and her siblings' education, and she recalls that they were introduced to a wide range of media and books from different genres in the parsonage. ABCs and picture books along with collections of fables and poems, natural histories, history books and different kinds of magazines all formed part of the Daugaard children's book collection. Works by the eighteenth-century author Ludvig Holberg and nineteenth-century authors Adam Oehlenschläger, Steen Steensen Blicher, and B.S. Ingemann were prominent—ranging from poems and plays to short stories, historic novels, and comedies—and appeared next to a number of translations of foreign (primarily German) eighteenth-century writers such as J.H. Campe, C.F. Gellert, and G.C. Raff.³¹ Christine describes the confusion she felt when reading an illustrated world history book in which the Danish population was depicted extremely unfavourably. Why did the pictures show the Swedish invasion in 1700 and not the brave popular resistance of the earlier Danish-Swedish wars? It was not until much later in life that she could attribute the selection of motifs to the German origin of the book.³²

The books in the children's collection were mainly, but not exclusively, in Danish. Christine was taught French by her mother from an old copy of Madame le Prince du Beaumont's *Magazin des enfans*, even though the language in this text was somewhat outdated.³³ She also remembers her brother, Hans, reading a volume of Buffon's *Natural History* in English.³⁴ Christine describes how she and her siblings had special marks to indicate which books belonged to one of them personally and which ones were shared.

Christine's clerical family had limited financial means and books were not always easily accessible in their remote location.³⁵ They only took occasional trips to larger towns and Christine gives no account of visits to bookshops, but she does mention that she once bought a songbook from an itinerant vendor passing by the parsonage.³⁶ The Daugaard children also received books as gifts or borrowed them from friends, relatives, or the circulation

library in Varde, the nearest market town. Thorstrup parish even had its own small library and, according to Christine, new books would always pass through the hands of the pastor's family before entering the library collection.³⁷ Other reading materials were accessed via her father's subscription to a literary magazine and a local newspaper and through his membership of the Society for the Proper Use of Freedom of the Press, from which he would regularly receive publications.³⁸

Christine vividly describes a range of family activities centred around literature. The children memorized and recited poems and hymn verses, and they rehearsed seasonal hymns for Christmas and Easter.³⁹ The parents would often read aloud or tell stories for the children's enjoyment; the mother made up her own stories, and the father introduced some of the great classics at the dinner table:

The time of the day when my father read to us from *Peder Paars*, one of Holberg's Comedies, or from *The Odyssey*, was usually at dinner. He finished eating before the rest of us. After he finished his first course, he took the book and read until the main course was served, most often even some time after dinner.⁴⁰

Despite their relatively limited means, the family did not approach books with a particular solemnity and used them for purposes other than just reading. Christine's brother, Hans, was allowed to colour the engravings in his copy of Buffon's *Natural History*, and Christine also describes how the volumes by Schiller were particularly wellsuited to serve as building blocks for a homemade stage for a shadow play. In order to create a new picture book together, Christine and her siblings made their own illustrations and cut out pictures from old broad sheets and books.⁴¹ These examples show how children transformed and created diverse media to fit their own needs and tastes.

Christine Daugaard's media repertoire included both traditional children's books and titles that would be perceived as adult literature. Nevertheless, her parents were usually rather careful in their selection of reading material for her. Some books and texts were acquired for entertainment and others for educative purposes. Christine recalls that her parents once tracked down a transcript of a specific poem by Adam Oehlenschläger because they

thought it would be suitable and entertaining for their children. However, according to Christine, the handwritten format distracted from the actual reading experience. When reading aloud, her parents would also leave out inappropriate passages or express their disapproval of the offensive behavior of villainous characters, such as Odysseus's slaughtering of both men and women on his return to Ithaca.⁴²

Evidently, Christine Daugaard's parents were very active in selecting and curating good and appropriate media for their children and these interactions affirm their attentiveness to the children's education. Daugaard describes a family setting in which oral, visual, and written texts and narratives were shared among all members of the family and played an important role in daily social life across the generations.

In Benedicte Arnesen-Kall's home in the Danish capital of Copenhagen, the approach to children's reading was rather different. Despite the academic environment, Benedicte does not recall any attempt to teach her to read in her early childhood. On the contrary, she describes how she would sneak into the forbidden territory of her father's study to examine the folios on the shelves. The different shapes and looks of the volumes inspired her to fantasize about the stories they might contain: "I thus imagined, with the capability of my childish mind, their stories, and gradually I assigned a certain content to each of the books on the bottom shelf of the bookcase."⁴³

Benedicte also recalls her parents' storytelling. Her father told her about Greek mythology and Icelandic sagas, though he was too distracted by his work to consider whether these stories were suitable for young girls. Likewise, she remembers, in detail, a particular situation when her sister was ill and her mother read aloud to both sisters at the bedside.⁴⁴

Benedicte learned to read with guidance from her nanny, Dorte, at the age of seven.⁴⁵ As an adult, she considered this unreasonably late, and in her memoirs she explains her parents' negligence on this matter as partly due to her ability to entertain herself and partly due to her father's preoccupation with his studies.⁴⁶ In any case, after learning to read, Benedicte quickly developed an unquenchable thirst for books. She describes her initial years as a reader as blissful. Her parents did not monitor her reading and she

would consume any text with an open heart. She recounts going into her father's study, climbing one of the chairs and hitting the books on the top shelf with a stick until one of them fell down. "It wasn't a question of selection—whatever fell down ... I would seize and carry away, tiptoeing to the little wooden bench in the nursery where I would scroll through and devour one book after another."⁴⁷ Among these books were works by the acknowledged Danish writers Oehlenschläger, Baggesen, and Holberg and a Danish translation of *Don Quixote*. Benedicte read them all, skipping the passages she did not like or understand and returning to her favourite sections again and again.⁴⁸

Several similarities can be found in the stories of Christine and Benedicte. Both cases provide insights into the crucial role played by parents in determining their children's interactions with books and reading; and in both academic families, print media featured prominently. While Christine's parents introduced her to a carefully selected curriculum, however, Benedicte seems to have been the main agent in creating her own media repertoire. Both cases also describe a seemingly instinctive attraction to the world of books and a continuous urge to discover new reading material. And although they lived in different times, the media repertoires of both girls included a similar selection of genres and specific Danish authors. Christine's account also reminds us of how both geography and financial resources could restrict one's access to books, even in relatively privileged families.

The Media Repertoires of Two Poor Boys in the City

In this section we present the cases of two boys who grew up in fairly poor families in urban environments around 1800. Thomas Overskou (1798–1873) and Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) both highlight their own talents and ambitions when explaining how they gained access to varied media repertoires and positions among the cultural elite as mature men. In his autobiography *Af mit liv og min tid* (*Of my life and my time*, 1868), the elderly Thomas Overskou provides a detailed description of growing up in poverty in Copenhagen at the turn of the nineteenth century before becoming an actor, an author, and the first chronicler of the history of Danish theatre. Hans Christian Andersen wrote three autobiographical texts, the first as a young man, and in all three texts, he includes detailed descriptions of the

media repertoire of a poor boy growing up in Odense, Denmark's largest provincial town at the time.⁴⁹ Since Thomas Overskou provides a thorough description of his childhood reading and since his autobiography has thus far not been used as a source to shed light on children's reading culture, we will draw primarily on his account, supplemented by Andersen's description of his media repertoire in Odense.

Thomas's illiterate father, who worked in a sugar factory, was reluctant to spend money on his son's early education. In contrast, his mother, a hardworking servant, argued that her son was not stupid and should have access to the best education they could afford, even as a young boy. Despite his mother's support, Thomas's formal education was very limited, and the least important part of his media repertoire seems to have been books intended for children, such as schoolbooks. His parents ended up paying for him to attend a school for less privileged children, and decades later, he was still able to recall the titles they read: "We learned Balle's [catechism] exposition, a short bible history and Thonboe's short geography by heart, read Thieme's *Første Næring for den sunde Menneskeforstand* [First nourishment for the healthy human mind], we calculated according to Cramer's book of calculation That was all."⁵⁰ Although Thomas attended school for five years, between the ages of 7 and 12, these were the only books published for children mentioned in his autobiography. However, he was able to access books published for adults, he produced his own narratives and performances, and he appropriated a number of media for his own and other children's use.

Indeed, the variety of adult media that Thomas consumed is remarkable. Having experienced the bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807, his family went for a walk to watch the British troops and, on the way home, nine-year-old Thomas found "a small Danish Dictionary published in England for the use of the soldiers, and for a long time I saved it as a sacred object, but without thinking of using it for my own education."⁵¹ He did not actually read the book; he simply kept it as a kind of relic, a valuable object in itself. Around this time, he also began to seek out newspapers. Rumours were spreading about the Napoleonic wars, but Thomas wanted to know more and asked his father to bring newspapers home from the factory. Despite his lack of confidence in his son's intellectual abilities, his father brought newspapers home and, when he realized that Thomas could

actually read, he took him to meet his colleagues on their days off on Sundays.

At this point, Thomas was confronted with the media ensemble that the adult workers used for entertainment: narratives, games, songs, and jokes—all of them orally expressed. His father's co-workers began lending him books, including a worn-out collection of chapbooks, which Thomas particularly enjoyed: "I was often happy, sitting alone in the small room at the back of our house, immersing myself in all the chivalrous splendor and romance which appeared for me in this priceless book."⁵² Alongside popular literature, Thomas also gained access to works by authors who had garnered the praise and respect of literary critics. For instance, Thomas states that he read Ludvig Holberg's comedies repeatedly when he was around 11. His autobiography also includes a detailed description of a life-changing aesthetic experience that he had when reading the newly published poems of romantic poet Adam Oehlenschläger. When he was invited to the home and library of the accountant at the factory, a whole world of books suddenly opened up for him.

Apart from his engagement with printed textbooks and fiction for both children and adults, Thomas created his own stories in a number of genres and media. He invented narratives for his fellow pupils, including a fairy tale about a hole in the ground that led to an enchanted land of sunshine, exotic fruits, animals, and flowers.⁵³ In addition, Thomas's neighbour, a carpenter's wife, had seen some plays at the Royal Theatre and was able to tell him about the storylines, the actors, the decorations, and how a theatre worked. Thomas longed to watch a play, but, as part of a family that could not always afford food, paying for a ticket was unthinkable. Instead, he read the theatre posters in the street and imagined what the performances at the Royal Theatre would be like, based on the information on the posters.⁵⁴ He also became an amateur stage director himself when babysitting in the home of the accountant from his father's company. When the accountant and his wife went to the public theatre, Thomas and the children of the family turned the living room into their own theatre, using furniture as stage sets and costumes made from clothes they had at hand. They based their improvised performances on combinations of plays they had seen, read, or heard about, and they also repeatedly enacted their own version of the

medieval French play *La farce de maître Pathelin*, which they knew from an oral retelling by the children's father.⁵⁵

Thomas's media repertoire thus consisted of textbooks for children, books published for adults, newspapers, chapbooks, a wide range of oral narratives, retellings of plays, appropriations of posters, and improvised drama in collaboration with other children. He used narratives primarily to entertain and educate himself, but aesthetic experiences were also part of his reading culture. When accessing material, Thomas often depended on adult support, but he also invented narratives and created his own ways of transmitting stories by expanding or changing existing forms, or by using them in new ways.

Several striking similarities can be found between the media repertoires and reading cultures of Thomas Overskou and Hans Christian Andersen. Both were exposed to, interested in, and created a number of performative media: they listened to oral storytelling and songs, they went to the theatre, and they began to invent, present, and perform stories themselves at a young age. Hans Christian's father made a puppet theatre for his son, and Hans Christian wrote the plays, designed the stage décor, and created the puppets' costumes out of leftover material from his father's shoemaker's workshop.⁵⁶ He also befriended the man in charge of theatre posters in Odense and received posters in payment for helping him so that he could bring them home for inspiration.⁵⁷ When inventing, remediating, adapting, and performing, Thomas and Hans Christian were seen and heard by adults, who noticed their talents and ambitions and began to support their informal and formal education.

When explaining their move up through society in retrospect, both men emphasize a combination of dependence and agency and of lucky coincidences and strong personal impetus. Thomas Overskou mentions that, as a child, he was frustrated by the lack of books and advice on what to read. He hoped, however, that his desire for knowledge and his "meticulous scrutiny and unstoppable diligence" when searching for books would help him achieve the knowledge he thought would lead to "an independent, free, and honorable life."⁵⁸ In Andersen's case, the money he earned by singing for wealthy families paid for an important move: at only 14 years of age, Andersen left the provincial town of Odense, having convinced his mother

that he had to relocate to a city with more opportunities—and a better theatre. For both poor young men, the theatre was one of the rare places they could encounter the influential elite in a professional setting. This would be decisive for their future careers.

Boys and Books in the Danish Countryside

Whereas Overskou and Andersen, despite their humble backgrounds, had all the various media of the city at their fingertips, the situation of boys growing up in rural environments was quite different. Two autobiographies offer insights on their experiences: those of Anton Nielsen and Peter Kier. Anton Nielsen's autobiography, written in 1894 and entitled *Landsbyliv i Trediverne. Barndomsminder (Village life in the thirties: childhood memories)*, was published when Nielsen (1827–1897) was an elderly man and could look back at his career as a teacher and author of popular stories about the Danish countryside.⁵⁹ As the son of a schoolteacher, he was not typical of the village boys, whose fathers were usually peasants, cottagers, or agricultural labourers. Nevertheless, Anton's detailed account helps us understand not only his individual media repertoire but also the media ensemble that he shared with other children in his village. Peter Kier (1771–1834) was born as a peasant's son but managed to climb the social ladder by working first as a schoolteacher and then studying theology and finally becoming a parish pastor.⁶⁰ We shall first examine the autobiography of Anton Nielsen before turning to that of Peter Kier.

Anton Nielsen was taught to read by his mother. As a young woman, she had served in a parsonage with many books and cultural activities—not unlike the parsonage in which Christine Dugaard grew up—and she would often use this clerical home as a model and compare young Anton to the pastor's oldest son. Anton describes how it was easy for him to learn to read, around the age of five or six, using a copy of “Hallager's primer” inherited from his older brother. This primer was printed on strong writing paper and illustrated with “horrible pictures,” which meant that Anton developed rather peculiar ideas of what these animals actually looked like.⁶¹ When he began at Reerslev village school, Anton and the other children were trained in reading and rote learning based on the mandatory catechism exposition by Bishop Balle (which was also read and remembered by Thomas Overskou around 30 years earlier).⁶² The village school thus stands

out as a social domain with a very specific curriculum and media ensemble, shared by both boys and girls.

At home, in his poor household, a small selection of books from his father's time at teacher-training college was available: a few philosophy books, a couple of German travel accounts, and some teacher-training textbooks.⁶³ Anton recalls that family activities included storytelling and, in particular, singing. The family sang hymns in the morning, but most of the time, his father would sing other sorts of songs and ballads, including drinking songs. The lyrics were found in handwritten songbooks. Anton's father learned the songs by heart and performed them at home and at school, and in this way, he passed them on to both his own children and his pupils.⁶⁴ One day—a day that Anton recalls in detail as a special event—a member of his mother's clerical “family” gave him a songbook as a present. This was the first book Anton owned, and it made him forget the tediousness of his job guarding geese, as he would “live inside the book from morning till eve,” gradually learning all the songs by heart.⁶⁵

By the time Anton was about 10 years old, he had become “a true devourer of novels.” Having already read the books in his own home, he started reading books he came across in the neighbouring farms. Here, he would often find Bibles and hymnbooks to read for pleasure, especially accounts from the Old Testament—though only if nothing else was available. Soon, however, he realized that many farmers also had a chapbook or two, which allowed him to engage with different forms and new narratives: “When we were visiting a peasant, I immediately looked for the shelves, and when I discovered a book, I said: ‘Oh, please, may I have a look at that book?’ After that, I asked: ‘May I also borrow that book?’”⁶⁶

Anton's favourite chapbook was the burlesque story of *Uglspil* (in German: *Till Eulenspiegel*), closely followed by *Holger Danske* (*Holger the Dane*) and *Marcolfus*, and a number of other chapbooks from what can be recognized as the trans-European *bibliothèque bleue*.⁶⁷ These books were complemented by Saxo's comprehensive history of (medieval) Denmark and Snorre Sturlason's Islandic chronicles—books that had been donated in new translations to school libraries across the country, including the school in Reerslev. The first proper novel Anton encountered was a Danish translation of German author August Lafontaine's *Die Familie von Halden* (*The*

Halden Family, 1797–1798), which his father had borrowed from a colleague. Anton’s father would read it aloud in the long winter evenings to all members of the family, causing Anton’s mother to shed many tears, just as the author had intended. Later, Anton Nielsen recalls, “I read the long book myself, and more than once.”⁶⁸

The local pastor’s adult daughter helped Anton to discover even more books. Her father was a member of a reading society, mainly for the sake of his daughters, and whenever she received a new “reading bag” with three or four new books, she passed one of these books on to Anton. This made Anton “skip and dance.” The short lending period was no problem, as he “read fast, and once I had a novel, I forgot everything else, play as well as food, and spent every single minute of my spare time devouring the book.”⁶⁹

Anton Nielsen mentions a number of authors and genres that he read (thanks to this borrowing arrangement) when he was 12–15 years old: “Carit Etlar’s early stories, Bloch Suhr’s short stories, Crusenstolpe’s political novels, of which I only understood little, and Rise’s archives.”⁷⁰ At one point, his father interfered in his reading practice and demanded to see all his books prior to his reading them. As far as Nielsen remembers, this was because of a novel by Paul de Kock, which was considered controversial at the time. In retrospect, Anton Nielsen does not believe his morals were affected by his reading, but he was scared by “bloody scenes and torments,” which triggered his imagination and kept him awake at night.⁷¹ Anton did not tell his parents about this, as he feared it would lead them to stop his reading activities. Books were clearly important for Anton when he was alone, but they also played an important part in his interaction with parents, teachers, and friends. He describes how the children tested each other on rote learning—“It was also a pastime or a game”—and he recalls how they would make jokes and laugh when struggling with a particularly complicated paragraph in Bishop Balle’s exposition.⁷²

Finally, for another description of a rural boyhood with books, we turn to Peter Kier, born in 1771 as the oldest son of a peasant from Øster Løgum village in Southern Jutland (at that time, the northernmost part of Schleswig). His autobiography, written in 1823–1834 and intended for his children, was in German, the administrative language of the region, even

though his mother tongue was Danish.⁷³ In many respects, his memories of his childhood media are similar to Anton's experiences 50 years later.

Peter's mother died when he was just four. He grew up with his grieving father and a younger brother, and he recalls his father's storytelling, mainly of Bible stories and fairy tales at bedtime. As an adult clergyman, Peter Kier commented on the numerous "superstitions" shared in the household.⁷⁴ He was sent to the village school when he was six, and after some help from his father finding a good teacher, he learned to read. The young boy made his way through the well-known titles of the religious curriculum used in schools: a primer and small schoolbooks ("with miserable pictures"), followed by the catechism exposition, hymnbooks, and later the Bible, in which Peter read the stories of the Old Testament and the Book of Revelations with particular enjoyment.⁷⁵

In his father's and their neighbours' homes, Peter encountered other books, and he recalls that an illustrated Dutch copy of *Doctor Faustus* was particularly memorable due to its pictures. He often preferred reading to playing, and also enjoyed carving wooden "self-invented" figures. When he was almost nine, he was expected to work more and spend less time at school. During winters, however, he was introduced to mathematical textbooks, which he enjoyed immensely. Later, he was allowed to receive more advanced instruction in math in a nearby village, and in his autobiography he lists the authors of his calculation books, which suggest the importance to him of each of these books.⁷⁶ Peter's teachers and instructors made a great impact on him: he despised the bad ones and admired the good ones. When an agricultural surveyor and his assistant, a schoolteacher, stayed at his father's farm for a summer, their company and stimulating conversations made Peter feel that "everything had changed."⁷⁷

Even as the young boy's experience with different kinds of books expanded, religious texts were still in regular use at home and at school. Peter spent a lot of time rote learning the catechism exposition, but he found this difficult and far less edifying than reading hymns and prayers, which he also learned by heart but enjoyed much more. He even composed a song by himself at the age of 11.⁷⁸ Like Anton, Peter had a clear memory of the first book given to him as a personal present: in his case, a German grammar book from his father.⁷⁹ At the age of 14, Peter was employed as a schoolteacher

for the young children in the village. His father took great pride in this, though he died shortly afterwards. Peter's interest in reading continued, and he mentions Quiersfeld's *Himmliche Gartengesellschaft* (*Heavenly Garden Party*) as a title that had a deep impact on him around this time.⁸⁰ With his own modest income, he was now, from the age of 15, in a position to purchase books himself. He travelled to the towns of Aabenraa and Haderslev to buy books and have them bound; he mentions that he was attracted to topics such as geography, world history, navigation, and astronomy. He acquired some books through a sailor's wife and other books, including Latin titles, at an auction sale in the neighbouring parish, following the death of the pastor.⁸¹ Peter Kier thus managed to extend and curate his repertoire of reading material, combining textbooks and fiction, older texts and new publications, illustrated books for adults, and texts in German and Dutch as well as in Danish. As part of his daily life as a boy, books were selected, bought, received as gifts, read in solitude, read aloud, discussed, and contemplated—and clearly played an incredibly important role in his childhood.

Conclusion

What new aspects of children's reading culture between 1750 and 1850 can be discovered and investigated when taking the concepts *media repertoire* and *media ensemble* as a point of departure for the study of autobiographical texts? Keeping in mind that our cases only represent a minority of children—who, as adults, were in positions that allowed them to write an autobiography—we will now present our key findings.

Firstly, adapting Hepp and Hasebrink's concepts and approach invites the researcher to study how children in specific historical environments composed their own individual repertoires of books and other media. Our six case studies reveal six different media repertoires and have allowed us to identify a number of striking and surprising similarities. All the children, including those from less privileged backgrounds, had—or managed to acquire—access to a variety of narratives, genres, and media. They encountered catechisms, readers, and other textbooks at school, but also a lot more. Some children came across canonical poetry in books, but more often they encountered lyrics in songs, hymns, and ballads—whether listened to or learned by heart and performed. Some children encountered

the dramatic genre in their own theatrical performances, including puppet plays, shadow theatre, and performances in school, and many of them enjoyed Holberg's comedies (not in the theatre but at home). Our case studies reveal that several of the children experienced literature at a very early age, including texts not intended for them or books published in languages they did barely understand. In many cases, books stand out as the most important medium (though this might also be because several of them became writers themselves and attached special meaning to books and schooling), but it is clear that narratives were also experienced through other media.

Secondly, the focus on media repertoires has offered us a fuller picture of the children's own involvement in and experiences with activities related to reading and media usage. Questions concerning the social life of books, including specific questions about "when, where, how, and with whom" books were read, can suddenly be answered. In the autobiographies, adults recall their childhood encounters with specific titles, the materiality of single copies, the strong desire to find new reading material, the joyful bodily experience of reading in particular situations, and the pleasure of receiving, borrowing, or owning specific books. For the insights that they offer on children's experiences of reading, published autobiographies are only matched by the extremely rare contemporary letters and diaries written by children.

Thirdly, the records of different children's reading cultures also highlight the various power dynamics that existed between children and adults when curating book and media repertoires. Poor children in particular had to overcome child-adult and class hierarchies and depended heavily on the goodwill of more privileged adults. The autobiographies reveal these children's agency, inventiveness, and perseverance in seeking out books, finding support, and performing texts themselves. In this process, the children encountered adults who directly or indirectly opposed their desires and needs, but they also met adults who actively supported them and provided them with access to information, entertainment, and aesthetic experiences. Decades later, the children reflected on the importance of both types of adult in their formation as readers.

Fourthly, when studying the media repertoires of individual children and their interactions with different adults, we have an opportunity to trace the contours of the diverse *media ensembles* that emerge in specific social domains. Having examined six different cases, we can only highlight the potential of conducting further studies using the same approach. Rich insights emerge through an exploration of the ensembles of textbooks, maps, and wall charts in village schools, children's encounters with chapbooks, songbooks, and broadsheets in rural households, the newspaper reading, storytelling, and singing among factory workers, and the varied literary and performative culture around books and prints in nineteenth-century parsonages.

Childhood memoirs thus encourage researchers of reading and children's literature to look beyond national borders, specific media, established canons, and intended readerships in order to learn more about children's reading practices and media repertoires from the perspective of the readers themselves.

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Notes

¹ Anton Nielsen, *Landsbyliv i Trediverne. Barndomsminder* (Odense: Milo'ske Boghandels Forlag, 1894), 142: "var jeg saa glad, saa jeg hoppede og dansede hjem"; 145: "en komplet Romansluger." (All quotations are translated into English by the authors of this article).

² Important exceptions are Matthew O. Grenby, *The Child Reader, 1740–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Patricia Crain, *Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

³ The research project "Children and books—enterprises and encounters. Studies in the production, uses, and experiences of books for children in Denmark c. 1790–1850" was funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research 2016–2019. See Charlotte Appel and Nina Christensen, "Follow the Child, Follow the Books: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches to a Child-Centred History of Danish Children's Literature 1790–1850," *International Research in Children's Literature* 10, no. 2 (2017): 194–212.

⁴ The most important surveys are Inger Simonsen, *Den danske Børnebog i det 19: Aarhundrede* (København: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1942) and Torben Weinreich, *Historien om børnelitteratur: Danske børnelitteratur gennem 400 år* (København: Branner & Korch, 2006).

⁵ In "Media and Narrative," Marie-Laure Ryan distinguishes between "transmissive media," such as the book and the radio, and "semiotic media," such as language, sound, and image, among other modes of expression; see *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge 2005) 288–92. For a recent example of research interested in children's cross-media practices in different historical contexts (albeit concerned with optical toys that are not mentioned in the sources for the present article), see Meredith

Bak, *Playful Visions. Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

⁶ Arianne Baggerman, "The Cultural Universe of a Dutch Child: Otto van Eck and His Literature," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 31 (1997): 129–34. On "The World and Works of the Nelson Brothers," with Karen Sánchez-Eppler as a leading figure, see: <https://www.ats.a.mherst.edu/childhood/exhibits/show/nelson/home/>.

⁷ Appel and Christensen, "Follow the Child, Follow the Books," 203–6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹ A seminal article on the difficulties of getting close to children in history is Ludmilla Jordanova, "Children in History: Concepts of Nature and Society," in *Children, Parents and Politics*, ed. Geoffery Scarre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3–23. A good example of what is possible when it comes to privileged children, based on rich sources, also in relation to media use, is Lynne Vallone, *Becoming Victoria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ See the exceptions listed in note 2.

¹¹ For a highly informative introduction to European research traditions relating to so-called ego-documents, including traditional skepticism as well as different phases of "reevaluation," see Michael Mascuch, Rudolf Dekker, and Arianne Baggerman, "Egodocuments and History: A Short Account of the Longue Durée," *The Historian* 78, no. 1 (2016): 11–56.

¹² There are several examples of scholarly work on Andersen that draw on his autobiographies. The most recent is Jens Andersen, *Hans Christian Andersen*, trans. Tiina Nunnally (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2005). A nine-volume history of Danish Literature, *Dansk Litteraturhistorie*, by Søren Kaspersen et al. (København: Gyldendal, 1983–85), inspired by social history and the history of mentalities, applied a much broader definition of literature than hitherto seen and included autobiographies as sources. In the fifth volume, Martin Zerlang uses autobiographical texts to examine reading culture, especially in the countryside, which is also the case in Martin Zerlang, Lis Toft Andersen, and Bjarne Thorup Thomsen. *En selvskreven historie. Om erindringsbøger og dagbøger af bønder, håndværkere og arbejdere i Danmark* (København: Samleren, 1982).

¹³ On developments in cultural history, particularly the strong interest in micro-history, see the almost paradigmatic Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989) and Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019). For a discussion of how this resulted in a "second wave" of reevaluations of autobiographical sources, see Mascuch et al., "Egodocuments and History," 24–34.

¹⁴ See for example Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2015), especially Max Saunders, "Life-Writing, Cultural Memory, and Literary Studies," 321–32. See also Mascuch et al., "Egodocuments and History," 34–47, concerning the third and fourth "waves" of reevaluation.

¹⁵ See Lilian Munk Rösing, *At læse barnet: Litteratur og psykolanalyse* (København: Samleren, 2001) for a theoretical framework and thorough analysis of adults' perspectives on childhood experiences in memoirs by James Joyce and Walter Benjamin, among others.

¹⁶ Abigail Williams, *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ The concept of agency has been much discussed in childhood studies. See Allison James, "Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials," *American Anthropologist* 109, no. 2 (2007): 261–72, and, in relation to children's literature, see Nina Christensen "Agency," in *Keywords for Children's Literature*, eds. Philip Nel et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 10–13. Recent critical discussions of agency include Sarah Maza, "The Kids Aren't All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (Oct. 2020): 1261–85, and Spyros Spyrou, *Disclosing Childhoods: Research and Knowledge Production for a Critical Childhood Studies* (London: Palgrave, 2018).

¹⁸ An important bibliography of published autobiographies and memoirs by authors born before 1790 is Harald Ilsoe, *555 danske selvbiografier og erindringer: En kronologisk fører med referater til selvbiografier forfattede af personer, født før 1790* (København: C.A. Reitzel, 1987). Ilsoe lists 50 publications by people born 1770–1779 and 61 by people born 1780–1789. We can thus cautiously estimate that approximately 50 autobiographies were published each year. Information on media use in childhood in these autobiographies is bound to vary and may in some cases be poor or absent. We are most grateful to the late Harald Ilsoe for his useful suggestions concerning autobiographies at an early stage in our research project and to Per Dahl for drawing our attention to Thomas Overskou as a possible case.

¹⁹ Two key contributions are Uwe Hasebrink and Andreas Hepp, "How to Research Cross-Media Practices? Investigating Media Repertoires and Media Ensembles," *Convergence* 23, no. 4 (2017): 362–77, and Andreas Hepp and Uwe Hasebrink, "Researching Transforming Communications in Times of Deep Mediatization: A Figurational Approach," in *Communicative Figurations: Transforming Communications in Times of Deep Mediatization*, eds. Andreas Hepp, Andreas Breiter, and Uwe Hasebrink (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 18–48.

²⁰ For the phrase "audiences are inherently cross-media," the authors refer to Kim Christian Schröder, "Audiences are Inherently Cross-Media: Audience Studies and the Cross-Media Challenge," *Communication Management Quarterly* 18, no. 6 (2011): 5–27.

²¹ Concerning "deep mediatization," the authors refer to Nick Couldy and Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017) and Sonia Livingstone, "On the Mediation of Everything," *Journal of Communication* 59, no. 1 (2009): 1–18.

²² Hepp and Hasebrink, "Researching Transforming Communications," 28. The reference in relation to media ensembles is Hermann Bausinger, "Media, technology and daily life," *Media, Culture and Society* 6, no. 4 (1984): 349. The reference in relation to media repertoire is Uwe Hasebrink and Julia Popp, "Media Repertoires as a Result of Selective Media Use: A Conceptual Approach to the Analysis of Patterns of Exposure," *Communications* 31, no. 2 (2006): 369–87.

²³ Hepp and Hasebrink, “Researching Transforming Communications,” 28, and Hasebrink and Hepp, “How to Research,” 367.

²⁴ Hasebrink and Hepp, “How to Research,” 367–68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 366, 371.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 371. A media ensemble thus neither equates to the intersection of the media repertoires of the individuals involved nor to the total sum of individual repertoires.

²⁸ Concerning the entire media environment or landscape, albeit with an outspoken focus on written and printed media, important outlines can be found in a four-volume history of Danish media: Klaus Bruhn Jensen, ed., *Dansk mediehistorie*, 4 vols, 2nd ed. (København: Samfundslitteratur, 2012).

²⁹ The multifaceted pattern of schools and schooling in the first half of the nineteenth century in Denmark is thoroughly examined in Christian Larsen, Erik Nørr, and Pernille Sonne, *Da skolen tog form 1780–1850. Dansk skolehistorie*, vol. 2 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013).

³⁰ Benedicte Arnesen-Kall, *Livserindringer 1813–1857* (København: A.F. Høst & Søn's Forlag, 1889) and Christine Daugaard, *Biskop Daugaard. En Mindebog* (København: K. Schönbergs Boghandel, 1896).

³¹ Daugaard, *Biskop Daugaard*, 100–110.

³² *Ibid.*, 104.

³³ Beaumont's magazine was first printed in 1757. Christine's family probably used one of the numerous later editions. The magazine was also published in Danish (from 1763).

³⁴ Daugaard, *Biskop Daugaard*, 100–104.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 102–6, 109.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 105, 113.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 114–15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 107: “Den Tid paa Dagen, da min Fader forelæste af Peder Paars, af Holbergs Komedier eller af Odysseen var i Almindelighed ved Middagsbordet. Han var før færdig med at spise end vi andre. Naar han havde spist af første Ret, tog han Bogen og læste, indtil Eftermaden var anrettet; som oftest endnu et Stykke efter Bordet.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 101–2, 104.

⁴² Ibid., 107–108.

⁴³ Arnesen-Kall, *Linsærindeinger 1813–1857*, 12: “Jeg forestillede mig nemlig, efter min Barneforstands Indskydelser, hvad der stod i dem, og efterhaanden fik jeg tildelt et bestemt Indhold til hver af de store Bøger, der stode paa den nederste Hylde af Reolen.”

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14–15.

⁴⁵ In Benedicte’s account, it was the above-mentioned act of her mother reading at her bedside that motivated her to learn to read. According to her account, she initiated reading practice with her nanny the following day and, within a week, she was able to read. This is an example of information that was probably exaggerated in retrospect. However, we have no reason to doubt other parts of her narrative, such as her nanny’s involvement.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 13–14.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 19: “Om noget Valg var der—som alt sagt—ikke Tale. Hvad der faldt ned ... bemægtigede jeg mig og listede mig bort dermed til den lille træbænk i Krogen i Barnekammeret, hvor jeg gennembladede og slugte den ene Bog efter den anden.”

⁴⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁹ Klaus P. Mortensen, “Indledning. H.C. Andersens selvbiografier,” in Hans Christian Andersen, *Selvbiografier*, vol. I (København: Gyldendal, 2007), 13–49, and Jens Andersen: *Hans Christian Andersen* (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2005).

⁵⁰ Thomas Overskou, *Af mit Liv og min Tid*. 2nd ed. (København: V. Pio, 1915), vol. 1, 37: ”Vi lærte Balles Lærebog, en kortfattet Bibelhistorie og Thonboes lille Geografi udenad; læste Thiemes ’Første Næring for den sunde Menneskeforstand’ indenad; regnede efter Cramers Regnebog Det var Alt.”

⁵¹ Ibid., 57: ”en lille dansk Ord- og Glosebog, trykt i England til Brug for Soldaterne, hvilken jeg længe gjemte som en Helligdom, men uden endnu at falde paa at benytte den til nogen Selvundervisning.”

⁵² Ibid., 63: ”Jeg var ofte lykkelig ved at sidde alene i vor lille Bagstue og drømme mig ind i al den ridderlige Herlighed og Romantik, som oplode sig for mig i denne kostelige Bog.”

⁵³ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 119–20.

⁵⁶ Hans Christian Andersen, *Mit Livs Eventyr*, in *Selvbiografier* (København: Gyldendal 2007), vol. II, 24.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁸ Overskou, *Af mit Liv*, vol. 1, 9: ”om jeg dog ikke nok med de Midler, som gunstige Tilfælde eller ivrig Søgen bragte mig i hænde, skulde kunne hitte paa ved egen omhyggelige Granskning og uafladelige Flid at komme til mit Maal.”

⁵⁹ Nielsen, *Landsbyliv* (see note 1). Anton Nielsen’s first publication was *Tre Fortællinger* (Three Tales) from 1864. Nielsen was the author of around 20 books, many of which were based on his own experiences.

⁶⁰ Several accounts describing boyhood in the countryside can be found. Some were published by the authors themselves, like Anton Nielsen’s, while others were discovered and published later due to their relevance to local history, as was the case with Peter Kier’s memoirs; see below. Most of these authors had experienced upward social mobility (which increased the chances of their manuscripts surviving), but some also died as peasants, such as Søren Pedersen Havrebjerg (1770–1839); see Karen Schousboe, ed., *En fæstebondes liv* (Odense: Landbohistorisk Selskab, 1983). Havrebjerg left behind a composite collection of diaries, account books, and memoirs, reminding us that many memoirs were probably based on written sources. The distinction between contemporary sources like diaries and later accounts can often be blurred. A well-known and unusual diary, written by a Danish peasant boy, Severin Veiersøe (1814–1897), from the age of 10, is based on a clean and probably partly edited manuscript, written by the adult Veiersøe, who became a schoolteacher; see *En landsbydrengs og -degns dagbog 1824–38*, ed. Povl Schmidt (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2003). The repertoire documented in this diary strongly resembles the accounts by Anton Nielsen and Peter Kier.

⁶¹ Nielsen, *Landsbyliv*, 146: “en Abc af Hallager;” “gyselige Billeder.” It is not possible to say exactly which publication he is referring to. In fact, to our knowledge, all of Hallager’s primers were unillustrated, so Anton Nielsen could be mixing up two different books. On Hallager as a publisher of books for children, see Charlotte Appel, “Titler, typografi og andre tilpasninger. Morten Hallager som mediebevidst udgiver af bøger for børn i 1700-tallets sidste årtier,” *Fund og Forskning* 59 (2020): 71–117.

⁶² Nielsen, *Landsbyliv*, 147. On the widespread use of this book in Danish elementary schools, see Larsen et al., *Da skolen tog form*, 38–42, 83–84.

⁶³ Nielsen, *Landsbyliv*, 143. This part of his father’s media repertoire is an interesting indication of the media ensemble at Danish teacher-training colleges in the 1820s.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 88–91.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 88: “thi jeg levede i Sangbogen fra Morgen til Aften.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 143: “Naar vi var i Besøg hos en Bonde, kiggede jeg strax efter Hylderne, og naar jeg saa opdagede en Bog, sagde jeg: ‘Aa, maa jeg ikke se den Bog?’ Og derefter hed det: ‘Jeg maa vel ikke laane den Bog?’”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* On chapbooks in Denmark, see Henrik Horstbøll, *Menigmands medie. Det folkelige bogtryk i Danmark 1500-1840* (København: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1999). On chapbooks as children’s literature, see Matthew O. Grenby, “Before Children’s Literature: Children, Chapbooks and Popular Culture in Early Modern Britain,” in *Popular Children’s Literature in Britain*, ed. Julia Briggs, Dennis Butts, and M.O. Grenby. (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008): 25–46.

⁶⁸ Nielsen, *Landsbyliv*, 144: “Senere læste jeg den tykke Bog selv igjennem, og det mere end en Gang.” La Fontaine’s novel on the van Halden family was first translated into Danish in 1799 under the title *Familiehistorier* (Family stories) and was republished a number of times.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 145: “jeg læste hurtigt, og naar jeg bare havde en Roman, da glemte jeg alt, baade Leg og Mad, og brugte hvert Minut af min Fritid til at sluge Bogen.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.: “Carit Etlars første Fortællinger, Bloch Suhrs Noveller, Crusenstolpes politiske Romaner, af hvilke jeg kun forstod lidt, og Rises Arkiv.”

⁷¹ Ibid., 146: ”blodige Scener eller Pinsler.”

⁷² Ibid., 148–49: ”Det var ogsaa en Leg eller et Spil ... Vi spøgede og lo, mens vi opremsede Paa Sottesengen levnes kun liden tid.”

⁷³ Peter Kier, *Min rejse gennem jordelivet*, ed. (and trans.) Jens Holdt and Hans Hejselbjerg Poulsen (Tønder: Historisk Samfund for Sønderjylland, 1968). With a historical introduction and footnotes by the editors.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 53–55.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 58: ”med deres elendige billeder.” See also 60, 71.

⁷⁶ Peter Kier mentions mathematical books by Heino, Valentin, Severin, and Lambecius; *ibid.*, 62. He struggled to understand them as they were written in German.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 61: ”alt blev forvandlet dér.”

⁷⁸ Ibid., 60, 63.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 74. Quiersfeld’s *Himmlische Gartengesellschaft* was published in Danish as *Ny formerede himmelske Have-Selskab* in 1691 and republished in 1794. It is not clear whether Peter read it in a Danish or German edition.

⁸¹ Ibid., 78–81.

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