

[Ruble on Bruce, 'Revolutions at Home: The Origin of Modern Childhood and the German Middle Class'](#)

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Emily C. Bruce. *Revolutions at Home: The Origin of Modern Childhood and the German Middle Class*. Childhoods: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Children and Youth Series. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021. Illustrations. 224 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-62534-563-9](#); \$27.95

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In the uproarious Age of Revolutions, there was a different, quieter revolution happening in middle-class homes across German-speaking Europe: the reimagining of childhood and children as civically engaged citizens steeped in proper bourgeois values. This idea is the central premise of Emily C. Bruce's fascinating new monograph, *Revolutions at Home: The Origin of Modern Childhood and the German Middle Class*. In times of unrest stretching from the French Revolution to the 1848 revolutions, states looked to the family as a stabilizing entity. Specifically, state governments targeted children as the key to keeping the peace. As a result, governments supported mass schooling, new child-rearing practices, and literacy campaigns to educate young people. The result, Bruce argues, was a transformed public sphere that in turn fundamentally altered nineteenth-century Europe.

Chapter 1 demonstrates that youth periodicals were one effective way to reach young readers. Since the early 1700s, periodicals had published moral stories for adults. In the latter half of the century, pedagogues (understood here as primarily middle-class educators) seized upon periodicals as a vessel for targeting youth and engaging them in reading. The periodicals also served as a way of communicating morality to young people. Pedagogues employed diverse strategies to steer young readers, recognizing that different styles appealed to different members of their audiences. For instance, sometimes periodical editors printed dialogues between children and authority figures to convey moral lessons. At other times, they serialized stories to entice children to pick up the next issue or printed music with early traces of nationalism embedded in the lyrics. If they read these stories, children would learn proper middle-class values, such as self-discipline, persistence, faith, and compassion. At the same time, while periodicals communicated virtuosity and seriousness, they also encouraged play by printing games and riddles for young readers. Periodicals also became a way of instructing boys and girls in differentiated gendered norms of the time. While male and female children learned how to read—itself an emancipatory skill—stories aimed at girls ultimately taught them how to be wives and mothers.

In the second chapter, Bruce switches gears to examine fairy tales, namely, those written by the Grimm brothers. Other scholars have often interpreted fairy tales as a means of conveying nationalist

sentiments or language. As Bruce points out, they can also be understood as a pedagogic tool for teaching children about family dynamics and socializing them in proper class-based behaviors. In the nineteenth century, authors like the Grimm brothers altered old fairy tales to imbue them with the values of the period. One of the many fascinating examples Bruce highlights is the tale of “Hansel and Gretel.” In the original version, the father, with the mother’s encouragement, abandons his children in the forest because he cannot afford to feed them. In the Grimms’ version, the mother is changed to a cold stepmother who forces an extremely reluctant father to leave his offspring. The change was meant to demonstrate the importance of filial bonds. But of course, fairy tales remained open to interpretation by their child readers, which was part of their appeal in this context.

While fairy tales and youth periodicals communicated morals to children, there were other subjects, such as geography, that were becoming increasingly important to their education as well. As chapter 3 shows, the rapidly shifting political cartography of the early nineteenth century, both because of Napoleon’s wars and imperial expansion, prompted pedagogues to take geography more seriously. To do so, pedagogues had to reimagine how to teach geography. Whereas older texts from the late eighteenth century were dry and pedantic, newer textbooks from the nineteenth century incorporated more student-oriented language, bigger visuals, and amusing graphics and text. In other words, pedagogues realized that education was more successful when children enjoyed learning. As a result, pedagogues wrote songs and designed games to teach children about geography. That said, not all geographic education was aimed at the same audience. During this period, pedagogues began to distinguish between boys and girls, marketing certain textbooks with different information to each gender. Boys, for instance, could learn about war; girls should not, even though their global awareness was still critical for their future roles as educators and nurturers within their families. Geographic education also aimed to teach children that Europeans were superior to colonial subjects elsewhere around the globe. What did children take away from these texts? Bruce demonstrates convincingly through analysis of marginalia that learning was taking place. Even if the words scribbled on the side did not match the content, that could indicate that the child was practicing how to write and therefore reflected some engagement with their education.

Learning how to write became the basis of another element of forming children into educated citizens: letter writing, the subject of the fourth chapter. While other historians have often dismissed children’s letters as a source or claimed that such letters did not survive, Bruce excavates them from family archives to show how children actively participated in the construction of middle-class culture (whether they realized it or not). Letters from children illuminate the process of learning social literacy. Children learned the conventions of writing, as well as the occasions for writing (such as birthdays). Still, letter writing did not happen organically. Children learned how to do so from letter manuals and youth periodicals, which directly and indirectly instructed children in the art of correspondence. More than just a recording of daily life, Bruce maintains, letter writing tells us how children interpreted kinship and began to understand their own positions in their families and society.

While children communicated a version of themselves in letters, they also negotiated who they were through diary writing. The bulk of the fifth chapter highlights six case studies of middle-class Germans who later became prominent in Germany (and, therefore, had their early writings preserved). Each writer composed a daily diary of differing lengths but with many commonalities. For one thing, the writers came from similar social and economic milieus, despite their varied origins.

They also employed similar writing practices, such as dating their entries and self-correction. Diaries also became a venue for recording ordinary events of their lives and reflecting on their own personal growth. Part of narrating personal development, however, required self-surveillance of their emotions, self-discipline, time, and audience. In other words, these young diarists were extremely conscious of how and why they were writing: as an act of self-formation.

Historians often struggle to add more to the canon about the Age of Revolutions, but Bruce has succeeded in finding a novel angle. Far from being passive recipients of new educational models, Bruce's young protagonists emerge as active participants in their own social revolution: the construction of modern childhood. Readers searching for a streamlined and chronological narrative of how pedagogues and children transformed Europe will not find such a story here. Bruce's analysis goes in many directions at once, making one thread difficult to follow. At times, the bigger picture—the Age of Revolutions—gets lost in the detailed source analysis. At the same time, the scattered nature of the text is one of its greatest strengths because it allows Bruce to show off her methodological chops. Her in-depth analysis can be read as a tutorial on how to conduct nuanced readings of various primary sources ranging from periodicals to diaries. This type of instruction in close reading, especially on a micro level, is valuable for seasoned scholars and novice students alike. For anyone looking to educate themselves on the history of childhood and class in nineteenth-century Europe, Bruce's monograph will not disappoint.

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