Desperately Hungry for Reading: Children’s Reading Experiences in the Context of Their Social and Cultural Background in the Early 20th Century Finland

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Symposium: Childhood, Reading and Materiality

Children do not choose freely what, where and how to read, but their reading is restricted in many ways. Children’s cultural background, but also physical surroundings (for example, if they have free access to books) influence their reading habits. My presentation analyses from a historical perspective the material consequences of children’s cultural and social background on their reading experiences.

The presentation addresses the concept of materiality in three ways. First, it analyses how children’s physical surroundings and material resources affected their possibilities for and experiences of reading. Second, it considers how the attitudes of children’s families, friends and teachers supported and restricted children’s reading and affected the material experience of it. For example, how did children experience reading secretly when their parents had forbidden reading? Third, the corporeal level of reading is approached through the often-recurring metaphors of hunger for reading and reading as eating. For what purposes are these metaphors used and what kind of connections does their use reveal?

As material I use autobiographical reading memories from two collections of written library memories, collected by the Finnish Literature Society in 1983–1984 and 2000. In addition, I use memories derived from other types of texts: an autobiographical novel by Toivo Pekkanen (1953) and two studies on child and adolescent readers, in which the researcher uses his own childhood memories alongside other materials (Bruhn 1920–1921 and 1944). The material is analysed with narrative analysis.

References:


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