

Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America (Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book)

E. Jennifer Monaghan

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An experienced teacher of reading and writing and an award-winning historian, E. Jennifer Monaghan brings to vibrant life the process of learning to read and write in colonial America. Ranging throughout the colonies from New Hampshire to Georgia, she examines the instruction of girls and boys, Native Americans and enslaved Africans, the privileged and the poor, revealing the sometimes wrenching impact of literacy acquisition on the lives of learners.

For the most part, religious motives underlay reading instruction in colonial America, while secular motives led to writing instruction. Monaghan illuminates the history of these activities through a series of deeply researched and readable case studies. An Anglican missionary battles mosquitoes and loneliness to teach the New York Mohawks to write in their own tongue. Puritan fathers model scriptural reading for their children as they struggle with bereavement. Boys in writing schools, preparing for careers in counting houses, wield their quill pens in the difficult task of mastering a "good hand." Benjamin Franklin learns how to compose essays with no teacher but himself. Young orphans in Georgia write precocious letters to their benefactor, George Whitefield, while schools in South Carolina teach enslaved black children to read but never to write.

As she tells these stories, Monaghan clears new pathways in the analysis of colonial literacy. She pioneers in exploring the implications of the separation of reading and writing instruction, a topic that still resonates in today's classrooms.

Monaghan argues that major improvements occurred in literacy instruction and acquisition after about 1750, visible in rising rates of signature literacy. Spelling books were widely adopted as they key text for teaching young children to read; prosperity, commercialism, and a parental urge for gentility aided writing instruction, benefiting girls in particular. And a gentler vision of childhood arose, portraying children as more malleable than sinful. It promoted and even commercialized a new kind of children's book designed to amuse instead of convert, laying the groundwork for the "reading revolution" of the new republic.



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