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“Unpacking my Library”: Children’s Literature in the Writings of Walter Benjamin

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In recent years as the works of Walter Benjamin, the German-Jewish cultural critic and philosopher, have become more widely available in translation commentaries have emerged which focus on what his writings have to offer current practices of cultural history. Benjamin was an avid collector of children’s books. He also wrote extensively on children’s literature, forgotten children’s stories, the compulsion and cultures of book collecting and about his own childhood experiences in Berlin. This essay concerns itself with Benjamin’s relationship with children’s literature, both a child and as a collector, and his insights into the process of engaging with the internal world of the child. In doing so consideration is given to his innovative approach to memory-work and the relationship between “remembering”, memory, artefacts and history. In this sense, this essay is about the book and education and the writing of cultural history.

Introduction: stories about books

This essay begins with two stories about books. In 1986 Peter Lyssiotis contributed a photographic essay to an Australian edited collection, The Critical Distance. The essay, which he entitled Look and Learn presents a sequence of photographs taken of the same blackboard in the same room in the Humanities wing of a school. Over four months he shot two frames a day: one in the morning before lessons and the other during the remainder of the day. He chose to photograph the blackboard because for him along with chalk, it was the most

*My thanks to participants in the seminar at Alcalá, anonymous referees and Sue Akehurst, Martin Lawn, Kate Rousmaniere and Ruth Watts for their helpful comments on the arguments expressed in this paper.
constant and recognisable badge of the education system. He displayed the photographs - repetition of one large general view, framing fragments of teacher instruction/explanation and student 'hit and run' comments - in a way which drew attention to the classroom as a political site, where dominant ideologies are argued for and reinforced, but also resisted through comment. However, when we “look” we “learn” more than probably the photographer intended. The photographs record shards of knowledge, but there is also a striking absence in these images. Words change, furniture is moved but one element remains constant; either side of the blackboard are two large double-sized bookcases and they are always empty of books.¹

The second story relates to a sixty-five year old woman remembering her school days in Birmingham, England in the 1940s and early 1950s. She remembers: “The only activities I was good at were dancing, gym and covering books. My own textbooks were covered with samples from a wallpaper book. We all had a textbook each to cover the various subjects. The headmistress raised money to help buy them holding Bridge evenings. I was very good at book covering, being neat and quick, and I would help out those less adept - this made me popular.” This account of a remembered childhood, of an engagement with the material culture of schooling, appears in a collection appropriately entitled Through the Classroom Window (1998).² The reader is taken into past classrooms through collected rememberings.

Both stories are about books in education, but what is their significance? The first story - the empty bookcases - can be read as a metaphor for an absence in the historiography of history of education. We know about systems of schooling, about the material culture of schools, about the content of textbooks, but we know very little about the practice, meaning and culture of classrooms in the past. In particular, there is a silence in the literature about how teachers used books, about the routines and practices associated with books in the classroom, about how children and adults engaged with books in both formal and informal settings.³ The second story - a remembered interaction with a cultural artefact -

³There are some important texts which have begun to explore these issues, in particular, see: Roger Chartier, L’Ordre des livres: Lecteurs, auteurs, bibliothèques en Europe entre XIVème et XVème siècle (Aix-en-Provence, Alinèa, 1992); Martyn Lyons & Lucy Traska, Australian Readers Remember. An Oral History of Reading, 1890-1930 (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1992); James Raven, Helen Small & Naomi Tadmor (Eds.) The Practice and
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raises an issue of historical practice. When the remembering subject looks ‘through the classroom window’ the way in which the past is consciously brought into the present is through memory, but memories are filtered through the distance of time associated with the adult gaze. How can historians redeem the experience of past childhood from the adult gaze? In trying to answer this question, and address silences in the historiography of history of education, this essay draws on the writings of the Weimar philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin.4

When Walter Benjamin committed suicide in the little village of Portbou on the French-Spanish frontier in September 1940 the bulk of his writings were unpublished or had been destroyed. Today, Benjamin’s work is edited to the smallest fragment. The boundaries of Benjamin’s work resist classification and demarcation. His presence is invoked in political philosophy, cultural studies, linguistics, aesthetics, theology, in the theory of literature and film. In recent years new readings and applications of his ideas have flourished as his texts have become more widely available in the Anglophone world. Indeed, a reviewer commented that his prose in translation now “breeds commentary like vaccine in a lab”.5 New readings, in particular, have focused on what Benjamin’s writings have to offer current practices of cultural history, recognising that Benjamin, the critic and philosopher of history, was also the practitioner.6 The present essay constitutes a contribution to this debate. Here, Benjamin’s writings on children’s literature, old forgotten children’s books, book collecting and his childhood in Berlin are used to engage with both silence and memory in the history of education. In this sense, the essay can also be read as a continuation of a conversation and a research agenda that emerged out of a series of international seminars in the 1990s on Representation of Reading in England (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996); Guglielmo Cavallo & Roger Chartier (Eds.) A History of Reading in the West (London, Polity Press, 1999).


See, for example, Michael P. Steinberg (Ed.), Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996).
Silences and Images of the Classroom involving historians from Northern Europe and North America. The seminars were concerned with the unasked question, the construction of historical facts and the silences around significant elements of history of education. Although the seminar series began with the idea of the classroom, it functioned as a space in which issues about categories, traditional areas of inquiry and methodology were explored.  

Children's Literature in the Writings of Walter Benjamin: a note on the texts

Walter Benjamin’s writings on children’s literature, book collecting and childhood - the subjects of this essay - are scattered across essays, short critical reviews, radio scripts, academic treatises and unpublished and incomplete notes.  


For example, in the mid- to late 1920s he wrote a number of short urban pen-pictures or cityscapes of cities that he visited. Childhood, play and toys are recurrent themes in these texts. In 1932 he wrote a lengthy essay recording his childhood impressions of Berlin. This essay, *A Berlin Chronicle* was later reworked and published as *A Berlin Childhood around 1900*. These essays he characterised as “individual expeditions into the depths of memory”.9 Between 1929 and 1933 Benjamin wrote and broadcast scripts for two radio programmes. He was contracted to “speak nonstop for twenty minutes, on schedule, before an invisible audience, from the perspective of ‘childhood’, on any subject of his choosing”.10 Unlike the other texts so far identified these radio lectures were aimed at children. Each of them was written as a small historical lesson and they represent an attempt to convey his way of understanding social relations. Much of what Benjamin produced is brief and as Rugg has observed “resound with the echoes of words, concepts, and images that repeat from text to text, altering import by degrees with each resonation, as sound waves bend differently from different surfaces”.11 His writings on children’s literature and book collecting and his reminiscences of his childhood are no exception. Collectively they engage with, and elaborate, a number of recurrent themes and methodological issues, notably, the history of children’s literature, the nature of experience, the meaning of colour, the collection of objects, and the relationship between memory, material culture and the labyrinth of the past.
Walter Benjamin and the experience of childhood

The imagery of the child’s world appears persistently in Benjamin’s writings, but a serious discussion of its significance has largely been absent in commentaries on his work.¹² This omission has, in part, been offset by Graeme Gilloch’s *Myth & Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996). Gilloch conjectures that for Benjamin the metropolis is “a site of imprisonment with its own incarcerated subject: the child.”¹³ He argues that Benjamin’s aim and method is to recover and give voice to “at first sight”, a perception untainted by the destructive power of habit, of being an adult. Benjamin seeks to reach the pre-habitual gaze of the child, to retrieve the buried memories of childhood, to rescue the experience of the child awaiting the future, the comprehension of which will be achieved and apprehended through adulthood.¹⁴ Gilloch’s texts are the cityscape narrations. In these texts Benjamin is both narrator and child. The narrator is the adult-as-recollector and the child is the collector, the finder and redeemer of lost things.¹⁵

Benjamin’s concern for the remembrance of the child’s perception of things is also evident in his other writings. In his essays, radio scripts and fragments about childhood, children’s literature and book collecting Benjamin endeavoured to rescue the child’s perspective. He narrated how the child sees and experiences, but at the same time always saw from his vantage point as the narrator, the future which the child could not see. Thus, in one essay he acknowledged the difficulties associated with forgetting: “What my first books were to me - to remember this I should first have to forget all other knowledge of books”.¹⁶ In his 1929 radio lecture *Children’s Literature* he reminded his “dear invisible listeners” that “for children books, like everything else, can contain very different things from what adults see in them”.¹⁷ His skill in rescuing the “at first sight” perspective is beautifully captured in his account of a child reading: “Child reading. - You are given a book from the school library. In the lower classes, books are simply handed out. Only now and again do you dare express a desire. Often, in envy, you see coveted books pass into other hands. At last your wish was granted. For a week you were wholly given up to the soft drift of the text, which sur-

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 64-65.
rounded you as secretly, densely, and unceasingly as snow. You entered it with limitless trust. The peacefulness of the book that enticed you further and further! Its contents did not much matter. For you were reading at the time when you still made up stories in bed. The child seeks his way along the half-hidden paths. Reading, he covers his ears; the book is on a table that is far too high, and one hand is always on the page. To him, the hero’s adventures can still be read in the swirling letters like figures and messages in drifting snowflakes. His breath is part of the air of the events narrated, and all the participants breathe it. He mingles with the characters far more closely than grown-ups do. He is unspeakably touched by the deeds, the words that are exchanged; and, when he gets up, he is covered over and over by the snow of reading.”  

Similarly, Benjamin captured the sense of expectation, “the rapture”, associated with opening a new book, “... with each book its content ... its world, was palpably there, at hand. But equally this content and world transfigured every part of the book. They burned within it, blazed from it; located not merely in its binding or its pictures, they were enshrined in chapter headings and opening letters, paragraphs and columns,” and “the child enters into those pages, becoming suffused, like a cloud, with the riotous colours of the world of pictures. Sitting before his painted book ... he overcomes the illusory barrier of the book’s surface and passes through coloured textures and brightly painted partitions to enter a stage on which fairy tales spring to life.”

In the radio script Demonic Berlin Benjamin recollects his childhood relation to the ghostly tales of E.T.A. Hoffman and conjures the fears that were whispered in children’s ears, the images that were used to frighten children and the attendant excitement and fear at daring to read forbidden texts: “I can remember a particular evening, when I was sitting alone under the lamp at the giant dining-room table ... and there was not a sound to be heard in the entire house. And as I sat there reading The Mines of Falun, all the horrors gradually gathered around me at the table edge in the surrounding gloom, like fish with blank expressions, so that my eyes remained fixed on the pages of the book from which all this horror emerged, as if redemption might come from them.” On another occasion he remembered being so fearful of being caught: “I stood there reading The Entail with hair on end, and so frozen with the twofold horror of the terrors of the book’

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18 Benjamin, “One Way Street”, in Selected Writings, 1, p. 463.
that he ‘failed to grasp a single word of what I was reading’. In the radio lecture on Children’s literature he reminded his listeners of the pleasures obtained from “devouring” cheap literature and of the feeling of shame associated with asking for such titles “on borrowing day in the school library”. Having used the phrase devouring books the broadcast ends with a discussion of the appropriacy of the metaphor and the possibilities associated with comparing “reading and consuming”. Reading, Benjamin argued, involves a process of absorption, but “we do not read to increase our experiences; we read to increase ourselves”. This, he believed, applied particularly to children, “in their reading they absorb; they do not empathize”. Their reading was “much more closely related to their growth and their sense of power than to their education and their knowledge of the world.”

How children learnt to read and how they made sense of the world around them were two themes which engaged Benjamin on more than one occasion. Children were like “theatre producers” for when they thought up stories they refuse to be bound by “sense”. Given four specific words and asked to make a short sentence on the spot the most amazing prose came to light. He quotes: “Prince is a word with a star tied to it”, said a boy of seven”. For Benjamin such patterns of thinking offered “a guide to children’s books”. Words throw on their costumes and “in the twinkling of an eye” they are caught up in a battle, a love scene or a fight. “This”, he wrote, is “how children write their stories, but also how they read them.” In another essay Benjamin poetically captures the first elements involved in learning to read. With the ABC-book each sign was a “yoke under which hand and tongue have to humble themselves” before the child “masters the sounds with ease and creates his [sic] first secret society in the playground jungle of the language of robbers and games counting peas”. Children knew and explored the pictures in these “voice books” like “their own pockets; they have searched through them in the same way and turned them inside out; without forgetting the smallest thread or piece of cloth ...”. Through ABC-books and reading primers children discovered meaning of the world of objects, animals and people, but only in proportion to what they “already possess within themselves”. This “inward nature ... of seeing”, as Benjamin described it, was located in the child’s experience of colour. Children learn in the memory of their first intuition

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22Ibid., pp. 323-324.
24Ibid., pp. 255-256.
and from bright colours. "By remembering, they learn".\textsuperscript{28} Seeking to rescue again the "at first sight" perspective, Benjamin distinguished between the child's experience of colour and that of adults. For children form follows colour, while for adults, colour follows form. Children perceived objects according to their colour content and hence did not isolate them; instead they used them as a basis from which to create "the interrelated totality of the world of the imagination".\textsuperscript{29} So, when faced with coloured engravings in books children's imaginations fell "into a reverie"\textsuperscript{30}, but after the "seduction" of colour the black and white illustration "is incomplete and hence in need of additions". Children will "scribble on them". They inscribe the pictures with their own ideas. They imaginatively complete the illustrations.\textsuperscript{31}

In representing these experiences of childhood Benjamin was ever conscious to the dangers inherent in writing about the past as an adult. His aim was to mark out the distance between the world of the adult and the child and his method involved presenting their alternative modes of seeing and knowing. His texts present a journey into the past, but in his rememberings the voice of the, as yet, "innocent" child is heard alongside that of the distant adult.

**Walter Benjamin the "collector" of children's books**

Benjamin was fascinated by the activity of collecting, the compulsion to accumulate, classify and arrange material objects. He was an avid collector of children's books; which he described as "precious documents of cultural history"\textsuperscript{32}. In Unpacking my Library, an essay based on his radio programme A talk about book collecting broadcast on 27 April 1931, Benjamin asked his audience to join him "in the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open" - the air saturated with wood dust, the floor covered with torn paper - to be among "the piles of volumes"

\textsuperscript{28}Benjamin, "Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children's Books", in: Selected Writings, 1, pp. 264-265.
\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., p. 436.
\textsuperscript{32}Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books", in: Selected Writings, 1, p. 412.
which were seeing daylight again after two years of darkness. The purpose of this invitation was to share "the mood" which books arouse in a genuine collector, to feel "the spring tide of memories" which surge towards any collector contemplating their possessions. "Every passion", he wrote, "borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories".  

Books were treasure houses of memories: "once you have approached the mountains of crates in order to mine the books from them and bring them to the light of day ... what memories crowd in upon you!" Each book evoked the precise memory of how and where it was acquired. He started unpacking at noon, and at midnight he had worked his way to the last two crates. Here he came upon two volumes, "bound in faded boards which - strictly speaking - do not belong in a bookcase at all: two albums with paste-in pictures which my mother had glued in as a child and which I inherited". These were the seeds of his collection of children's books which was still steadily growing. After midnight, as he reached the last half-emptied crate, other thoughts surfaced: "not thoughts but images, memories. Memories of cities in which I found so many things ... memories of Rosenthal's sumptuous rooms in Munich, ... of Süssengut's musty book cellar in North Berlin; memories of the rooms where these books had been housed, of my student's den in Munich, of my room in Bern, of the solitude of Iseltwald ... and finally of my boyhood room, the former location of only four or five of the several thousand volumes that are piled up around me." Unpacking the crates which contained his library transported Benjamin back in time, into his childhood, to his boyhood room and to a memory of his mother. Books, he wrote, did not "come alive" in the book collector, it was the collector "who lives in them" ...

Collecting was "a form of practical memory", it provided a means of re-remembering, it connected the present to the past and a collection as it evolved offered an intimate narrative of selfhood.

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34Ibid., p. 492.

35Ibid., p. 492.

Books, memory and experience

Much of Walter Benjamin’s work is motivated by a desire to understand the nature of the modern experience. This understanding involved engagement with the complex relationship between the past and the present and in particular the ways in which memories intervene in the present.

Personal memories litter Benjamin’s writings about children’s books, childhood and book collecting. For example, in a 1929 draft of an essay entitled Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland Benjamin in the midst of describing the glass-roofed, marble-panelled arcades suddenly shifts the focus of his text to his childhood and remembers how “When, as children, we were given those great encyclopedic works World and Mankind, New Universe, The Earth, wouldn’t our gaze always fall, first of all, on the colour illustration of a ‘Carboniferous Landscape’ or on ‘Lakes and Glaciers of the First Ice Age?’”. This evocation of the past is used to help his readers visualize the panorama which is revealed when we look through the arcades that are found in all cities.

The following year, in his radio talk Demonic Berlin, Benjamin recollected how his parents had “forbidden me to read Hoffman. When I was little, I could read him only on the sly, on evenings when my parents were away from home”. In early 1932 he recalled in A Berlin Chronicle, “It is certain that all I know of them [my first books] today rests on the readiness with which I opened myself to books”, and “I retreated completely behind the rampart of its cover [Neuer deutscher Jugendfreund] There was nothing finer than to sniff out, on this first tentative expedition into the labyrinth of stories, the various atmospheres, scents, brightnesses and sounds that came from its different chambers and corridors”, and again, “You did not read books through; you dwelt, abided between their lines, and, reopening them after an interval, surprised yourself at the spot where you had halted.”

Yet, at the same time there is also an absence in these texts. The reader struggles to find a sense of an ordered narrative of Benjamin’s life. This absence was deliberate and central to Benjamin’s ideas - and style of writing - about the past and how it enters into the present. In The Berlin Chronicle he writes: “Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography... For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence, and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if

months or years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of commemoration. This strange form - it may be called fleeting or eternal - is in neither case the stuff that life is made of. "41

There is no linear narrative in the process of recollection, it is not sequential, nor is it continuous but rather involves a bringing to consciousness that which is fragmented and momentary. "Anyone", he wrote, "can observe that the length of time during which we are exposed to impressions has no bearing on their fate in memory". He continued, "Nothing prevents our keeping rooms in which we have spent twenty-four hours more or less clearly in our memory, and forgetting others in which we have passed months. It is not, therefore, due to insufficient exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance. More frequent, perhaps are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixed the room’s image on the plate. It is we ourselves, however, who are always standing at the center of these rare images. Nor is this very mysterious, since such moments of sudden illumination are at the same time moments when we separated from ourselves, and while our waking, habitual everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock ... It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images."42 While it is clear from the above that the concept of memory-image is central to Benjamin’s account of how memory enters into the present it is not necessary for the purposes of this essay to explore it in any depth.43 What is important though is the way Benjamin described the process by which one memory invokes other associations and experiences.

Remembering an afternoon in Paris he wrote: “Suddenly, and with compelling force, I was struck by the idea of drawing a diagram of my life, and knew exactly how it was to be done ... I would speak of a labyrinth. I am concerned here not with what is installed in the chamber at its enigmatic center, ego or fate, but all the more with the many entrances leading into the interior. These entrances I call ‘primal acquaintances’; each of them is a graphic symbol of my acquaintance with a person whom I met not through other people but through neighborhood, family, relationships, school comradeship, mistaken identity, companionship on

41Ibid., p. 632.
42Ibid., pp. 632-633.
travels, or other such ... situations. So many primal relationships, so many entrances to the maze. But since most of them - at least those that remain in our memory - for their part open up new acquaintances, relations to new people, after a time they branch off these corridors ... there are ... paths that lead us again and again to people ... passageways that ... guide us to the friend, the betrayer, the beloved, the pupil, or the master." Benjamin's diagram of life, his labyrinth of reminiscences, was a site of multiple associations, experiences and memories. It was a labyrinth entered through memory.

Living, for Benjamin, meant "leaving traces". These "traces" of human social activity - an album with paste-in pictures, a book of fairytales, a toy, a building, a place, - acted as triggers in the present to bring memories into consciousness. However, such traces had to be excavated, or to use the phrase in Unpacking My Library, mined: "he [sic] who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This determines the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. They must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter ... For the matter itself is merely a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand - in the sober rooms of our later insights ...". Memory for Benjamin was actively produced. Remembrance, for him, did not proceed in the "manner of a narrative or still less that of a report", but must, "assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to every deeper layers." The past was a labyrinth of both objects and memories waiting to be encountered and brought into consciousness. What was remembered and brought into consciousness was material to be interrogated for meaning. In recording and documenting this labyrinth Benjamin eschewed conventional narrative structures in favour of a "discontinuous, fragmented literary form and style" which captured the fragmentation and fluidity which was for him the essence of the experience of modernity. Further, his mosaic of modern memory-images constituted only half of the text. Meaning was to be given by the reader of Benjamin's generation; they would provide the other half of the picture from the fleeting images of their lived experience. In this sense the contents of the individual past combined with material of the collective past.

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46 Gilloch, Myth & Metropolis, p. 18.
Walter Benjamin and history of education

This essay has used only a small selection of Benjamin’s texts, but they contain a number of discrete threads of argument - the nature of experience, the relationship between experience and memory, the fetishist delight in collecting - which need to be located in the context of Benjamin’s life-long concern with history. In his last known work, a series of theses on the nature of history 48, he wrote “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again ... For every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably ...” and “To articulate the past historically ... means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger ... The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is about to overpower it ... Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins...”49 For Benjamin, to be an historian was to engage in an active process of remembering, to use the traces of the past that remain in the present as the raw material for producing stories about the past that might be overlooked and lost. History existed to be redeemed. To be an historian was to be partial and to celebrate the marginal over dominant histories, to ‘brush history against the grain’ and to engage with the politics of memory.50

The texts used in the essay and the threads of arguments they contain are part of Walter Benjamin’s life history, of the critic as remembering subject. They offer individualistic images of a bourgeois child, at a particular time, in a specific location. Thus, in one sense, to read these texts is to engage with his life, with his...
story of education, and with his conception of autobiographical writing. To read these texts is also to engage with the development of Benjamin's self-understanding as a cultural critic, with his commentary on contemporary social relations and his concern with the materiality of the past and his practice of historical thinking and writing.

What then, of the questions posed at the outset of this essay, of the historian seeking to engage with the silences associated with the book and education and the problems associated with redeeming the experience of past childhood from the adult gaze? What insights can be found in Benjamin's writings on children's literature, on book collecting and a city childhood? First, in his own "rememberings" Benjamin worked to elucidate the child's perception, to disinter childhood experiences from within adult memories. His texts are full of vivid images - of touching a book, reading its contents, turning its pages, absorbing its colours - which in Benjamin's poetic and visual mode of writing become vehicles for capturing the conditions of past life, the relations of power, and the 'at first sight' experience of childhood. Secondly, and relatedly, Benjamin reminds us to attend to the dangers inherent in accepting as "truth" what is written or told in the present about the self of earlier years. At the moment of telling events become ordered as the remembering writer/teller and subject become one. Being aware of how to effect the act of "remembering" is as important as recording the details of memories. Thirdly, Benjamin acutely captured in his texts the performative nature of "remembering" and the relationship with traces of the past that remain in the present. Correspondences are established between the arc of present and past states of consciousness. Benjamin connected memory, objects and place with the entrances into the labyrinth which is the individual and collective past. As a consequence his writings point to the possibility of entering the past through alternative routes, alternatives which can reveal new connections between present and past, connections which have the potential to address some of the silences associated with current historical practice. Benjamin, the practitioner, offers a model whereby remembered objects and memories associated with them can be manipulated to give new insights and meanings. In short, Benjamin's writings on children's literature, book collecting and a city childhood add to our knowledge of the history of the book, but they also afford an opportunity for historians to "look and listen", to ask questions, to formulate thought, and to develop new practice.