

# The Childhood Memoir and Children's Cultures of Reading in Meiji and Taishô Japan

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## Abstract

The perspective of children themselves is often missing from historical studies of childhood. Childhood memoir, a well-established genre of world literature, is a valuable resource for addressing this absence. Emerging in the 19th century as a reaction to rising scientific and cultural interest in the child, childhood memoir quickly became a transnational genre that still retains its popularity today. In a context where nation building, imperialism and colonization, technological development, and market economics were actively transforming what childhood meant, the recurring motif of childhood reading found in Meiji and Taishô examples of this genre speaks to the emerging societal concern over the effects of reading on children -- but also to how children themselves experienced reading as a powerful force in their own lives.

This paper will highlight the missing child's perspective by critically reading the childhood memoirs of contemporary notables such as Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), Tanizaki Jun'ichirô (1886-1965), Naka Kansuke (1885-1969), Yoshikawa Eiji (1892-1962), and Hayashi Fumiko (1903-1951). These texts, however mediated, nevertheless offer a way for the child's voice to be heard in a discourse that has always been dominated and shaped by adults. Written about coming of age during the six decades under examination, Japanese childhood memoirs are remarkably diverse but also reveal patterns shared experience. Strongly shaped by the rise of nationalized formal schooling, the mass media boom, and the various cultural networks surrounding these institutions, the reading-related episodes described in these neglected texts are significant as accounts of an evolving national and increasingly transnational children's reading culture. By tracing the trajectories of these young readers individually and as a group, this reading of childhood memoir will highlight how the evolving literary, cultural, and political context manifested in the lived experience of actual child readers -- and helped form the writers they became as adults.