

Edgeworthstown, USA: Colonial models for
practical education

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For a good while, it was thought that teaching children to swim at an early age prevented drowning. Not only does this square with intuition and experience, but it was annually affirmed by the leading pediatric authorities. The only problem is that our intuitions about drowning are highly misleading. Drowning doesn’t even look like *drowning*, and it can take down swimmers of all abilities. What prevents drowning, it turns out, is the presence of trained lifeguards and—more vitally—the executive function by which an individual could perceive aquatic hazards or physical impairment and choose not to swim. This latter function is precisely what young children lack. As a result, there is only one safe way for kids to be in the pool: under constant supervision.¹

I mention this conundrum because it gets at a key question that recurs in the early-19C educational literature: how can a book (however so good) serve as an effective manual in the real-world home or classroom? The many thousands of parental helpers and teacher’s guides are caught on the horns of a dilemma: their advice is necessarily non-exhaustive when it comes to the contingent scrapes and scrambles of real life. But when they do aim at a complete system of instruction, they cannot help but prescribe an unsustainable level of parent/teacher involvement. In this chapter I explore how fictionality and seriality were recruited by period writers to help resolve this problem. Since “constant supervision” was seldom possible, and the risks of semi-supervision at least carried with them a pedagogical rationale, educationalists turned away from representations aiming at completeness and toward “practical” methods. The media form of practical education was not the treatise or the novel but the series, ever accompanied by initiatives for distributing the series kinaesthetically in the world.

“Among her endowments there is such a predominance of plain, practical sense,

¹Just cite Slate article

that we might perhaps describe her, in a single phrase, as the Franklin of Novelists.”

Sacvan Bercovitch: “Novel had a longstanding relationship to Franklin”

(Cambridge History of American Literature, Volume 1)

Telegraphs

Richard Lovell Edgeworth

Fiction

Frances Ferguson has recently argued . . .

Works Cited