

## 6-Karen Sanchez-Eppler.mp3

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:00] From Trinity College, this is Hidden Literacies.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:17] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies Anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:36] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Karen Sanchez-Eppler. Karen contributed an 1883 manuscript magazine to Hidden Literacies. To begin, I've asked Karen to introduce herself.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:00:57] So I'm Karen Sanchez-Eppler and I teach American Studies and English at Amherst College. So the item that I've submitted to be part of Hidden Literacies is one little handmade newspaper made by three brothers in Goshen, New Hampshire in the 1890s. But it's really part of a larger collection of about 63 little homemade books and magazines that these boys created over a five-year period. And we also have photographs that they took in starting in 1896 for about three years worth of glass plate negative photographs that they took of each other and their town and a little bit of their imaginary world and also some more everyday life writing by these boys.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:02:02] The Nelsons were a family of farmers.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:02:04] Ida and Hale Nelson had four boys, and it's the three oldest ones. And their names are Elmer, Arthur and Walter, who made this library. The Nelsons did not own their own farm, so they're not wealthy farmers. It's a quote from one of the Nelson brothers' newspapers is called The Intellectual Farmer, and it proclaims itself as being its purpose is to help people to know enough about farming to become wealthy farmers. It's clear that their family was not. Father did a lot of hired labor on other people's farms.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:02:42] The handmade books and magazines created by the Nelson boys drew on models they knew and offered a means to share details of their daily lives.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:02:52] The piece that I've put up is a child made version of a juvenile or family magazine. So it's an imitation or creation by these boys of the kinds of magazines that families in the late 19th century would often get to entertain their children. And we know that the Nelson family and the boys who made this magazine were subscribers to the Youth's Companion. And there are a lot of features of the little imitation magazine they make that are very much in line with characteristics of the publications of that period in general and the Youth's Companion in particular. One of the things that's extraordinarily unusual is to have not only so much writing by children, but also to have photographs by them, but also of them, to know what their environment looked like and how they saw it with their camera eye. And to also have some daily writing, some more diary journal kinds of writing about their everyday life. So we know a lot about their family and their real world. And we also have these little books and magazines and some of these little books and magazines are about their daily life. There's one little book that tells the story of one of the brothers shooting a pheasant and the father making a fan out of its tail. So sort of actual things that happen to rural children in New Hampshire.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:04:37] But as Karen tells us, the Nelson brothers created an imagined world through play that they recorded in their magazines.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:04:45] But the vast majority of these publications are about and often thought to be published in an imaginary world that the boys invent and play in together. The house they lived in in Goshen had a brook behind it, and that brook had three islands on it. And each of the brothers claimed an island as a continent. And they had many wars and also collaborations and explorations and development projects, building bridges and cities and most of their book making is documenting the events of that play world on the islands behind their house and then later on Forest Continent, a sort of mainland wooded area. And this little magazine Chit Chat, that's what I've put up on Hidden Literacies, purports to be coedited by two imaginary people, one from Big Continent, the largest of the islands in the brook. That was the property of the youngest of these three brothers, Walter Nelson, and Long Continent, a longer and thinner little island that is associated with Arthur Nelson, the middle brother. And so the Chit Chats says that it's edited by Ethan Allen, not of the Green Mountain boys, but the president of Big Continent and William Jay Little, who is the president of Long Continent. And and it contains all sorts of fictional stories and things, but also news and advertisements from their imaginary world.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:06:39] As Karen explains, part of what makes this collection significant is its focus on rural youth culture.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:06:45] Among the other things that's really unusual about this collection is that it's a collection of rural youth. And the Nelsons were a farming family and the boys did a lot of farm labor and also document a lot of hunting activities. And so to the extent that there are similar collections of literary productions by young people in the mid and late 19th century, they tend to be the stories and books made by much more elite families, much more urban families. So probably the famous most famous collection that people would be aware of is not an American collection, but the Brontes, when they were children, similarly wrote many, many, many books and maps and chronicles about a history of an imaginary world. And we tend to think of that as well, they grew up to be novelists and this is a training ground for that. But the Nelsons grew up to be grocers and poultry men. And that's just a really a testament to the kind of breadth of a literary culture, of imaginative bookmaking that we tend not to be aware of. We tend to think of that kind of activity as like, well, certainly very precocious literary young people might do something like that. But part of what I think collection documents is that the Nelsons were a very special young men, but it also documents that actually these are very ordinary and widespread kinds of literary practices.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:08:26] Another special aspect of the collection is the serendipitous way this collection of homemade books and magazines by the Nelson Boys found their way to Karen and her students.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:08:37] It's a great story. I teach at Amherst College and I have been working on, I guess what I'd say as a child made literary object for about a decade. I'd started writing a book that was about the history of childhood and realized that all of my sources were created by grown ups and that I would never have thought that that was a responsible thing to do as a historian with other kinds of subjects. But here I was really years into this project without even having crossed my mind that I should be looking for things that children had to say about the questions I was asking. And so I started a project of looking for that and I started with diaries. But then I did find a similar kind of collection in

terms of large library of child made books and newspapers from the Hale family. So Edward Everett Hale and his brothers and sisters and then in the next generation, his children. So it's kind of wonderful because you have a two generational library of child made books in that family. But of course, that's a very highly literate family. Hale's own father was a printer. Many of his siblings became writers. He himself was, of course, both a writer and a famous minister and lecturer. And then his children also became bookmakers and his daughter, who was the main figure in making the creation of that library, becomes one of the early American women painters of note. So like the Brontes, is kind of the kind of family that you could imagine doing this kind of thing, but I'd written a fair amount about them and that library. And Amherst College has an art museum and the director of educational programming at the museum lives in New Hampshire, and more or less as a sort of entertainment weekend activity often goes to local auctions. And at a local auction, there was a box that the auctioneer described as children's doodles for sale. And she looked at it and thought it looked charming. And so she purchased it for herself and then went home and looked at it and realized that these were little books and wondered what there was that anybody might have written or said about children making little books. And so she did some Googling around that and found some of the things I had written about the Hale's in their childhood library. And that was serendipitous. Funny because we had worked together often in the past. And so she emailed me and said I just bought this thing is an auction, come and look at it. So I had signed up to teach a little colloquium. So I had signed up to say I would do that and I had called it 'In the Archives of Childhood' and didn't really know what I was going to do with my students. And then Pamela Russell had acquired this box of children's doodles. And so I said to her, well, would you be willing to have this box of children's doodles be our research project? And she was thrilled about that. And so a lot of the books have these names, are authored by what turned out to be imaginary characters. And a lot of them are located in imaginary places, New Pocklington and in in Forest Continent, Little City in Long Continent. But some of them said Walter Nelson, Goshen, NH. So did some hunting around and through ancestry and things and found the Nelson family in Goshen, New Hampshire, with the names of the boys matching up. And then I called the Goshen Historical Society just to see if they knew anything about the Nelsons, if there is anything there. And turns out the Goshen Historical Society was listed in the list of New Hampshire historical societies, but then it didn't have an address or a functioning phone number and email address. So then I called the Goshen Public Library and someone there said, well, really, the Goshen Historical Society is in Jill Jillette's house, but I'll give you her phone number. And so I called Jill Jillette and it turns out that she is the great grandchild of Elmer Nelson, the oldest of the three boys, and that there were actually quite a number of Nelson materials in the Goshen historical collection. That's where all the sort of more diary kind of everyday writing from the family is housed and that's where they have five hundred glass plate negatives.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:13:37] The Nelson descendants would welcome being the subjects of a college research project, right? Not at first.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:13:44] And so initially she and other Nelson descendants were unhappy, I think that someone at Amherst College had acquired this collection and why didn't they have it? But we convinced them that this was actually a really good thing to have Amherst college resources supporting these materials and the college. And so with our class, we built a sort of big website that makes all those materials accessible.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:14:17] The Nelsons had long archived their own histories, real and imagined, as Karen reminds us. And so it's no surprise they were so interested in preserving their own histories.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:14:28] Though in another way you think, of course, it would be inherited children of the Nelsons who would want to be archivists for their town because they were such archivists of their own lives and world and even their imaginary world. A lot of their books are histories that their imaginary imaginary world made a subject, a geography book of their imaginary world. They made a gazetteer that provides little factual information like an encyclopedia of every town and major events and things. So I don't know, deep in the Nelson blood to want to do this, that kind of work.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:15:10] This leads us to think about what exactly the Nelson family's archive preserves. What does this specific magazine tell us about these brothers, this family, and it's time, for example, as Karen describes, this homemade book reminds us to think of children as what she calls, quote, culture makers.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:15:30] I guess when I started looking for writing by children, it was coming out of a sense of my first book had been about the abolitionist and feminist movements. And it just never would have crossed my mind that it was appropriate to tell that story just from material that had been created by white men. So it felt important to try to get children's perspectives and to figure out what were ways that one could start doing that. And I think the more that I've done that, the more that I've come to really respect and be interested in children as cultural producers, not just consumers. But it's also a very multidirectional kind of thing. That is, we all know all culture makers are also made by the cultures and in which they live. And childhood is so much a time of cultural formation. And part of what's so interesting about studying children's literature, I think, and writing for children and child rearing manuals is that the sort of values of a society are so blatant in those documents. You know, they're just like they're not suddenly doing the work of socialization there. That's their purpose. And they know it and they say it. And that kind of transparency is sort of helpful.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:16:54] Karen shared a favorite passage from one of the Nelson Brothers homemade magazines.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:17:00] This is from a partial periodical that is it's a few pages where the cover has been lost. So we don't actually know what the brothers themselves were calling this periodical. That was clearly a periodical because of layout and things. And the first piece in it is called Horse Race. And so in our labeling system, in the larger website, we say that it's from horse race. But it's just a little comment that one of the boys makes. Some folks think that writers have very easy lives, but this is wrong. But it's true that they do not use their muscles as much as farmers, but it is all the time wearing on their minds and brains.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:17:41] She explains why she chose this passage to share and why the Nelson brothers creations are important to think with.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:17:48] And partly that's the importance of finding writing by farm children. Just the difference. These are not the Hales. These are not the Brontes. These are boys who spent some amount of time complaining about haying and also they spell muscles and wearing wrong. And that's kind of wonderful. But I guess as someone who has devoted my life to intellectual labors, I just love that defense of them and that they felt that they felt that this thing that they were doing was in some sense cultural production was work was meaningful and important and mattered, was hard and should be

applauded. So trying to applaud it and also to note the things that are dangerous and problematic about it.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:18:45] Karen described the kind of culture the Nelson boys produced or reproduced in the magazine she contributed to Hidden Literacies entitled Chit Chat. Specifically, she describes the references to killing Indians in acts of violence that appear in their work.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:19:00] Children who are making their own books and magazines, that's play. And a lot of the ways that we talk about play is about kind of freedom from constraint and obligation. But of course, play is also contained inside of social realities and norms and is one of the ways that those get inculcated and one of the things that are particularly important and interesting to me in pulling up Chit Chat and talking about it for the Hidden Literacies project is that in the serialized stories in Chit Chat, there's a lot of Indian killing and there's a lot of exploration and discovery. So that that narrative of finding land and claiming it and developing it, which is what the boys enact over and over again on their island play, is also the stories that they record in their books and periodicals. And it's a story that contains genocide.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:20:08] As much as the contents of Chit Chat are charming, the Nelson brothers magazine also normalizes violence. This, Karen, suggests, is a juxtaposition that resonates then and now.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:20:21] So I am very interested in both that learning of genocide that the culture is teaching white boys in 19th century America. But I'm also really interested in the ways in which everything that's charming and creative and just exuberant and attractive about this whole world making enterprise that, you know, on their islands and on the page that the Nelson brothers are engaged in normalizes for all of us makes palatable that violence. And I think that that those are things that we need to keep coming to terms with. And in some ways, this particularly attractive and whimsical container is like a I don't know, a very potent place for facing the violence and in the at the roots of American vision and ambition and pleasure and that and the ways in which we are reared up into it. And Robin Bernstein, her book, Racial Innocence, in which she talks about children being the co-producers of racial violence. And I think that's right, that you don't want to just see these boys as trapped in social norms, but also as participants in their formation and continuation and in ways that continue to make them attractive to us. So big stakes, I think ultimately, even though very little, two inch by two inch little book.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:22:05] As Karen argues, there are big stakes in taking childhood seriously. Recounting her own history with this work, Karen notes that studying items like Chit Chat can expand what we think of as literature and what we imagine about childhood.

**Karen Sanchez-Eppler** [00:22:21] I started doing my childhood study scholarship when I had small children, and so that's when I started that. My first project about children and now my small children are young adults and very much out in the world in their late 20s and early 30s. And, you know, my training, my Ph.D. is in English and my training was largely reading beautiful literature that many hundreds of people had read and written about before. And there is this kind of thrill in finding and starting to think about material that has been a hidden literacy that has been not considered worthy of that kind of attention and study and honoring. And, you know, it it feels good to think that I've helped find things that can expand a little bit what it is that we think about childhood and what it is that we think about what literature is. And I think this little library does both of those things.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:23:29] Karen Sanchez-Eppler is the L. Stanton Williams, 1941 professor of American Studies in English at Amherst College. Listeners curious to learn more about Karen's work and explore her books *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* and *Touching Liberty, Abolition, Feminism and the Politics of the Body*. You can also visit the collected magazines and handmade books of the Nelson Brothers at the *Worlds and Works of the Nelson Brothers* located at [www.ats.amherst.edu/childhood](http://www.ats.amherst.edu/childhood). *Hidden Literacies* is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to *Hidden Literacies* for more information on *Hidden Literacies* and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit [www.hiddenliteracies.org](http://www.hiddenliteracies.org).