

Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Books and the "Free-to-Choose" Culture of 1980s America

Eli Cook, Assistant Professor, American History, Haifa University, Israel

Any American child born in the 1980s remembers these books well. They were called "choose-your-own-adventure," because unlike regular books they gave you agency. At the end of every page YOU (the books were always written in second person) had to make a choice. "If you want to fight the dragon, turn to page 75. If you prefer to run away, turn to page 64." An important precursor to the billion-dollar video game industry of today, these books gave young adults the feeling of empowerment, freedom and choice. Small wonder then that they sold over 250 million copies in the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite their significant impact on young Americans, no history or analysis of this unique genre of books has yet been carried out. In my paper, I will attempt to place this consumer object in the larger context of 1980s America and the rise of free market capitalism. Much like Milton Friedman's 1980 best-selling book and award-winning documentary on the wonders of free market capitalism titled "Free to Choose," I will argue that Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books offered a novel cultural ideology in which the idea of freedom became synonymous with the idea of choice. This was a dramatic ideological shift since, as I will show, freedom was not always so tightly linked to choice in American history.

Through an archival analysis of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure's culture production, distribution and reception, I will also demonstrate how young Americans were socialized to view individual choice as the harbinger of freedom, a lesson that would have important ramifications for American consumer culture, politics, ideology and much more. Yet I will also show, through these books, the problems which emerged out of such a pro-choice ideology. For instance, while these consumer objects may have given the reader a feeling of power and freedom, the truth is that all the choices open to the young reader had already been prescribed and prearranged by the authors. Much like the modern American supermarket that offers a cornucopia of goods produced by only a small handful of giant corporations, the seemingly empowering aspects of choice in these books often obscured predetermined power structures. This too would have an important impact on the consumers who breathlessly read these books.