

invention and entrepreneurship were associated more with men. Unfortunately, the brief entry called “Women in Toys” focuses on a trade group by that name, rather than a more illuminating consideration of women’s role in American toy culture.

The special-topic essays focus most directly on making connections between toys and broader cultural issues. The entry entitled “Racist Toys” is unflinching in its acknowledgment of the dubious aspects of the toy past. The lengthy entry “Advertising and Toys” provides a useful introduction to the topic. An essay titled “Gender Stereotyping in Toys” draws attention to the ways toys reflect and amplify traditional gender ideals. A few of the other special-topic essays seem partial or perfunctory, but the range of topics indicates the wide sweep of toys in America.

Readers interested in education and child development may be disappointed with related entries. The entry named “Science and Toys” is too short. There are no entries on educational toys, children and toys, or childhood and toys. It should be noted that this volume does not assume toys and childhood to be synonymous; some of the toys are either not primarily aimed at children (Pet Rock) or are presented as significant in relation to their status as adult collectibles (Beanie Babies, PEZ, and Star Wars action figures.)

For generalists seeking an overview of toys in America, or for high school students or college undergraduates seeking basic information for beginning research, this volume might be a good starting place. Older students also might be engaged by the biographical and company entries that go behind the scenes of familiar toys, although the lack of color illustrations ham-

pers the appeal of this volume for casual browsing. *Toys and American Culture* is a limited but useful addition to the expanding toy reference bookshelf, reflecting the growing significance of toys, play, and children as topics worthy of attention within a broader historical and cultural context.

—Samira Kawash, *Rutgers University, Emerita, New Brunswick, NJ*

Connecting Kids to History with Museum Exhibitions

D. Lynn McRainey and John Russick, eds.
Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press,
2010. Bibliography, index. 334 pp.
\$34.95 paper. ISBN: 9781598743838

Despite its focused title, this book tries to accomplish a great deal. The pages cover everything from developmental learning theories to the ways people understand history to techniques for museum exhibit design. It seems to have been assembled as a single go-to volume for curators and designers who are new to working with children in history-museum settings. Unfortunately, this overambition leads to a diffuse, often redundant, and highly varied volume. There are other books to support and supplement this one, particularly pertaining to learning theories, child development, and the fundamentals of exhibition design. The authors’ desire to cover everything for everyone makes for a less powerful and useful text.

This book tackles the basic question: How can museum exhibitions help children learn and experience history? The answer requires understanding children’s

self-centeredness in relation to their comprehension of time and space. Historian Benjamin Filene notes that kids have a “narrow, self-absorbed, presentist outlook” (p. 173) and are better served by exhibitions that move from the personal to the abstract instead of the other way around. Children also have several misconceptions about history because their sense of time is not developed and because they often have an imaginative interpretation of facts. In a provocative essay, Daniel Spock of the Minnesota History Center encourages museum professionals to cultivate rather than quell kids’ fantasies about the past. He asserts that “it is a fact that the past must be imagined in order for it to be experienced” (p. 118), and he cites psychological and neuroscientific studies demonstrating that memory and imagination are intrinsically linked. By engaging in imaginative play, children (and visitors of all ages) can connect with what it was like in the past and incorporate imagined experiences into historical memory.

The book has some surprising gaps regarding the ways children learn and experience museums. While classic learning theorists like Jean Piaget and Lev S. Vygotsky get page time, there is almost no information about how theories of child development and learning have changed in the digital age. Given the recent explosion of books and research projects focused on how the Internet and online gaming affects the communication skills and global awareness of children, I was disappointed to see only a brief mention of the Web and its impact in the final chapter. Similarly, on the museum side, the book lacked discussion of school groups, a way that many children visit museums. While many es-

says explore how families use exhibitions, there is no analysis of design techniques to accommodate large groups of children on school trips—or their teachers with their own particular needs and interests.

When it comes to the practitioner side of making history exhibitions successful for children, several authors turn to the useful example of children’s museums and science centers. These institutions have a long history of developing interactive and multisensory exhibitions for children and their families. I was particularly impressed by the detailed developmental profiles the Brooklyn Children’s Museum constructs to understand how children of different ages might be able to engage with an exhibition physically, socially, and cognitively. While the concept of the audience-centered exhibition is not new to history and art museums, these institutions do not typically make such exhaustive, informed efforts to understand the particular needs of their (mostly adult) visitors.

And this is where the argument and the focus of the book gets a bit cloudy. While many authors advocate for interactive elements, a strong narrative, connections to authentic objects, and development of multisensory environments, most acknowledge that these elements also appeal to adults. Ironically, chapter 9, which has the clear title “Designing for Kids,” presents an argument for universal design—design that accommodates everyone. Readers interested in the topic would be better served picking up *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions* by Kathleen McLean (1993), a full-length book that covers design techniques for people of all kinds (including children).

So is this a book about designing exhibitions specifically for children, or about

developing better exhibitions for everyone? This tension comes out in two excellent essays by Judy Rand and John Russick on writing labels and developing interactive exhibits respectively. Rand presents illustrative examples and research findings demonstrating that short, narrative, first-person labels are particularly effective for children and families. She suggests that exhibition developers need to “form new habits” (p. 269) in their label writing so they can develop wall texts that serve as the basis for family conversations rather than as authoritative treatises on a topic.

Rand is an early pioneer for audience-centered exhibition design; Russick is a newer convert. In a well-written, honest essay about developing interactive exhibition elements, the Chicago History Museum curator recalls a visit to the Field Museum in which his children entreated him to help push a giant block of limestone, and in doing so, imagine what it must have taken to build the pyramids. Russick was a young exhibit preparator at the Field Museum when the block was installed, and at that time, he was confused about its utility in an exhibition about ancient Egypt. It took him “twenty years and two kids” (p. 235) to understand the value of a basic interactive element to making history come alive for young audiences. It simply was not part of what he had been trained to include or expect in a history exhibition. Similarly, he had to learn to become comfortable with the noisy, active way that children learn in museums and to see childrens’ play as a positive addition to his exhibitions.

Ultimately, this book is for people like Russick who are ready to retrain themselves in exhibition design. Interactive exhibits, short labels, contextualized stories, and multisensory experiences are not

exclusively for children. But in developing them, curators are pushed to work in new ways, to stretch beyond what Elizabeth Rawson calls the “book on the walls” (p. 50) approach to exhibitions. The challenge is not only to understand children and take their needs seriously, but to do so for all visitors. When museums present dull history exhibitions for adults, visitors politely read the labels, look at the objects, and say, “well—that’s what the history museum is for.” Thank goodness we have children to demand something more active, more relevant, and more valuable for everyone.

—Nina Simon, *Museum 2.0*, Santa Cruz, CA

On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction

Brian Boyd

Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. References, index. 560 pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780674033573

Brian Boyd’s *On the Origin of Stories* is consilience at its best. Boyd eschews both critical theory and the grinning gargoyles of many contemporary evolutionary psychologies. For too long, readers have squirmed as theory and cultural critique made a shambles of literary analysis. Rather, Boyd sees science and the humanities as equally orthodox and as mutually supportive. An acknowledged authority on Vladimir Nabokov’s life and work, Boyd is well qualified to take a Nabokovian approach to literature. Biological and cultural insights find common ground in this perspective. Like mind and nature in the