

a valuable resource primarily for practitioners and undergraduate students of early-childhood education at Australian universities. It presents numerous perspectives on the conceptualization of play and a comprehensive review of how many individuals—such as teachers, family members, and theorists—conceptualize play. Yet the content in the book has a narrow focus, and it appears to be based on the Early Years Learning Framework, which is a basic element in the Australian government's National Quality Framework for early-childhood education and care. Fleer discusses important theories from classical and contemporary perspectives, but it seems that she selected these theories based on either the National Quality Framework or the particular theories she considered to be the most important. However, she does present and analyze the most prevalent theories (e.g., of Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget) and current theories (e.g., theories of mind) about early-childhood pedagogy and play. She uses the theory of Vygotsky and other cultural-historical approaches to describe current developments in play research and the role of play in early-childhood development and education. She defines play based on contemporary definitions by early-childhood professionals—Jaipaul Roopnarine, Peter Gray, and Doris Bergen. Since play has been difficult to define, many play researchers and experts prefer to use different criteria to identify their use of play. Fleer might have strengthened her definition by including such criteria for play as spontaneity, flexibility, and interest for children.

The book's most noteworthy contributions are its chapter on families at play

and its presentation of a variety of cultural perspectives on children's play. For example, Fleer provides an illuminating play vignette about children from Singapore. In addition, the book uses several theories of play, real-life examples, and glossaries that help students understand children's play. The book also includes the perspectives of teachers on children's play, which help students understand the complexities of play as presented in different classrooms. Fleer's discussion of the use of technology in children's play should also be noted, because—according to the National Association for the Education of Young children—young children are currently experiencing an unexpectedly shifting digital terrain. Enjoyable and engaging, shared experiences in technology can promote children's learning and development in the classroom and at home.

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—Olivia N. Saracho, *University of Maryland, College Park, MD*

### **The Ball: The Object of the Game**

*John Fox*

New York: Harper Perennial, 2012.

Notes, bibliography, index. 400 pp.

\$14.99 paper. ISBN: 9780061881794

Why do we play ball? *The Ball: The Object of the Game* begins with the conceit that John Fox—prompted by an offhand question tossed out by his seven-year-old son—embarked on a quest to articulate why humans play ball. Although the underlying motivation for the work clearly comes from the years he spent researching an ancient Mayan ball game, this father-

son moment of bonding sets up the book's conversational tone and serves as its narrative thread. Fox begins by claiming the ball as a universal object: one that has been differently bounced, kicked, thrown, and batted about by cultures for all of human history. He wisely declines an attempt at an encyclopedia of ball games, and instead chooses to focus on eight exemplary ball sports from the past and present, those that, "best reveal . . . key historical moments in the evolution of ball games, from the ancient world to the present" (p. 10). Fox gives sustained attention to the Kirkwall Ba', *jeu de paume* (or royal tennis), the Mayan ball game and its present-day iteration *ulama*, the American Indian tradition of lacrosse, American baseball, football, and basketball, and, at the end, a nod to soccer. As Fox elaborates these examples of balls being batted around for the purposes of pick-up play, complex ritual, and major media event, another question comes to the fore: How do the ways we play, and their differences, matter?

Fox argues that playing with balls is and has been central to human development—among others, he points to William Calvin's work suggesting an evolutionary connection between human capacity for language and precision with projectiles. He also argues that our current forms of play have been corrupted by what other scholars have dubbed the sports-industrial complex. At times Fox's evolutionary and cultural arguments feel conflated, like his exhortation that we, "reclaim our purest, most primal connections to the games we love and remind ourselves why they matter so much" (p. 11). These calls for a return to purity are rarely compelling, not because our present moment does not desperately

need transforming but rather because referring to a fantasy of an idyllic past is not the best tactic for making different and better futures. From Fox's own stories of ball games in early Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and Mayan civilizations, it does not seem as if earlier chronological iterations of ball games were somehow purer. They were just importantly different in the ways they served as reflections and material mediations of their times and places. But his argument gathers urgency when he locates it in relation to the recent work in child development, which indicates that, as a culture, we have a "play deficit." I wanted Fox to be both louder and more careful here. A lack of play is a big deal when you put it together with research on the importance of play to cognitive development. He could have taken more time to tease out the nuances of this research since it lends his own work some serious stakes.

Even the most serious sport, game, and play scholars will find something new in Fox's book. Readers will find themselves educated into the histories both of games that they have never heard of before and games that they only thought they knew all about. Fox's pilgrimages to distant places and into distant pasts make the book read as a cross between travel literature and history. One of the strongest sections describes the remarkable rubber ball sent ricocheting around massive ball courts by the Mayans. Naming a ball a type of technology shifts common historical narratives about technological capacity. Revealing that the Mayans had developed a fairly reliable process for stabilizing rubber many centuries before Goodyear and Hancock fought to patent the vulcanization processes, for

example, provides us a critical purchase on our notions of property. Fox's description of how a nine-pound *ulama* ball crashing into his chest in the small town of Los Llanitos transformed his understanding of the ancient game he had studied for years, also makes a powerful case for the types of knowledge that can only be gained through bodily impact.

The second half of the book sinks into the social history of twentieth-century American sports. Of particular interest are the early rule debates in American football that provide back story to the present-day concussion crisis; a profound story about Onondaga Nation lacrosse players refusing to travel on U.S. passports when England deemed their travel documents inadequate; and Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir's stunning achievements in women's high school basketball in the face of anti-Muslim taunts. In turning to these histories, Fox, at times, leaves the ball behind. But although I had hoped to learn more about the dynamics and politics of industrial pneumatic objects, the stories he highlights are important and undertold and mark one of the book's important contributions.

The most frustrating aspect of the book is its tone. Fox pitches it for a broad audience, purposefully refusing academic jargon. But it is possible to forsake jargon and still grant your readers respect. I felt anxiously anticipated instead of trusted. This tone may be an unintended effect of using his son's question as a hook, which implicitly aligns his readers with the seven-year-old whose question he is answering. The father-son through line also amplifies Fox's lack of any sustained address of gender. It is certainly true that the history of ball sports is, until very recently, mostly a

history of men playing each other. Which begs the question, why? A long history of men playing sports, especially one that devotes only a handful of its three hundred pages to women, needs to address masculinity. In skirting this subject, Fox misses a true opportunity to address our desperate lack of spaces and languages for discussing how men connect and combat other men through objects. He also misses an opportunity to speak to the fundamental queerness of sport—the range of intimacy and eroticism that its cordoned-off spaces open up. Despite these drawbacks, both fans and scholars will appreciate the depth and the range of research that Fox has done on such a central object of play. He has performed a real service by gathering all these different histories together and giving them the opportunity to sit next to each other.

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—Carlin Wing, *New York University, New York, NY*

### **Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons and Dragons and the People Who Play It**

*David M. Ewalt*

New York: Scribner, 2013. Contents, notes, index. 288 pp. \$26.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781451640502.

A few pages into David Ewalt's auto-ethnography of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), I learned what to expect. "I am not a wizard," Ewalt writes, "but I play one every Tuesday night" (p. 4). Technically, Ewalt plays a cleric, a divine spell caster