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## Book Reviews

### **Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World**

*Steven Johnson*

New York: Riverhead Books, 2016.

Introduction, footnotes, bibliography, and index. 323 pp. \$30.00 cloth.

ISBN: 9780399184482

What fun it is to read a book about how fun has influenced human history! In *Wonderland*, Steven Johnson, iconoclastic cultural critic of the best sort, has turned several historical interpretations inside out to reveal that amusement and amusing things have produced some of the most profound transformations that fill everyday life. In six meaty chapters, savored with engaging stories and illustrations, he explains how “delight” was a driver of historical change through a “hummingbird effect,” meaning a “process in which an innovation in one field sets in motion transformation in seemingly unrelated fields” (p. 12). Thus innovative playthings such as music boxes and player pianos influenced the development of computer software, a bouncing ball used in a natives’ game observed by Columbus led to an international rubber industry, and the taste for exotic spices,

such as cinnamon and pepper, propelled the expansion of international trade and the spread of Islam.

Johnson identifies other instances of amusement providing a seedbed for social and economic transformation: A roulette wheel hack led to personal devices such as iPods and iPhones. Taverns, inns, and coffeehouses combined public space in private establishments where some of the most influential political movements, such as the American Revolution, were born. And there is more to each chapter. The path from fun to fundamental sometimes included slavery and other human suffering that Johnson admits cannot be overlooked. But ultimately, the “pursuit of pleasure” helped “stitch together a global fabric of shared culture” (p. 13). That pursuit also inspired big ideas. Johnson would not want to discredit influences on Charles Darwin, such as the voyage of the *Beagle* and Malthusian theories, but in 1838, two decades before *Origin of the Species* was published, Darwin went to observe Jenny, an imported orangutan at London’s Regent Park Zoo, where he found the ape dressed like a schoolgirl and acting like a “naughty child.” Afterward, Darwin wrote

that rather than consider man the result of “interposition of a deity,” one should consider him “created from animals” (p. 269).

One limitation to this kind of approach to historical change is that the analysis is overly linear: this led to that led to this led to that. For example, according to Johnson, the delight among seventeenth-century British elite women in shopping for chintz and calico from India sparked the demand for cotton that led to the invention of machines to produce cotton fabrics that in turn fed the Industrial Revolution and, sadly, the atrocity of slavery in the American South. History, however, is complicated. The web of historical change contains many strands coming from different directions. For example, the human quest for swifter and more efficient transportation that led to railroads also contributed to industrialization. Also, Johnson’s attribution of American slavery to cotton plantations overlooks the broad incidence of slavery in domestic and service functions—a much greater proportion of Southern urban households than rural households owned slaves. Still, Johnson’s point is worthwhile. The sequence of a big change such as the Industrial Revolution did not have to start with serious men building machines and factories to create a new culture. Rather, women’s “mercurial appetites” for enjoyable things drove the advance (p. 32).

Without being explicit about meaning, Johnson uses concepts of play, joy, entertainment, and fun interchangeably. Thus, the book’s subtitle is misleading because his definitions are inadequate. Perhaps, Johnson could have applied Tom Sawyer’s characterization of play, as opposed to work: “Work,” Tom declared,

“is what a body is obliged to do. Play is what a body is not obliged to do.” It was the delight in that nonobligatory quality that planted the seeds of change that Johnson celebrates so delightfully.

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—Howard P. Chudacoff, *Brown University, Providence, RI.*

### **Choice Time: How to Deepen Learning through Inquiry and Play, PreK–2**

*Renee Dinnerstein*

Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann, 2016. Foreword, conclusion, acknowledgments, and works cited. 164pp. \$28.13 paper. ISBN: 9780325077659

*Choice Time: How to Deepen Learning through Inquiry and Play, PreK–2* is a thorough look at younger children’s play through inquiry and exploration. Author Renee Dinnerstein divides the book into two primary aspects that promote play choice: part 1 discusses the importance of play, different types of play, and classroom logistics of play-centered development; while part 2 delves into the explanation and creation of these varied, multilayered centers using blocks, science, reading, dramatic play, math, and art.

In part 1, Dinnerstein describes why choice time and play are pivotal to children. Here, she recognizes many forms of play for their advantages, including artistic, sensory, fine-motor, rule-based, mastery, construction, make-believe, symbolic, and language play. Additionally, she says this play-based curricu-