

adulthood as it is in childhood, ensuring that his analysis is as innovative as it is comprehensive. Particularly inclusive are the brief sections describing play in the lives of children with disabilities.

The third section concentrates on a less-popular subject: the value of play in development and therapeutic interventions. In contrast to the wide-ranging review of the first two parts, here L'Abate neglects to address how important play is in rehabilitation. Although the book is aimed at a variety of professionals, his analysis rests heavily on psychotherapy. For example, his focus lies more on the emotional and relational benefits of play than its sensory-motor and cognitive usefulness.

Finally, L'Abate devotes a section to contemporary controversies in the field, including the function of technological media. However, he neglects to explore fully the ramifications of this shift in lifestyle for expressions of play. For example, he fails to mention the ubiquity of mobile phones and social-networking Web sites, and he addresses the Internet only briefly.

In his conclusion, L'Abate offers the reader an organizing framework of play using concepts from relational-competence theory. He defines play as a relational activity that occurs with others or with the environment, and he approaches his conclusion from this perspective. A reader unfamiliar with this theoretical approach will labor through this section. L'Abate could have strengthened the presentation of this framework if he had incorporated examples from the literature he reviewed in the previous sections. In addition, the reader who wants to appreciate fully L'Abate's innovative contribution to the study of play presented in this con-

cluding chapter will need to have a basic understanding of relational-competence theory.

Despite some of the restrictions, this comprehensive handbook covers a wide range of topics related to the study of play. It is clearly written and can serve as a necessary textbook for graduate-level courses that focus on the study of play and leisure across the lifespan. *The Praeger Handbook of Play across the Life Cycle* is an engaging, extensive overview of play from different perspectives, emphasizing play as a valuable activity for individuals of all ages.

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### **A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Toward a Contemporary Child-Saving Movement**

*Joe L. Frost*

New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. Illustrations, bibliographical references, index. xx, 295 pp. \$49.95 paper. ISBN: 9780415806206

Children's play, so goes the story told by historians, is a universal phenomenon, a force of nature considered by adults as too trivial to describe or disturb, a fact which secured its autonomy and transmission from one generation to the next. Aside from a few classical references (Plato and his Renaissance followers), play was first "discovered" by the Enlightenment and made into a fundamental philosophical entity supporting the modern ideal of the self as spontaneous and free. Since play does not require the use of compulsion,

it was refined by social reformers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a successful social, educational, and therapeutic practice. The golden age of public play ushered in by these developments, as Joe L. Frost argues convincingly in his timely and alarming *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments*, has come to an end. "Even under the most terrible conditions children played their traditional games in their traditional ways—*until now*," writes Frost. "Now, for the first time in history, the children of entire industrialized nations, especially American children, are losing their natural outdoor grounds for play and forgetting how to engage in free, spontaneous outdoor play. The consequences are profound" (pp. 269–70).

The status of play and childhood are undergoing profound, unplanned transformations under globalization—according to Frost's account—to the detriment of the well-being of children. Can play policy, invented to ameliorate the effects of industrialization and promote mass democracy, be revived to address the challenges of the information age and the looming environmental crisis? Frost emphatically thinks so. The structure of the book is organized to promote his passionate plea for the revival of organized public efforts to control and direct childhood and save it from the unintended consequences of such policies as No Child Left Behind (which subvert education into preparation for testing, gradually eliminating recess and physical education, which many regard as a waste of time), the culture of litigation (which by eliminating risk from outdoor play, sequesters play into bland, standardized play spaces), and the profusion of cyberplay and other sedentary forms of commercial

amusement (which contribute, together with industrialized, sugary diets, to obesity and deterioration in health and fitness). As a hybrid of scholarship and advocacy, as a general survey of play movements and play environments, and as a passionate manifesto for reviving the role of play policy for the next century, *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments* constructs a social history of play in America that is determined to prove the beneficial role of play and the pathological consequences of "play deprivation."

The history employs two grand narratives and two different methodologies: an organic, grassroots history of play, which is indebted to the projects of oral and vernacular history based on diaries and letters of ordinary people; and an institutional history of play, which traces the top-down development of play policy to ameliorate the crisis of childhood under massive urbanization and immigration.

The first grand narrative begins with Native American play culture, which for Frost embodies the lost ideal of spontaneous, free play in the wilderness. He writes: "Perhaps no culture integrated play into daily life, culture and work more richly than that of the Native Americans prior to the arrival of the settlers" (p. 35). It continues with accounts of play in the early colonial period, the resiliency and resourcefulness of play culture among slaves in antebellum America, and the play practices of immigrants in urban slums. It concludes with the Great Depression, a period usually absent from most histories of play. Frost's account of the period is informed by his own childhood memories, which motivate his advocacy of rugged play in wilderness settings and his design of the playground of the future as a con-

densation of nature into urban playscapes. Here, Frost belongs to a venerable tradition of reformers such as Octavia Hill, the first to integrate playgrounds into housing estates, and Lady Allen of Hurtwood and Carl Theodor Sørensen, the pioneers of the adventure playground, all of whom were driven by the desire to provide disadvantaged urban populations with the intense play experiences of their country childhoods. But the reason Frost provides play a central place during the Depression is strategic. It suggests obvious parallels with the present economic collapse and advocates a revival of Roosevelt's New Deal policies. Frost mentions that these included child-welfare programs, but we might well add another important New Deal experiment—the Greenbelt New Towns and their child-centered planning.

This dimension of organized policy is part of the second strand of play history for which Frost provides an authoritative account, in which the multiple organizations and movements promoting play are masterly contextualized within their respective political, social, cultural, and geographical settings.

It is ironic that the constitution of play as a universal right enshrined by the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child was followed by the decay of public play culture in the United States and the virtual disappearance of children from the public realm. Of course, the declaration has yet to be ratified by Congress, as Frost reminds his readers. Frost provides a systemic explanation of this ironic development. In doing so, he also provides the conditions for examining some of the underlying assumptions of play advocacy implicit in his account. This, in turn, allows the

readers to see that the assumptions make the prospect of reviving play policy relevant. In other words, we are beginning to see the premise that play is an essential biological need. As developmental psychologist Martin Woodhead has argued in *The Oxford Review of Education* and elsewhere, designating a social practice as an essential “need” allows those in position of authority to make their value judgments appear objective and indisputable. It also implies—according to Woodward—that “dire consequences” will follow if that need is not met through what he calls “appropriate intervention.” Woodhead’s argument should warm the hearts of those who wish to define play as a biological need and its lack as “play deprivation.”

Frost grounds his advocacy upon various scientific studies, some of them based on neurology, to support the view that play is essential for the developing brain or that recess has a measurable impact on mental health and classroom performance. Instrumentalizing play and valuing it for its measured utility is precisely the problem of our times. Perhaps, as the psychologist David Cohen has suggested in *The Development of Play* (1987), play ought to be promoted because it is pleasurable, not because it is useful.

Even if I were to criticize Frost for declaring play essential and for romanticizing spontaneous play in nature as a fundamental human need, I would not be necessarily implying that his aims are misguided. On the contrary, the urgent appeal for governmental intervention in *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments* identifies a fundamental flaw of our times—the lack of a viable project for childhood, which now drifts rudderless between the Scylla of privatization of child

rearing as the competitive responsibility of parents and the Charybdis of market forces addressing children as consumers. But there is room for skepticism. Some of us doubt that the twentieth century's discourse of play could—or should—be revived to address the perils of the twenty-first. The future might require a different strategy and, maybe, a less technophobic conception of play, one that more befits a “posthuman” age.

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### **Toy Monster: The Big, Bad World of Mattel**

*Jerry Oppenheimer*

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The behind-the-scenes stories of toy makers have repeatedly inspired journalists and even those in the toy industry themselves to write highly accessible books for the general public. Jerry Oppenheimer's *Toy Monster* plants itself firmly in this tradition. Oppenheimer is the successful biographer of Martha Stewart, Barbara Walters, the Clintons, and the Kennedys. A mark of his standing in today's market for tell-all biography comes in the back-of-book endorsement from Kitty Kelley, famous—some would say infamous—writer of unauthorized biographies of the Bush family, British royalty, and media celebrities.

Given all this, it would be surprising if Oppenheimer's story turned out to be an

insightful account of the process of toy design and marketing. It would be shocking if it were a thoughtful consideration of the impact and meaning of commercialized playthings on children and their parents. No worry. Oppenheimer neither surprises nor shocks us on these scores. Instead, he gives us the inside dope on the big players at Mattel.

We meet founders Ruth and Elliot Handler, the early designer Jack Ryan, the Barbie-like CEO of the late 1990s Jill Barad, and the current chief Bob Eckert. Based on interviews with their children, their friends, and their former associates (some sympathetic, others not), Oppenheimer's book offers an endless string of colorful stories. He presents the money-minded figure of Ruth, the egoist whose manipulation of sales records to boost stock prices in the early 1970s led to her ouster. Then there is her husband Elliot, the quiet and artistic toy maker. We meet Ryan, the narcissistic engineer, who “really” was responsible for Barbie, not Ruth who stole the “look” from a German doll named Bild Lili. Barad comes off as the flamboyant fashionista whose excessive self-confidence and drive for power and wealth could not even save her own job amid all the failed acquisitions and questionable accounting. Oppenheimer includes stories, too, of Eckert, the quiet midwestern corporate official who strove to keep the brands profitable and out of the news despite scandals over lead paint and ingestible magnets in Mattel's toys and the legal battles with MCA Entertainment Inc. over its Bratz dolls, the first successful competitor to Barbie. The book includes a lot of discussion about the Handlers and their ultimate break with Ryan (whose lusty lifestyle they found objectionable)