

acter of play with great clarity.

“Come sail with me through a life spent fishing the waters of play theory,” Brian Sutton-Smith opens with in chapter 15, titled “Play Theory: A Personal Journey and New Thoughts” (p. 239). It is an invitation that might just as well refer to the entire handbook, for the seamless and pleasurable sequential logic of its chapters, each stocked with academic curiosities and fascinating anecdotes, allow the reader to fly-fish in this vast pool of exciting knowledge.

In chapter 1, for example, the evolutionary biologist Gordon M. Burghardt points to the importance of low-stress settings as fundamental for the initiation of play—a point that historian Jon-Paul C. Dyson refers to when explaining the suppression of play by Puritans and Pilgrims, whose colonies were, certainly in the seventeenth century, genuinely struggling for survival (chapter 2). Anthropologist Garry Chick surveys cross-cultural play research (chapter 4) and demonstrates how children’s play is very commonly imitative and serves a preparatory function for adulthood, to which Sutton-Smith (chapter 15) adds that adult-oriented child play is prevalent in traditional societies. These anthropological findings cast a similarly fresh perspective on other areas of play research. For instance, education researchers David Kuschner (chapter 17) and Olga Jarrett (chapter 18), and therapeutic playworker Fraser Brown (chapter 19), discuss the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries debates among educators and play practitioners about the role of play as a didactic tool, both within and outside the classroom, and the extent to which it ought to be supervised.

This handbook does not merely point to potential historical and cultural biases, such as the notion of “free play,” but charts the extent to which play has been a scholarly topic for at least fifteen hundred years, beginning with Hellenic philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, as discussed by Wendy Russell and Emily Ryall in a chapter titled “Philosophizing Play.” Gwen Gordon’s contribution manages to bridge the most ancient theories of play to neurobiology, one of the most exciting and recent fields of play research (chapter 32). The ancient Greek conception of “the good life” comprised both eudaimonia, or actualizing one’s unique potential, and hedonia, or pleasure and positive affect, an old distinction Gordon persuasively reconciles by pointing to the discreet, but interrelated neural substrates of the PLAY, CARE, and SEEKING system.

It is most fitting that the final chapter is written by Jaak Panksepp, the pioneer of affective neuroscience whose work demonstrates that real social play is an unassailable necessity for healthy brain maturation and prosocial behavior and that the increasingly diminishing opportunities to engage in play pose a genuine crisis that will not only have a negative impact on the well-being of individuals but also on the flourishing of society itself.

—Phillip A. Prager, *IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark*

Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child

J. Allan Mitchell

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Notes, index,

images. 249 pp. \$25.00 paper.
ISBN: 9780816689972

Becoming Human is a curious book in the best of ways. Its broad questions regarding ontogeny—this is, becoming (or development)—are posed intriguingly, and its intense focus on items some people might consider mundane, such as eggs, toys, and tables, helps us view these familiar objects in fascinating ways. J. Allan Mitchell's coherent argument regarding perpetual mutability in life creatively connects the particular with the universal.

Structurally, the book comprises a series of three essays linked thematically by ideas of relations between humans and the objects—animate or inanimate—with which humans interact. The first essay, titled “Being Born,” focuses on long-standing conceptions of cosmic eggs and embryogenesis that hark back to ancient and medieval times yet have some surprisingly modern connotations. The second essay, titled “Childish Things,” discusses toys and play in the Middle Ages yet manages to enrich our understanding of society in the fourteenth and the twenty-first centuries. In Mitchell's last essay, titled “The Mess,” tables and table manners across eras come under scrutiny as the author explains the influence these multi-purpose surfaces have on children, adults, society, and literature.

Drawing on a growing comprehension of the Anthropocene Epoch (or the time period in which the human race has appreciably affected the overall ecosystem) among scholars of philosophy and science such as Bruno Latour, Mitchell compares our anxiety about the earth becoming an environmentally damaged

planet to the medieval Christian sense of a fallen world, tainted by original sin (p. 43). Specific causes and symptoms may be different, but the fault for both notions lies inescapably with humanity. This type of argument underpins the whole book as the author argues that past and present (and future) have far more correspondences than we may think. Fourteenth-century poets like John Gower accepted the interconnectedness of everything; it is the work of scholars and scientists now to rediscover this idea.

Readers interested in child development and theories of play will benefit from the in-depth evaluation of toys in “Childish Things.” Starting with assertions that toys are not necessarily passive but “quietly sanction the most conventional values,” Mitchell also considers how children play with objects discarded by adults, thereby conserving abandoned items and customs (p. 66). The author discusses how miniature versions of objects provide a sense of power yet may also prove “disorienting and dysfunctional” (p. 95). In a wide-ranging example centering on a very specific toy, the author spends several pages describing a miniature mounted knight made of pewter and forged during the fourteenth century in England. To Mitchell, this small trinket suggests a wealth of information about the interdependent medieval society that produced it. While clearly celebrating chivalric ideals, the toy physically merges horse and rider as well as the armor covering both into one object (also underlining a theme of the book by showing the malleability of materials to become anything). As such, the tiny representation reflects the relationship between fighting man and horse and equipment (human + animal +

mineral = knight). Furthermore, Mitchell points out that while the toy reflects the warrior class in medieval times, it also reflects the artisan class who made not only the toy but the armor and weapons of real knights—revealing a bond of dependence between these groups (p. 64). Such connections between goods and classes obviously still have relevance today.

Occasionally, a few questionable choices appear in *Becoming Human*. Following the theme of combining past and present, the author may mix the commentaries from medieval writers and modern ones too much or too selectively, suggesting greater similarities than there are. Once—and only once—Mitchell admits (almost painfully) that “none of this is to deny that medieval and modern sciences are not sometimes worlds apart” (p. 55). Also, the nimble long jumping around in time from giants such as Augustine and Boethius to Isidore and then quickly on to William of Conches and other great thinkers of the High Middle Ages is not only dizzying but perhaps misleading when one considers the centuries between. A few smaller points, too, come across as contradictory because Mitchell refers to the fourteenth-century toy knight as “an anachronistic idea of the man-at-arms” yet also describes Geoffroi de Charny, a famous knight of the same century, writing manuals of chivalry for boys of the nobility, who presumably trained to be not-so-anachronistic men-at-arms (or knights), in the same period (p. 59).

The prose in *Becoming Human* can be rather dense in places; this book is not a quick read. Filled with studious words, some interpretations are overwrought, and the many double entendres about tables

could certainly be weeded out without loss. However, when the author leads his readers up high intellectual staircases to appreciate ideas concerning reciprocal influences and interactions in the shifting times around us, he sparks curious thoughts in the reader, and new perspectives appear. This is exactly what a scholarly book should do. *Becoming Human* delivers a remarkable return on a reader's investment of time as it offers new insights into play and society during medieval times and contributes substantially to revitalizing the study of medieval history.

—Paul Dingman, *Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.*

The Science of Play: How to Build Playgrounds that Enhance Children's Development

Susan Solomon

Lebanon, NH: University of New England, 2014. Notes, images, selected bibliography, index. 208 pp. \$40.00, cloth. ISBN: 9781611686104

Through *The Science of Play: How to Build Playgrounds that Enhance Children's Development*, Susan G. Solomon strongly advocates for the revamping of playgrounds in the United States. According to the author, playgrounds in this country are poorly designed and a waste of funding. She makes the case for replicating the playgrounds of Europe and Japan that provide spaces for taking risks, solving problems, experiencing natural consequences, and engaging in multiple-generational social interactions.