

cating for the inclusion of superhero play in early childhood contexts. The concluding chapters would be a good place in the book to summarize and support more strongly how and why children should have the right to engage in this type of play. While the author references children's emotional development connected to superhero play within the book, these chapters would be an excellent place to emphasize the importance of this type of play for children's emotional development and mental health.

Given the current concerns about mass shootings in the United States, a war in Ukraine, and a global pandemic, it is essential to note that allowing children's superhero, power play, and play with themes of death and killing is probably even more important now to support their social-emotional development and processing of the world. *Calling All Superheroes: Supporting and Developing Superhero Play in the Early Years* is a timely and valuable resource for educators worldwide to consider and reflect on superhero play and all the related controversial play themes.

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—Jeanne Galbraith, *State University of New York at Geneseo, Geneseo, NY*

**Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture**

*Meredith A. Bak*

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What makes children so impressionable? In *Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture*, Meredith Bak reframes this loaded question by tracing how such anxieties arose from a nineteenth-century culture in which visions of childhood emerged from engagement with optical play. For instance, the image of the impressionable child arose from optical theories on persistence of vision that posit vision as literally leaving impressions through “an inscriptive, percussive process in which the eye's surface is struck or marked” (p. 10). Through this and other cultural notions of visuality, Bak argues that nineteenth-century optical play served as “a key component in the formation of modern middle-class childhood” (p. 26). Childhood, it turns out, is literally a matter of optics. Yet, as Bak demonstrates, the cultural optics that frame and construct playful visions of childhood do not constitute a singular vision. Instead, each newly invented optical toy rekindled cultural debates through which recurring paradoxes were continually reimaged. Thus, Bak takes particular care in tracing how discursive constellations coalesced around different optical toys with “distinct material features that invite different forms of interactivity, manipulation, and social and individual play” (p. 19).

To this end, *Playful Visions* is organized as a series of case studies in which each chapter traces how one such constellation orbits a different kind of optical play. After contextualizing her project with two introductory chapters that situate optical toys within childhood and media culture, Bak begins her case studies by exploring how the visual and verbal play mediated

by the thaumatrope expanded “conceptions of children’s literacy to include visual acuity and the capacity to play with, rather than simply understand, language” (p. 27). Then, in a chapter on “Seeing Things,” Bak widens her scope by exploring the social and material contexts for optical toys. For instance, Bak explores how parlor play paradoxically both relies on middle-class leisure culture and alludes to industrialized factory labor. A chapter on moveable toy books then considers how now-familiar debates on media spectatorship arose around optical books that afforded self-directed children’s play. Debates around color education and the kaleidoscope in the following chapter allow Bak to consider the intertwining of scientific and aesthetic in the construction of the middle-class subject. Demonstrating the shifts and contradictions that characterized these changing cultural optics, Bak’s next chapter on the stereoscope notes how “the decades-old practices of optical discernment that persistence-of-vision toys sought to instill” (p. 192) was contradicted by how “the stereoscope industry and its supporters endeavored to sell the mediated gaze as the ‘real’ thing” (p. 193). Further complications arise in the final chapter, which considers how traditional optical toys have been resurrected with altered significance after the emergence of screen-based media have subtly altered discourses of visuality and childhood.

As these case studies scrutinize how ocularcentric thinking influenced the construction of modern childhood, *Playful Visions* itself becomes an exercise in optics. While many of the central cultural tensions analyzed in this book will be familiar to readers who are conversant

in contemporary or nineteenth-century rhetoric around childhood, reframing these tensions around the specific material culture of optical toys presents them in a new light. In particular, Bak’s toy-centered optics makes two notable contributions by framing childhood culture through the doubled lenses of material culture and media culture.

While childhood culture is very much shaped by cultural imaginaries, Bak’s toy-centered optics grounds these otherwise airy imaginaries in material culture. Backed by thorough archival research on the toys themselves and the cultural conversations that surrounded them, Bak consistently shows how larger concerns of nineteenth-century society are refracted through the cultures and material practices of optical play. In so doing, Bak also shows how broader cultural formations that construct and sustain middle-class society, including scientific and psychological theories, pedagogical and developmental doctrines, and racial and gender inequities are similarly grounded in material practices. This emphasis on materiality provides a vital perspective for understanding how the tactile and visual performance of play contributes to the development of ideological yet embodied subjects.

Furthermore, Bak’s toy-centered optics frame this material culture as an early form of media play that sets the stage for contemporary concerns around children’s media use. Resisting the tendency to reduce early optical toys to mere precursors to cinema, Bak does justice to optical toy media as they played out in their own time while also offering nuanced analyses of the “shared currents of optimism

or anxiety that seem to run through time” (p. 22). Thus, *Playful Visions* describes play as a perpetually contested space that was and still remains “inseparably bound to broader media and technology cultures” (p. 223). In particular, it shows how contemporary concerns over media spectatorship arise from longstanding cultural debates around visuality that helped define modern childhood.

This multilayered study presents unique and compelling optics on the generative interplay between childhood, material, and media cultures. By deftly weaving together widely varied source material, eloquently engaging how cultural ideas echo across history, and rigorously contextualizing its histories within cultural theories, Bak paints a profound, holistic picture of the complex cultural formations that coalesce around play, proving that charting these cultural constellations around optical toys has a distinctive merit. While *Playful Visions* is clearly a must-read for scholars invested in the cultural history of optical toys, its insightful and nuanced optics will also appeal to anyone interested in how playful visions frame the interconnected anxieties and optimisms pertaining to childhood, material, and media cultures.

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—J. Rey Lee, *Cascadia College, Bothell, WA*

**Playing with History: American Identities and Children’s Consumer Culture**

*Molly Rosner*

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021. Contents, introduction,

conclusion, acknowledgments, notes, index, and photographs. 193 pp. \$29.95, paper. ISBN: 9781978822078

*In Playing with History: American Identities and Children’s Consumer Culture*, Molly Rosner examines how children’s toys, dolls, and books (collectively referred to as didactic amusements) promote a particular version of American history. While many might consider these didactic amusements frivolous, Rosner conveys the weight of the political and ideological messages sold to children during the twentieth century. The book begins by exploring the early days of the toy industry followed by four case studies from different eras in which she focuses on a specific artifact of childhood to examine messages about America and race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

In chapter 1, “Made in America: The Rise of the American Toy Industry,” Rosner considers how the toy industry created toys and marketing that contributed to gender and racial roles in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. The section entitled “The Marketing and Distributing of Class and Racial Roles” provides a critical examination of urban growth, the infrastructure of toy production and transportation, and Christmas. Rosner considers how department stores and Christmas window displays added to class divisions. Children on the streets were able to participate only as voyeurs of the trappings inside. The section entitled “Racialized Toys during Jim Crow” provides a critical analysis of the lack of toys that represented Black children by juxtaposing white character toys with Black character toys, as well as the limited