

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.

—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

availability of Black dolls. Rosner argues that “these toys conveyed to children that certain races and ethnicities were meant to be subservient, disposable, and abusable” (p. 22). A compelling point that Rosner makes is how the toy industry reinforced the notion that people of different races stay within their own group.

Chapter 2, “Dolling Up History: 1930s Antique Dolls and the Clark Doll Study,” explores the Doll Show of 1938, which was hosted by a group of wealthy women in Manhattan, New York. During the show, more than two thousand handmade and antique dolls were displayed. The show was free and provided an escape from the Shantytowns scattered across the city during the 1930s. The organizers yearned for a simpler time and often criticized industrialization, mass immigration, and urbanization. Rosner calls attention to the irony of this pastime because the women were participating in a feminist activity. They used the dolls to educate people and involve themselves in public life and, therefore, gained power and influence.

Rosner examines the Orange and Landmark history books published during the Cold War in chapter 3 and looks at the selling of multicultural girlhood through the lens of the American Girl Doll from 1986 to present in her fifth chapter. I agree with the author that the “American Girl doll and book collection represents perhaps the most serious and successful attempt in twentieth-century American culture to use dolls and books to teach children through history” (p. 119). However, studies of American Girl, like Barbie, often fall flat because there is only so much to say about these artifacts and most of it seems to have been said. To bring the

study of American Girls up to present day, it might be useful to consider adult play and social media.

In chapter 4, “Family Fun for Everyone? Freedomland, U.S.A., 1960–1964,” Rosner looks at Freedomland, an amusement park located in the Bronx for a brief period. Freedomland featured exhibits, rides, shops, and performances representing landmark American events like the Chicago Fire of 1871 and stagecoach robberies. Rosner notes, “by creating a literal miniature nation, which required the purchase of tickets for entry, it made consumer citizenship the primary mode of engagement with U.S. history for both children and adults; and by re-creating and miniaturizing the past for spectacle, it attempted to make the tumultuous, violent, conflicted past controllable and simpler to digest” (p. 85). The chapter may have benefitted from further exploration of how Freedomland, like many other places of amusements, portrayed women and gender roles. The park hosted a “Most Watchable Girl” contest held by the American Society of Girl Watchers, dating games, and appearances by Miss Wool of America. One might also argue that Freedomland gave between two thousand and three thousand people work, including such positions as pretzel bending, seal keeping, doughnut rolling, and carousel-horse jeweler. Perhaps by further exploring the gimmicky spectacle of it all, we can gain an understanding of counter-culture.

Playing with History is well written and organized in such a way that it demonstrates how to use artifacts of childhood to approach the study of American history. In Rosner’s conclusion, she demands that

“it is not enough to diversify product lines” and that “such representations will not necessarily teach children about their own experiences of discrimination or systematic inequalities in the world around them” (p. 148). This call to action is one of the most promising aspects of the book. Rosner invites the reader to be an active participant and observer of childhood artifacts, and everyone from scholars of play to toy industry professionals to guardians can benefit from this message.

—Michelle Parnett-Dwyer, *The Strong*,
Rochester, NY

Play like a Feminist

Shira Chess

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Playing like a Feminist begins with two aims: to introduce gamers to feminism and feminists to games. Chess argues that considering feminism will allow gamers to embrace equality and improve video games. Additionally, encouraging feminists to rethink the value of play can unlock the resistant potential of leisure and playful experiences. While the book is unlikely to connect with gamers unfamiliar with feminism, it is the second aim, addressed to feminists, where the book is most successful.

Chess begins by describing the complicated relationship between play and girlhood, where doing things “like a girl” often means doing things poorly. Chess

acknowledges intersectionality involved in considering what it might mean to “play like a woman.” It is this question of how women play, or how might they play, that sets up Chess’s productive combination of game, feminist, and leisure studies.

Chess encourages feminists to play games and argues for the importance of leisure in discussions of equality. She feels feminists should advocate for equality in play in the same way they advocate for equality in the workplace, education, and health care. Play is liberating. It is not frivolous but rather leads to a fulfilled life. For Chess, this means play is something that should be encouraged and advocated.

Chess illustrates the disparity that surrounds play and leisure. Play is privileged. It belongs to those with the time and resources to partake. Leisure for women tends to be structured, productive, and contained. Chess looks to temporalities to imagine a more egalitarian and freer type of leisure. Recognizing the restrictive nature of normative notions of time, Chess explains how modern technology allows people small escapes from their normative timelines into places of play. Smartphone users can play mobile games in the “between” moments which would not traditionally involve leisure. These nonproductive interruptions illustrate the freeing potential of play.

Feminists should not only advocate for play, but they should also consider using play in their activism. Chess explains how play can be a vehicle for feminist protest. They look to the power of laughter to disrupt. Playing can work to attack institutional structures. In the same way, feminists playing games can challenge toxic gamer culture and a game industry built