Please Touch: A History of the First Four Children's Museums in the United States (1899–1965)

Jessie Swigger
Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2026. List of illustrations, acknowledgments, introduction, epilogue, notes, and index.
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What does it mean to create a museum for a specific demographic audience—children—rather than one focused on a specific subject such as art, history, or science? This is the key question animating Jessie Swigger's thoughtful, well-researched book *Please Touch* in which she reviews the histories of four groundbreaking children's museums, showing how their larger aims and purposes were inextricably linked to their specific contexts and histories.

A book needs to start somewhere, and Swigger begins with the founding of the Brooklyn Children's Museum in 1899. Widely considered the first children's museum, it was born from the Brooklyn Museum and linked to the New Museum movement of the period that prioritized education over collections. For thirty-eight years, the indomitable Anna Billings Gallup propelled the institution forward, while also mentoring a new generation of children's museum professionals, including Delia Isabel Griffin and Mildred Manter, who played key roles in the founding and growth of the Boston Children's Museum.

Whereas the growth and offerings of the Brooklyn and Boston Children's Museums resembled each other, the Detroit Children's Museum had an identity distinctly tied to its close connections with Detroit Public Schools rather than with its identity as a free-standing public museum. This made a difference not only in funding, but also in the programs it produced and where they took place, because the museum staff looked to reach into public school classrooms more directly than Boston or Brooklyn staff did. Swigger documents an approach in Detroit that has not been widely duplicated in the children's museum world, because most kids' museums came to look a lot like Brooklyn and Boston. The Detroit Children's Museum has itself struggled over the years, being closed for most of the past decade-and-a-half, so perhaps there is a reason few other museums have followed Detroit's lead.

The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, on the other hand, successfully combined the museum-based approaches of Brooklyn and Boston with the wider community focus of the Detroit Children's Museum. Citizens of Indianapolis, young and old, helped plan the museum, design the experiences, and raise funds for it, even donating the materials that formed the collection. Ever since its founding, the museum has had a midwestern collaborative approach that helped turn it into a major regional attraction and the nation's largest children's museum. Swigger's historically based analysis serves her well in this case. For example, one thing I had always wondered about the Children's Museum of Indianapolis was why it has such extensive programs devoted to dinosaurs, including active paleontological digs (something usually the province of natural history and science museums, not children's museums). It made more sense once I learned from Swigger that as early as the 1920s the museum was sponsoring teenagers to go west on Prairie Treks that included things like hunting for dinosaur fossils. Knowing this history helped me, as someone who works in the museum field, better understand the present.

In reading Swigger's book, several key themes recur. The first is the vital role women such as Margaret Brayton in Detroit and Grace Golden in Indianapolis played in the history of children's museums, as founders, directors, staff, and supporters. Swigger ably shows how female leaders advanced the field of children's museums, shaped its approach, valued its audience, and fought for their work in the face of much opposition and many obstacles. She does not spend much time broadly generalizing about what this meant for the field long term, though her histories signal how issues around funding, prestige, and pay that still dog the world of children's museums reflect, in part, long-standing biases against women.

Another theme that resounds throughout Swigger's research is the extent to which progressive ideology has shaped the approaches of children's museums over the decades. The Brooklyn Children's Museum was founded in the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century, when eager reformers set about tackling what they perceived to be the ills brought upon society by the massive immigration of the period. Swigger shows how the elite, white founders of these museums often strove to inculcate certain beliefs and worldviews through their exhibits, collections, and programs. Not all of these have aged well. For example, Swigger points out the extent to which museums such as Brooklyn and Boston promulgated positive views of America's imperial adventures overseas in the Philippines through displays touting civilization and racial uplift or engaged in Americanization campaigns after World War I. Over the years, the leaders of children's museums have generally continued to identify strongly with progressive views, though the nature of these progressive views have obviously changed. But it is a cautionary lesson that suggests what appears progressive, correct, and necessary to contemporary eyes may be looked on askance a hundred years hence as benighted, wrong, or misguided.

Swigger's emphasis on the ideological orientations of early children's museums is in line with much recent historical writing, but I think she could have explored the subject of play more. It is a commonplace credo that play is the work of children, and I would have appreciated greater focus on how the founders of these museums thought about play, how they worked play into the exhibits, and what it was like to be in the museums. Were they dry and stuffy or playfully vibrant? More pictures of the actual exhibits and more time spent describing the museums would have given me a better sense of the role play found in these spaces.

I learned much from this book, and it made for an interesting, easy read. I believe anyone working in children's museums would benefit from reading it to understand better how the approaches we take and the decisions we make are influenced, in part, by the perspectives and choices of those who preceded us. We may not stand on the shoulders of giants, but we build on the foundations laid down by the dedicated and accomplished women (and a few men) who built the first children's museums. Swigger's work is a sensitive, thoughtful telling of all they accomplished.

—Jon-Paul C. Dyson, *The Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, NY*

Bear with Me: A Cultural History of Famous Bears in America

Daniel Horowtiz

Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2025. Contents, preface, introduction, coda, acknowledgments, notes, index, select bibliography, and images. 267 pp. $29.95, paper. ISBN: 9781478032373

As someone who is interested in playfulness in everyday life, I was immediately intrigued by what I read in the preface of Daniel Horowitz's *Bear with Me: A Cultural History of Famous Bears in America.* Horowitz recounts a charming tale of pillow talk involving imaginary animals, like Polar, that he and his wife, Helen, engaged in as they attempted to fall asleep. Horowitz explains that what began as a hobby and an escape from the worries of modern America, evolved into a close examination of America's relationship with bears as both terrifying beasts and honey sweet icons.

The book is organized thematically, and Horowitz's interdisciplinary foundation provides deep insights into how bears symbolize American values. In chapter 1, "Folkloric Bears and Actual Ones: Sacred and Profane from Those Biblical Times to Contemporary Celebrities," Horowitz notes that bears appear only fourteen times in the Bible as compared to other species such as lions, sheep, and lambs who are referenced hundreds of times. Eventually bears became prominent figures in popular culture. The chapter includes representations of bears from the Bible to modern day. Horowitz provides a rich discussion of Baloo from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) and how Disney incorporated the character in its 1967 film of the same title. Although Disney's illustrations of Baloo present the character as playful, almost humanlike, the story still echoes American racial stereotypes. In the same chapter, Horowitz writes about Jim Davis's comic strip character Garfield and the first appearance of his teddy bear Pooky in 1978. One of the arguments Horowitz emphasizes throughout the book is that bears serve as emotional surrogates. Yet there is little attention paid to Pooky as a transitional object, as psychiatrist and theorist D. W. Winnicott called it in his 1971 book *Play and Reality*. Though Winnicott is mentioned in chapter 6, a greater engagement with his theory would have reinforced Horowitz's observation that "unlike what is true with so many other nonhuman animals, humans can project onto bears, especially fabled ones, an immensely wide range of characteristics that over time both remain constant and shift significantly" (p. 32).

Chapter 2, "The Stories of Hugh Glass: The Case of a Disappearing and Reappearing Dangerous Bear," explores stories about Glass from when they originated in 1923 to the 2015 film *The Revenant.* Horowitz later examines other complicated relationships between bears and humans in chapter 4, "Grizzly Adams: Bears He Tamed, Those He Displayed, and Those Responsible for His Death," and chapter 5, "Captive Bears