
Book Reviews

Playful: How Play Shifts Our Thinking, Inspires Connection, and Sparks Creativity

Cas Holman, with Lydia Denworth

New York: Avery, Penguin Random House, 2025. Acknowledgments, drawings, notes, and index. 288 pp. \$30.00, hardcover. ISBN: 9780593713464

To illustrate the major theme of Cas Holman's book *Playful*, I take the liberty to begin with a personal story. Some time ago, I was invited by two ten-year-old girls, whom I knew well, to play a game of Scrabble. I have played a fair amount of Scrabble and am good at it—"good" meaning I often win. The two girls, in contrast, were novices. So, I saw this as an opportunity to teach. I would be their Scrabble mentor! But, as it turned out, they taught me something more important than Scrabble.

They loved the basic situation—taking turns at putting down letters in an organized way, interlocking sets of letters with others in crossword fashion, making interesting designs. But they had no interest in keeping score, and the idea of

limiting themselves to actual words bored them. Quickly and effortlessly, despite my initial protests, they developed their own rules and strategy. Their unstated but obvious goal on each turn was to put down the longest, funniest nonsense word they could, using as many letters as possible from their rack combined with at least one letter on the board. It had to follow the rules of English phonology—or, as they would have said, they put down something that sounded like it might be a word but that could not be an actual word.

The object was not to score points but to make each other laugh. And laugh they did! Sometimes one would challenge the other's "word," asking for a definition, and the other, pretending to consult the dictionary, would offer a hysterical definition that somehow seemed to fit with the sound of the "word." And then they would laugh again, even louder. I realized as I pulled back and began to laugh along with them that my way of playing resembled what we usually call *work*. Their way of playing was *play*.

In *Playful*, Cas Holman asks us to rethink our priorities. What is our purpose

in life? Is it to achieve, win, and accumulate, or is it to have fun, connect with others, and add our bit to others' well-being and happiness along the way? The book is an engaging, highly readable mix of autobiography, inspiring stories about play, and practical advice for increasing one's own playfulness and creating conditions to make all sorts of occasions more playful.

Holman began her professional journey into play as a student of industrial design. In the course of her study, she discovered a passion for creating toys that stimulate imagination and open-ended play. Among her inventions are Rigamajig, a building kit consisting of large wooden pieces of various shapes and sizes, pulleys, and bolts and nuts that permit users to connect the pieces in an essentially infinite number of ways, and Geemo, a set of magnetic limbs, which look a bit like long narrow bones, that can be hooked together magnetically in unlimited ways for artistic creations. She also contributed to the invention and development of Big Blue Blocks, large, lightweight, Styrofoam blocks of various shapes that kids can use to build forts, towers, or other large structures for play. And, in China, she contributed to the development of the expansive outdoor adventure-promoting components used in the country's ever-growing Anji play movement for children. Holman describes all this in her book.

For most readers, I suspect, the most enlightening part of the two-part book is part 2, entitled "The Playful Mindset." There she reminds us that play, especially for adults, has more to do with one's mental attitude than with a type of behavior. We adults, of course, have serious respon-

sibilities, but we can choose how to execute them. We can, for example, clean our house in the most efficient possible way, prioritizing time and spotlessness, or we can do it playfully, good enough, but enjoying the process and worrying less about spotlessness. Holman suggests we might dance or sing while cleaning and we might invite children to join in the merriment of sweeping and picking up. In separate chapters of part 2, Holman elaborates on three mental shifts that help us become more playful: embrace possibility, release judgment, and reframe success.

To embrace possibility, according to Holman, is to ask ourselves "What if?" What if I were to do something a new way rather than doing it my usual way? What if I were to leave this job and move into a career track more in line with my passions? She suggests trying things out, experimentally, to see how they feel. She writes, "Instead of asking 'What do I want to be when I grow up?' or 'When can I quit this job?' you could ask, 'What kind of person do I want to be?' or 'What do I enjoy doing?'" (p. 139).

To release judgment is to mute our inner critic, the critic that seeks perfection and fears failure or looking foolish and thereby prevents us from starting untried activities or behaving more playfully at old activities. Concerning any sort of artistic or creative project, she advises, "Create first, assess later."

To reframe success is to place more value on enjoying and learning from the process and less on efficient achievement of a goal. Holman advises us to think of projects as experiments. What does not work out may be considered failure in one sense, but considered success if you

enjoyed the process and learned from it.

I recommend *Playful* to anyone who wishes to increase their playfulness and reduce their stress. It is not explicitly a self-help book, but implicitly it is. As such, I rank it right up there with Bernard De Koven's *A Playful Path* as a book that will inspire readers to rethink how they approach daily living.

—Peter Gray, *Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA*

The Therapeutic Powers of Play: Comparing Theories and Practice

Athena Drewes and Edward Franc Hudspeth, eds.

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. List of figures and photos, list of tables, about the contributors, about the editors, foreword, preface, in memoriam, and index. 456 pp. \$49.95 paper. ISBN: 9798216277613

In 2018 Charles Schaefer invited me to contribute a chapter to a book he was editing. At the time, I was knee-deep in my own teaching, scholarship, and journey as a new parent, and I declined the opportunity. I have often reflected on my limited interactions with Schaefer since then. His warmth, generosity, and deep commitment to play therapy left a lasting impression—one that has prompted me to think not only about a missed professional opportunity but also about the enduring influence he has had on the field itself.

It is difficult to imagine how play therapists conceptualize the therapeutic

powers of play without acknowledging Schaefer's foundational contributions. His seminal 1993 volume, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play*, helped launch and shape one of the field's most important conversations. In this updated volume, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play: Comparing Theories and Practice*, edited by his longtime coeditor and play therapy pioneer Athena Drewes, alongside former *International Journal of Play Therapy* editor Edward Franc Hudspeth, Schaefer's legacy is thoughtfully extended.

Drewes and Hudspeth note that “many play therapists do not have a full understanding of what the therapeutic power of play is, how it interplays with theory, and how the change agent operates” (p. xxv). This observation captures a central challenge within the field. Care givers may reasonably say, “So you are going to play with my child? I can do that at home.” And educators and other stakeholders may ask the value of removing a child from class for play therapy. Too often, play is misunderstood as mere recreation rather than recognized as a sophisticated therapeutic medium. As a play therapist and educator, I consistently emphasize to my students that effective practice requires more than skillful intervention; it demands the ability to articulate clearly why we do what we do, how play supports social and emotional development, and what mechanisms contribute to meaningful therapeutic change. In this regard, this text offers a valuable framework for clinicians, educators, and helping professionals seeking to answer these essential questions.

The book is organized into four sections: “Understanding the Therapeutic Powers of Play,” “Comparing Theoretical Approaches Through the Lens of the