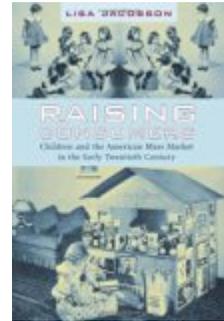


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lisa Jacobson. *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. xviii + 299 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11388-5; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11389-2.

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## Little Consumers and a Big Marketing Industry

“Sometimes, if you’re *very* clever, you can get things without even asking for them” states a 1929 advertisement for Elgin watches in *Child Life* magazine. It continues with a plan for children getting a new watch by manipulating their parents (p. 51). A 1924 ad for Remington portable typewriters presents boys with a verbatim script for convincing fathers of the long-term positive impact of such a gift, “Tell him you want to be a leader of boys now, and a leader of men later” (p. 52). Lisa Jacobson’s thoroughly researched and well-written book, *Raising Consumers*, charts the development of this growing relationship between children and consumer culture in the early twentieth century as children increasingly became a regular feature in advertisements, a topic of conversation in the advertising industry, and sought-after consumers themselves, both as direct purchasers of goods and as influence peddlers in the home.

Jacobson’s study is an important contribution to the growing body of research on children and youth in U.S. history. It is well placed within, and draws upon, the histories of consumer culture, childhood and youth, advertising, childrearing, commercial leisure, and behavioral sciences, and tells an important story of the emerging focus on children and youth as consumers. This trend both revealed and redefined tensions related to children’s roles in a consumer society. *Raising Consumers* explores various aspects of this trend, including early attention to young people in the advertising trade press, thrift education and savings plans promoted through schools, the role of gender in defining the imagined consumer, the

home as a beacon of middle-class values and a realm for teaching those values through commercial play products, and the growth of radio advertising directed at children. It includes close to fifty images, often full page, that are carefully integrated into the narrative and allow readers to explore the world of advertising, messages of thrift, and idealized visions of play for and about children.

This book raises a number of compelling issues. As the circle of adults interested in the lives of young people expanded, what avenues were considered appropriate for discussing the raising of children? Some advertisements continued to address parents in relation to products and choices for children, while others began to address children directly. How did these messages differ? And how did children respond to the efforts to attract their attention, spending money, and brand loyalty? How much did various factors, such as family, peers, commercial leisure, and schools, influence the lives of young people? This, as Jacobson notes, is difficult to assess. She finds several creative sources for accessing children’s voices, utilizing market research and contest data from the late 1930s, but the gap leaves some questions unanswered.

Chronology is difficult to handle when studying gradual change, or more accurately change that develops unevenly, sometimes slowly and at other times rapidly. *Raising Consumers* sets out to explore the decades from 1890 to 1940, a time of change that witnessed the development of a consumer society and “the gradual emergence of a distinctive children’s consumer culture” (p.

1). The strongest examples of this emergence come from the later years, but Jacobson's book also documents the early, sometimes uncertain interest in child consumers as well as its development into a national practice. The final chapter explores the "consolidation of consumer culture," especially through radio as advertisers shifted from the practice of encouraging wholesome food and responsible consumption to hoping "that irritated parents would give in to the incessant demands of their children" (p. 184).

This book makes an excellent contribution to our growing understanding of the rise of a consumer society and its effects on individuals of all ages. It is remarkable to note that the strategies that emerged almost one century ago are still prevalent in today's multibillion dollar marketing industry. Young people are impressionable (i.e., receptive to ads) yet loyal to brands; they are eager for the newest products and set the trends, yet they follow where advertisers and manufacturers lead.

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