

# H-Net Reviews

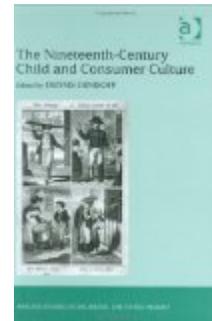
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dennis Denisoff, ed. *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*. Ashgate, 2008. x + 239 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-6156-6.

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## Consuming Childhood in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Though the growing interest in the historical development of consumer cultures has produced some excellent studies on childhood, scholars have overwhelmingly focused on the twentieth century. Dennis Denisoff's edited collection, *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, goes a long way to fill this gap, highlighting a significant and complex relationship between consumerism and childhood in nineteenth-century Britain. This collection offers a diverse array of new perspectives on changing attitudes toward childhood and the effect on a developing consumer culture, the role of boys and girls in this expanding consumer culture, and the effect of consumerism on conceptions of childhood. While the chapters go in different directions and address different sources, the authors do an excellent job of directly engaging the arguments and subjects of other essays in the compilation. This assembly of twelve chapters, evenly divided into four sections, in addition to Denisoff's fine introduction, convincingly suggests that British children were commonly understood to be consumers and figurative objects of consumption in both children's and adult's literature.

The first section of the book, "Play Things: Toys and Theater," considers how adults treated children as potential consumers and objects for consumption. In the first chapter, "Experiments before Breakfast: Toys, Education and Middle-Class Childhood," Teresa Michals examines the writing of author Maria Edgeworth, arguing that while middle-class adults in the early nineteenth century tried to shelter their children and ex-

pressed concern that they would be tainted by consumer culture, they still ultimately taught boys and girls that fulfillment could be realized with appropriate purchases. While "Edgeworth's ideal mother and father bought a great many things for their children," they drew a distinction between frivolous playthings and functional toys that educated sons and daughters (p. 38). In the following chapter, "Paper Dreams and Romantic Projections: The Nineteenth-Century Toy Theater, Boyhood and Aesthetic Play," Liz Farr examines how notable male authors including Robert Louis Stevenson and Charles Dickens made miniature toy theaters prominent fixtures of their play as children. The decisions they made regarding what new theater accessory to buy transformed them into consumers. Moreover, these authors' boyhood experiences with toy theaters shaped their writing in adulthood. For instance, Charles Dickens "drew upon popular theatrical techniques throughout his literary career" (p. 53). In the final essay of the section, "The Drama of Precocity: Child Performers on the Victorian Stage," Marah Gubar considers the relationship between children and the stage, arguing that adult theatrical consumers did not evaluate juvenile performances based on their innocence, but instead judged them primarily based on their talent. Consequently, juvenile thespians softened "the line between child and adult, innocence and experience" (p. 64). It was this blurring of boundaries that made child performances especially enthralling to theater-goers.

The second section of the book, "Consuming Desires," primarily examines literary depictions of children

as objects of sexual desire. In “‘I’m not a bit expensive’: Henry James and the Sexualization of the Victorian Girl,” Michèle Mendelssohn considers how Henry James’s published work deploys “the taboo combination of childhood and adult desire,” particularly with regard to girls (p. 82). The intertwining of childhood, commodification, and sex does not occur within the context of prostitution, where the reader might be more comfortable, but in spaces commonly understood to be respectable. While Mendelssohn considers an impressive number of James’s novels, if she expands this into a larger project, she might want to also examine *The Bostonians*. First published in book form in 1886, *The Bostonians* depicts the ultraist reformer Olive Chancellor and the Mississippian Basil Ransome pursuing young Verena Tarrant. Though Verena Tarrant is a young adult, she is often depicted as child-like. By maintaining a distant perspective, James forces his readers to morally judge for themselves the sexual consumption of girls, expecting them to view it contemptuously. As Carol Mavor suggests in the next chapter, “For-getting to Eat: Alice’s Mouthing Metonymy,” Lewis Carroll also incorporates children in his expressed anxieties over consumption. In his writing, photography, and personal relationships with girls, consumption was an omnipresent theme. But the consumption Carroll presents to his readers or viewer is seldom a satisfying or filling act, but rather one that causes forgetfulness. Indeed, Carroll took photos of girls and expressed his affection for them with kisses: acts that appear to, but do not, consume their recipient. Richard A. Kaye, in “Salome’s Lost Childhood: Wilde’s Daughter of Sodom, Jugendstil Culture, and the Queer Afterlife of a Decadent Myth,” explores how Oscar Wilde’s depiction of Salome is more than simply as a femme fatale; Wilde’s Salome also embodies “a highly stylized, intensely consumerist youth ethos” (p. 120). Significantly, this “consumerist ethos” is highlighted through the title character’s childishness and through an encoded queer sexuality.

The third section of the book, “Adulthood and Nationhood,” considers the relationship between childhood and adulthood and childhood and the nation through the lens of consumerism. In “Adult Children’s Literature in Victorian Britain,” Claudia Nelson examines a little-studied but popular writing style: adult literature that incorporates the “strategies more usually associated with children’s fiction” (p. 137). The tremendous success of these books as saleable merchandise, Nelson opines, indicates that the idea of childhood as a “superior state” to adulthood resonated in nineteenth-century Britain (p. 148). Lorraine

Janzen Kooistra also advances the idea that depictions of idealized childhood became marketable to adults for consumption in “*Home Thought and Home Scenes: Packaging Middle-class Childhood for Christmas Consumption*,” Kooistra argues that Christmas-themed literature, especially gift books, packaged a romanticized family and nation, complete with sheltered children, into a saleable commodity. In the final chapter of the section, “Maps, Pirates and Treasure: The Commodification of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century Boys’ Adventure Fiction,” Ymitri Mathison examines how “boy’s adventure fiction” featuring pirates made English imperialism more comprehensible and appealing to the middle class (p. 173). Focusing on three appropriate novels, Mathison also demonstrates that this genre prepared readers for a more commodity-centered society.

The final part of the collection, “Children and the Terrors of Cultural Consumption,” considers how literary representations of nineteenth-century childhood played a significant role in depictions of the “dark side” of consumerism, epitomized in a common fear that children themselves would become commodities. Indeed, in “Toys and Terror: Lucy Clifford’s *Anyhow Stories*,” Patricia Demers considers how Lucy Clifford’s work from the late nineteenth century alludes to a broader fear that children would themselves become consumer objects. Demers argues that the *Anyhow Stories*’ depiction of children as commodities, particularly in a story entitled “Wooden Tony,” portends a “dystopia of conspicuous consumption on a mass scale” (p. 197). Tamara S. Wagner also examines this fear that children are becoming consumer objects in “‘We have orphans [...] in stock’: Crime and the Consumption of Sensational Children.” Destitute orphans in particular, Wagner argues, acted as commodities in the novels of authors such as Charles Dickens. Moreover, the portrayal of “infanticide, child abduction, and counterfeit orphans” proved commercially profitable themes for authors (p. 213). Finally, in “‘And now Tom being killed, and all spent and eaten’: Children, Consumption and Commerce in Nineteenth-Century Child Protection Discourse,” Monica Flegel points to a deep anxiety among reformers, particularly in the National Society for the Prevention for Cruelty to Children, that impoverished profit-driven parents would murder their children in exchange for the insurance money, a very explicit commodification of children. Though it is surprising that the author does not consider Viviana A. Zelizer’s 1985 examination of this concern in *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Flegel convincingly argues that the organizations’ classless rhetoric obfuscated their anxiety over

the poor.[1] Moreover, Flegel suggests that the concern reformers expressed towards poor youngsters shrouded fears regarding these children as consumers and workers in adulthood.

*The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture* has a lot to offer to scholars, particularly those in literary and theater studies who are interested in nineteenth-century childhood and consumerism. Future work might want to consider the relationship between the consumer-oriented child highlighted in this book and the charitable juvenile examined in 1980 by F. K. Prochaska in *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England*. [2] While the book offers a diverse array of intriguing insights into these fields and is well written, it is not

intended for casual readers. The book's appeal to only a specialized group will only be further ensured by its prohibitively high price, with the result that the book will likely end up primarily in libraries and on the bookshelves of specialists.

#### Notes

[1]. Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 113-137.

[2]. F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 73-94.

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