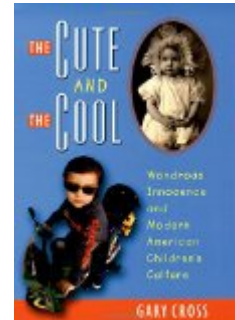


Gary Cross. *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 272 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-515666-9.



Reviewed by Hilary Levey

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A few days before reading Gary Cross's *The Cute and the Cool* I found myself shopping in a Baby Gap. On a mission for the perfect baby shower gift for a little boy I made a beeline for the "blue" side of the store. Most of the area was devoted to clothes and outfits for newborns. I ooohed over the tiny striped socks, plaid overalls, and sweaters decorated with barnyard animals while also aaahing about the little "rock-star inspired" outfits, minute wingtip shoes, and miniaturized racing jumpsuits. At the time, I did not find it contradictory that I found adult clothes scaled to infant bodies as appealing as clothes that were clearly only ever meant to be worn by the six and under set. But after reading Cross's latest contribution to the literature on the history of American childhood and consumer culture, I started noticing the contrasting images of cute, childish kids and cool, adult-like kids all the time. It certainly seems like cultural producers are confused about just what childhood is and how and to whom they should market it.

How we came to the current confusion about childhood (is it a time of innocence or a time of

precociousness?) is at the heart of *The Cute and the Cool*. Cross examines how conceptions of childhood have changed since the late nineteenth century and how they have intersected with the market. He explains that starting in the early twentieth century there was a battle between "sheltered innocence," which emphasized effort and work on the part of parents, and "wondrous innocence," which emphasized imagination and gratification on the part of children, with the latter emerging victorious. The supremacy of wondrous innocence is evident in the child-centered, gift-giving focus of holidays and family vacations. But therein lies the basis for the destruction of wondrous innocence as well. As parents shower their children with more and more gifts the children simultaneously want more goods and demand a greater say in their own consumption choices. This means that ties to parents weaken as children are pulled "into the very heart of a new consumer market with few ties to the worlds of parents," where the "cool" is born (p. 17).

The organization of the book mirrors its central argument. Cross starts off in the first chapter

by highlighting the current contradictory behaviors of adults toward children, not the least of which is claiming to protect the innocence of childhood without being able to say just what that innocence is. Here he also suggests that parental delight in the "cute," the embodiment of wondrous innocence, is really just parents' selfish desire to escape from their own complicated, adult lives. In the following chapter he shows that the "two faces of innocence," sheltered and wondrous, squared off in Victorian times as well. The eventual dominance of the wondrous child was a result of a cultural shift that came to see childhood as a special time that should be protected, especially because children could experience emotions in a way that adults could not.

Chapters 3 and 4 draw on a range of sources, both historical and contemporary, to show just what that wondrous time looks like and how it is reinforced through rituals. These two chapters are arguably the best of the book as they convincingly document the evolution of cute kids in a multitude of formats, from toys to books to ads to movies to comics and more, often with photos and images as part of the text. Cross also discusses the ways in which the cute differed for boys, seen as urchins, and girls, seen as coquettes. These chapters are layered with interesting, significant details. For example, Cross goes beyond reporting that elaborate birthday celebrations are of recent origins by explaining their development as rituals of childhood's "wondrous innocence."

As the rituals that make children the center of attention, like birthday parties, grew over the course of the twentieth century so too did the cool child. Chapter 5 describes the origins of the cool in the "penchant for the 'exotic'" in the early 1900s, working-class movies in the 1920s, and fantasy literature and comics like the Western, detective stories, and science fictions adventures in the early part of the century (p. 126). It was not until the rise of television in the 1960s that the cool became firmly entrenched. Chapter 6 discusses ways

that adults have tried to reassert control over children's consumer culture, with mixed results. It comes as no surprise then, in the final chapter, when Cross suggests that there may be a return to sheltered innocence as society continues to grapple with some of the same contradictions and confusions about childhood and innocence as it did a century ago.

The argument and evidence presented across these seven chapters are thought-provoking and, as with other good scholarship, produce a great many follow-up questions. Consider the following puzzle the book never fully addresses: While we know how the cool evolved out of the cute, producing confusion about childhood, how should we understand cases when both the cute and the cool exist simultaneously?

The order of the chapters seem to suggest a linear progression across time, starting with sheltered innocence, then moving to an in-depth look at wondrous innocence, followed by explanation and hypotheses about the cool. Yet, the evidence in each of these chapters covers the entire time period under consideration. Examples of the cool could be found in the 1930s even though wondrous innocence reigned supreme then. And even today, which could be thought of as the height of the cool, Disney characters continue to sell well along with elaborate family pilgrimages to the holy sites of Disneyland and Disneyworld.

It seems that Cross himself is unsure about the existence of the cute and innocent child and the cool and mature child side-by-side. More than once he turns to child beauty pageants, drawing on the case of JonBenÃ©t Ramsey, to show that society does not know what to make of children looking like kids one minute and gussied up like adults the next, but he does not pursue this line of argument. Perhaps his reluctance is just a reflection of the greater societal unease about children looking and acting like adults while still behaving like kids.

It appears then that despite society's unease the cute and the cool often appear together, both historically and in more recent times. Instead of being a dichotomous choice between one and the other, maybe it is a balancing act with both always present. In different time periods the pendulum may swing to one side more than the other based on changing social and cultural norms. It would be worthwhile to more fully understand how this tremulous relationship between the cute and the cool is determined and maintained.

Another puzzle from the book is that it suggests that much of the impetus for the cool came first from children, then advertisers picked up on this and they now dictate what is cool for children. Yet, my visit to the Baby Gap shows that parents themselves have a choice between having a cute or a cool baby before children can verbalize what they themselves like. The question of who chooses between the images of the cute and the cool presented by advertisers in daily life--parents or children--is not fully examined in this work, and neither are differences in how such choices may differ by race, class, or immigrant status in the present or over time.

Finally, on a related note, the voices of children themselves are almost completely absent, though of course this was not the focus of Cross's book. Nonetheless it would be interesting for researchers to find out what children think about the shows and movies they watch, the toys they play with, or the clothes they wear. Perhaps what we, as adults, think of as cool is too cutesy for them or vice versa. This knowledge would add another level of understanding to our adult conceptions of childhood and children's consumer culture.

Despite these lingering questions *The Cute and the Cool* makes an important and timely contribution to our understandings of children's consumer culture because of its novel argument and its wealth of evidence. Gary Cross's well-researched book challenges scholars to continue to

study the cute and the cool and to more fully understand the contradictions of childhood, whether they be in the Baby Gap, in Saturday morning cartoons, or in the toy chests of our own children.

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