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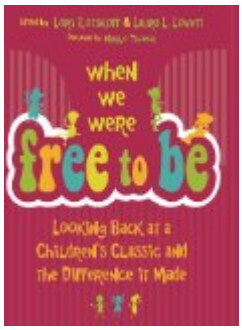

Lori Rotskoff, Laura L. Lovett. *When We Were Free to Be: Looking Back at a Children's Classic and the Difference It Made.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 368 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3723-8.

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Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan (University of Western Ontario)

Like so many of the varied contributors to Lori Rotskoff and Laura Lovett's edited collection, *When We Were Free to Be: Looking Back at a Children's Classic and the Difference It Made*, thinking back to the 1972 television special, book, and vinyl record *Free to Be ... You and Me*, brought many memories to the surface for me. From the excerpts of the script, book, and songs sprinkled throughout the collection to the occasional photographs and the images from the record jacket, it all took me back to my middle school days, and got me thinking about my own journey from 1970s child to present-day academic feminist. One of the many strengths of this collection comes from the great variety of vantage points from which the contributors reflect on and analyze this cultural phenomenon and its impact forty years later. Rotskoff and Lovett are historians, and the collection includes pieces by other academics: specialists in history, sociology, psychology, politics, gender studies, and cultural studies. Some contributors are celebrity artists and activists, like *Free to Be's* creator Marlo Thomas herself, as well as Alan Alda and Gloria Steinem. They are joined by composers, producers, television and film writers, and performing artists of many stripes. Some contributors are leading journalists and bloggers who write about gender issues, family, media, and politics. These distinguished contributors are from many fields and many generations, engaging this cultural text with respect, celebration, and a critical eye.

The book is organized into four major sections and includes contributions from a total of over thirty authors. Framed by an introduction written by the two editors, the book includes brief reminiscences from Thomas and her niece Dionne Gordon Kirschner, now a writer who back in the 1970s was the child who inspired Thomas to create *Free to Be ... You and Me*. The entries in the four major sections are organized chronologically. Part 1 explores the production of the primary source material, from the music and lyrics to the book and television special. The broader historical context of the time is analyzed in part 2, with particular attention to second-wave femi-

nism, childhood gender, and emerging discourses of "nonsexist" parenting in the United States during the period. Part 3 focuses on reflections and analysis from commentators currently parenting, presenting thoughts from a mix of academic, journalistic, and activist voices that includes mothers and fathers of various racial and ethnic identities, straight parents and gay parents, and current parents of young children who were directly involved with the production of *Free to Be ... You and Me* when they were young children themselves. The last major section addresses the legacy of the text by combining.an appreciative and critical sensibility that--as the editors put it--"deepens our investigation of *Free to Be's* cultural impact and social limits" (p. 7).

In their introduction to the collection, Rotskoff and Lovett note that "the landscape of childhood (now) harkens back to the sharply divided sex roles of the *Leave It to Beaver* era," a shift that left them asking: "What happened to the ideals that inspired *Free to Be ... You and Me*?" (p. 2). It is this broad and deeply important question that motivates the book, a nostalgic look back that is firmly rooted in a thoughtful social and political analysis. They treat the original text "as an artifact that registered concerns unique to the moment that produced it, and as a cultural landmark that still generates new meanings today" (p. 3). Overall, the collection attends not only to questions of gender, which are of course central, but also to their intersections with questions of race, ethnicity, and to some extent sexuality. The intersectional analysis could have been deepened a bit more, especially in relation to economic inequality and social class, but the volume definitely situates its gender-focused perspective in the context of intersecting inequalities and a thoughtful social, political, and economic analysis.

It is hard to single out any contributions without wanting to write about them all. So I urge readers of this review to grab this collection and read through the table of contents. They will find a diverse array of entries that range from very short to almost article length, with topics and titles sure to entice them into the text. And they will find an epilogue by Lovett that ties the topics together well, and brings into consideration the follow-up project that Thomas and others produced celebrating the wide variety of family forms, *Free to Be ... a Family.* I noted that economic inequality could have been addressed a bit more deeply throughout the text, and thus it bears mention that poverty is considered explicitly in this epilogue. Lovett ties together strands from throughout the volume. She notes, referring to *Free to Be ... You and Me* and *Free to Be ... a Family*, "the *Free to Be* projects express more than claims for individual expression; they also reflect a continuing struggle to build a more just and equitable society (that) ... remains both historically significant and socially relevant today" (p. 262).

Right from the outset, in their introduction, the editors explicitly welcome readers drawn to the title by their own personal memories of *Free to Be*, and the book is written and edited in a manner that will indeed welcome those readers. But there is also thoughtful, nuanced work of scholarship here. The essays engage *Free to Be* from a diverse array of perspectives, situate it in a clear and compelling historical context, and bring to bear satisfying cultural analysis and cultural criticism. I recommend this book to readers whose interest is any combination of personal, political, and academic. It would be an effective text in undergraduate courses in a variety of fields; a helpful resource to scholars in those same fields; and a compelling read for anyone interested in gender, childhood, and inequalities from the late twentieth century onward in the United States.

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