

Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century. *By Lisa Jacobson.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. xiii + 299 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-231-11388-9.

Reviewed by Daniel Thomas Cook

In an increasingly populated research area, *Raising Consumers* generally succeeds in shedding new light on the history of children as consumers. Lisa Jacobson's project is to explain how a "positive reevaluation of children's consumer identities in the 1920s and 1930s came about" (p. 3) by attending to how ideologies of the market and family helped shape and legitimate an emergent children's consumer culture (p. 5). Making use mainly of parenting, women's, and children's magazines, as well as advertising trade journals, Jacobson analyzes the discourses of childhood, money, play, and gender that arise and intermingle during this period. She spends a great deal of time examining advertisements for children and parents and, in particular, the testimonials proffered by child-rearing experts.

Jacobson takes the reader through a number of cultural sites where the child consumer could be found—from the changing landscape of children and advertising, to "thrift education" programs for children, to the "hero" boy consumer, to adolescent girl athletes of the 1920s and 1930s, to the increasing entanglements of children's play with consumption and, finally, to radio clubs of the 1930s. In this excursion, Jacobson far exceeds recent, similar histories by detailing the extent to which children had been conceptualized and treated as consumers in these early decades.

Chapter two traces the changing beliefs among child experts, parents, bankers, and social reformers regarding the proper relation thought to obtain between children and money and, by implication, the tensions between parental influence and child autonomy. "Thrift" education, sponsored by bankers and educators in the first two decades of the century, promoted a Victorian ethic of money management and saving, which, by the 1930s, ultimately gave way to a different morality that touted disciplined *spending* as a form of consumer education. Jacobson cites teachers' and parents' frustration about the

rote, mandatory aspect of school savings programs and the “inability” of children to defer gratification as two main reasons for this reappraisal.

Chapter three focuses on the boy consumer as the “hero” of advertisers’ dreams. Jacobson here switches registers as she turns her attention to analyzing the ways in which the rhetorical figure of the “exuberant boy consumer” animated advertisements in boys’ magazines, particularly *American Boy*, apparently between 1910 and 1930 (no period is specified). She claims that this construction of the boy consumer performed important cultural, even psychological, functions by mediating the conflict between a traditional sense of female frivolity associated with consumption and the loss of male power in the emergent, managerial class of twentieth-century modernity, and by smoothing the contradiction between hedonism and control (pp. 95–96). Jacobson insightfully recognizes the semantic role the boy consumer played *within* the advertising trade as a reassuring male figure with whom *advertisers* could identify (p. 109), and not merely as some pure reflection of boys’ identities in the social world.

In chapter three, however, problems arise, which are repeated elsewhere in the book. One never gets a consistent sense of periodization from Jacobson. One wonders, for instance, why the Depression-era boy consumer is left unanalyzed in chapter three. As well, in other parts of the book, the discussion can jump from the first decade of the century to the third without comment (see especially chapter one). The result is, at times, an implosion of constructs of “the child” into a singular figure. At other times, the period being described is clear within a chapter (chapters four, five, and six), but the relation between chapters and between cases remains unclear. For instance, do the children of the school savings programs of the 1910s and 1920s in any way inform the experience of adolescent girl athletes (chapter four) and/or the audience for radio clubs (chapter six) in the 1930s? We never quite know, since these tend to be treated independently, as separate case histories.

The question of who and what “the child” is never quite receives the reflexive analysis it deserves. Except for the discussion of the adolescent girl consumer (chapter four), Jacobson rarely specifies the age range she is scrutinizing. Children aged nine to nineteen are mentioned as the range *advertisers* often targeted (p. 5), but her own focus is not stated and defended. In chapter three, furthermore, it is only by examining an

illustration closely that the reader learns that the average age of readership for *American Boy* is solidly adolescent at fifteen-and-a-half years (p. 108). Other illustrations clearly depict younger, school-aged children (pp. 65–66), confusing the matter further. We also are never told the age range under consideration by those reformers and experts who were revaluing play (chapter 5), but are left to conjecture from the illustrations.

The lack of specification of age is important, because “children” are not of a piece but vary according to age as well other factors. Age norms were in flux at this time as well. Jacobson’s narrative would have been enriched had she considered the idea that childhood itself was being transformed with the influx of a consumer ethos over these decades, or the fact that the children of one era become the parents of another.

Her interesting cases are instructive, in particular her argument about the interrelations between the revaluation of play, the companionate family, and the emerging children’s consumer market in chapter five. But her hard work begs for historical dynamism. By overusing “children” and “juvenile” as cover terms, Jacobson elides the question of the extent to which there is a consistency to “the child” over age ranges and over the decades she surveys, thereby leaving vague the extent to which we can glean contemporary insight from her work.

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