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***Shapers of American Childhood: Essays on Visionaries from L. Frank Baum to Dr. Spock to J.K. Rowling*, edited by Kathy Merlock Jackson and Mark I. West**

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



**SHAPERS OF AMERICAN CHILDHOOD: ESSAYS ON VISIONARIES FROM L. FRANK BAUM TO DR. SPOCK TO J.K. ROWLING.** Kathy Merlock Jackson and Mark I West, eds. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2018. 278 p. 978-1-4766-6455-2. \$45.00.

THE EDITORS SEEM ALMOST APOLOGETIC in introducing their collection of disparate essays: "we encouraged our contributors to provide key biographical information about the personalities covered in the book as well as discuss how they have shaped children's lives" (2). They offer little more justification for the subjects chosen for the book, and clearly aren't making any sort of overall critical argument for how these "visionaries" have "shaped" American childhood. For just what audience is this book intended? Maybe for education professionals?

Perhaps some readers will construct their own argument from reading these eighteen essays, ordered chronologically by the subjects' birthdates (complicated slightly by the fact that one essay is devoted to Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin, whose birthdates bracketed the 1911 birth of Augusta Braxton Baker). More likely, most readers will just fit what they learn about these various "personalities" into their own understanding of the shaping of American childhood from the early twentieth century until today. I'm a little unsure if the development of my discussion of the essays, below, is a function of the inevitable course of history, or just my own "reading" of it and these essays.

Most of these essays illuminated their subjects. I barely knew of some of these figures, such as Augusta Baker and Ruth Handler, and was surprised to learn some of the things that I did along the way, even about such familiar names as Salk and Sabin, Ernest Seton, Dr. Spock, Jim Henson, and Judy Blume. I thought myself reasonably well-versed in the biography and legacy of L. Frank Baum, but it was in Dina Schiff Massachi's essay, subtitled "Brains, Heart and Courage," that I found myself noting a reference that I need to look up. As I continued with the next essay, Martin Woodside's on Seton, I found myself impatiently reading about his role in the formation of the Boy Scouts of America, and of his internecine struggles as one of its founders and with those of the Campfire Girls, looking for more about his book, *Wild Animals I Have Known*, only to remember that this is not a collection of essays about the authors behind Children's Literature. The two organizations clearly had a far greater impact on American childhood and its development than any of Seton's books.

With Sarah Minslow's essay on A.A. Milne, I seemed to be back on track with reading about one of those classic children's authors. Then suddenly (as with the Baum discussions inevitably drawn into the subsequent developments of Oz in the 1939 film and later cultural impacts), Minslow was not only discussing Milne, and his son's life, and the eventual location of the

stuffed animals in the New York Public Library, but Pooh's extended life and influence as part of the Disney empire, in films, and even merchandise. The book follows this with a thoughtful essay about Walt Disney by James Plath, "When You Wish Upon a Star." After quickly exhausting Disney's own original creation and collaboration on Mickey Mouse, and even his retelling of the familiar fairy tales of "Snow White" and so on in film, Plath begins quoting Annette Funicello about the impact and reach of the Mickey Mouse Club through television, merchandise and Disneyland. I was realizing that yes, this book was about literature and its impact on childhood, but literature was broadly including motion pictures and television, and maybe even beyond.

It was the next essay, however, Lucy Rollin's "Benjamin Spock," which actually surprised me the most. It would be hard to deny that Dr. Spock's book had a significant impact on child rearing in the 20th century in the U.S., even if we don't usually count it as literature. I believe that my own mother had Dr. Spock's book, though whether it had much impact on her I don't know; I don't recall ever discussing it with her. I also vaguely remember Dr. Spock crusading against the Vietnam War, and involved in various protests and Democratic Party activities. I think I churlishly considered him an almost comic, quixotic figure. Reading this brief account of his life, and his development as a thinker and medical doctor and social crusader, was inspiring. It also models, in this book, the way that small ideas grow and mature to meet new challenges facing society, and the way that these individual writers or actors grow in concert with those efforts. Carl F. Miller's essay on Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel) fits in well with this pattern, though it didn't come to me as such a surprise.

Michelle H. Martin's "Augusta Braxton Baker (1911-1998): The Art of Storytelling and a Gateway to Children's Literacy and Literature," told the story of an African-American woman who triumphed over institutional racism to become a powerful librarian in the New York Public Library, always advocating for all children and their need for literature, but also establishing institutional support for recognizing especially literature for African-American children. Before reading this essay, to me she had been little more than a name mentioned in a course on Children's Literature. Kathy Shepherd Stolley's essay, "[...] Conquering Polio," departs farthest from the other stories here in devoting almost nothing to literature in any sense, but unquestionably, the conquest of polio had an immense impact on shaping American childhood. Meanwhile this essay, about the conflicts and competition between the different approaches to solving the problem between Salk and Sabin, actually made for one of the more dramatic stories told here, and perhaps anticipates some of the themes in later essays: great good accomplished despite human failings.

After polio, what could compare in impact? The next essay, editor Jackson's own "Ruth Handler (1916-2002): Toys, Barbie and Girls' Choices" may

actually map out an equally dramatic cultural claim. Jackson tells a compelling story about the woman who invented the Barbie doll and revolutionized Mattel and the toy industry, impacting children in ways that I had never considered. It was a story that was completely new to me. While I think in the end the implicit claim to widespread import falters, in comparison to the stories about some of these other figures, it may be because Handler, herself, was never the same sort of altruist as Drs. Spock or Seuss. Interestingly, though, the story touches on the other stories in various ways, with Handler hitching her company's success in part to the Mickey Mouse Club, and eventually working with the Disney Co. to produce the film, *Sounder*, from the Newbery Award book. Her own personal fall and disgrace from the corporate leadership of Mattel is also something of an odd tragic fall for a woman who was an early exemplar of a woman chief executive.

Gabriel Sealey-Morris's essay on Stan Lee was full of more behind-the-scenes collaboration and conflicts between Lee and his illustrators, equally giant personalities it seems, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and others, and although engagingly told, somehow seemed a little overshadowed in this sequence. Fred Rogers's story, as told by Richard Bilsker, was a compelling and moving account, though with the current programs about him, pretty much what one might expect. Mr. Rogers was much more a conscious player in the development of children's television and shaping American childhood than I had ever imagined. This was even more true of Jim Henson, who accidentally stumbled into children's television, but later developed his involvement into an empire. Again echoing other accounts here, such as that about Disney, at least as here recounted by Andrew Grunzke.

Gary R. Edgerton opens his essay, "Bill Cosby (1937- ) Recoding Bill Cosby's Legacy" with a quotation from Cosby: "I've never been a saint. I'm sure if anyone wanted to get me on my past, they very well could" (181). He could almost have left it at that. But I hadn't remembered or ever known Cosby's connections to the public television universe of *Mr. Rogers* and *Sesame Street* and *Reading Rainbow*, playing in the *Electric Company* program for 240 episodes, obtaining an M.A. along the way and then developing children's educational television programs as part of his Ed.D. Program, and creating the *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* programs at the same time. His educational focus also clearly shaped *the Cosby Show* in the 80s.

Edgerton's discussion of *The Cosby Show*, and in particular one episode, becomes perhaps the most powerful discussion of a series of issues and problems in this entire book. He argues that "Artists also reveal the good, bad, and ugly about themselves in their work. Most of the time, it is the safest and most socially acceptable way for them to share with us their deepest, darkest secrets" (186-7). He eventually comments on the problem of putting "the yin

and yang of Cosby's art into broader social and cultural context. [...] [That while] he is a cunning and deceitful sexual predator; he is also a comic genius and a civil rights pioneer" (191). The tie between Cosby's educational involvement in television, in stories and activism, of shaping childhood towards a positive and successful adulthood, underlines the need for understanding how a flawed world with idealistic aspirations can reconcile the flaws and the aspirations to best shape our society. Edgerton isn't able to further guide us in that direction, but he does clearly lay out this difficulty.

After Edgerton's essay, Susan Larkin's account of Judy Blume's career and the impact of her work on children seems almost to be a low key, if inadequate answer: "Judy Blume does not write about who we want to be, she writes about who we are" (206). As told by Lisa Lyon Payne, the story of Steve Jobs is not only about the development and impact of Apple Computers and iPhones on American culture and childhood, but also about Pixar. Picking up the strands of educational television and film, Jobs's technologies offered new opportunities for children to play and create, further extending some of the invitations offered previously by Seton, and Disney, and Handler. Payne finds that at heart, Jobs maintained a connection to childlike intuition, positioning him at Judy Blume's fundamental place of who and where children are: Jobs's dying words "capturing a child-like wonder of the world: 'Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow'" (223).

Co-editor West's story of LeVar Burton picks up themes from many of these essays, right back to Augusta Baker as she worked to bring great stories and books to children. Not only in the original PBS series but in Burton's continued work and advocacy for his *Reading Rainbow*—in the face of various set-backs—Burton has worked to create a "community of readers" (232). Sue Matheson's essay on J.K. Rowling finds Rowling's success with books and films to extend beyond just her own phenomenal success and impact, to enable the similar if lesser empires of *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, and so on. She draws a number of parallels to Disney's career, and touches on the Pottermania resulting in new creative initiatives and play from the readers and fans of Rowling's work. After Rowling, almost any other writer is in some ways at least a commercial step down, but Lisa After tries valiantly to tell the story of Lemony Snickett's creator, Daniel Handler, with grace and humor. She employs details from some of his stories and quotes delightful *bons mots* while attempting discussion of his readers as "millennials."

—David Lenander

