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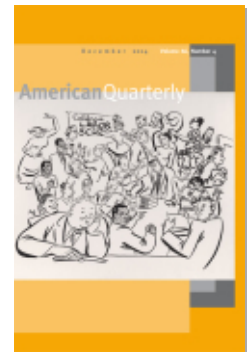
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## **American Studies and Childhood Studies: Lessons from Consumer Culture**

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# American Studies and Childhood Studies: Lessons from Consumer Culture

*Julia L. Mickenberg*

*Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930–1960.* By Nicholas Sammond. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005. 472 pages. \$89.95 (cloth). \$24.94 (paper).

*The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer.* By Daniel Thomas Cook. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004. 211 pages. \$74.95 (cloth). \$21.95 (paper).

*Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century.* By Lisa Jacobson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 320 pages. \$37.00 (cloth). \$24.00 (paper).

Why is the field of childhood studies relevant to American studies? As R. Gordon Kelly pointed out in a seminal *American Quarterly* essay in 1974, studying childhood and the culture surrounding it provides crucial insights into core values and practices of our society, revealing how American culture reproduces itself in the younger generation.<sup>1</sup> Classic inquiries into “American character” recognized this basic fact: anthropologist Margaret Mead, for instance, observed in 1942 that “just as one way of understanding a machine is to understand how it is made, so one way of understanding the typical character structure of a culture is to follow step by step the way in which it is built into the growing child.”<sup>2</sup>

Scholars of certain historical eras—perhaps most notably the post–World War II period—have paid special attention to children as “barometer[s] of American life” (to use Richard Pells’s formulation), but only relatively recently have works with children as their focus begun to gain the sustained attention of American studies scholars.<sup>3</sup> However, a strain of exciting scholarship by people such as Karin Calvert, Katharine Capshaw Smith, Gary Cross, Paula Fass, Miriam Forman-Brunell, Sherrie Inness, Henry Jenkins, Kenneth Kidd, Lynne Vallone, and others, in what has come to be called “childhood studies” should be of interest to all scholars of American studies.<sup>4</sup>

The three books reviewed here implicitly or explicitly suggest that we cannot understand consumer culture as a defining feature of twentieth-century America without examining its development in relation to children and childhood. Yet even as Americans increasingly define themselves by the goods they buy, own, and consume, we often view children as somehow apart—or ideally apart—from the crass realm of commerce. As Daniel Cook notes in the introduction to *The Commodification of Childhood*, “in various ways . . . childhood stands apart from the market even as children are born, live, and grow in tandem with commercial culture” (7). The irony of this false separation is compounded by the fact that “bad” consumption tends to be corrected not by limiting consumption, but by introducing “beneficial” consumer goods. As one nursery school educator argued in the 1920s, “[if] our stimulation is to compete with Satan’s . . . we must provide legitimate thrills.”<sup>5</sup> These three books argue that the tension between consumerism and childhood in the modern era was not simply reconciled but actually employed in service of their mutual development.<sup>6</sup>

Growing emphasis on providing edifying activity, entertainment, and goods for children marked not simply a new relationship between children and consumer culture but also crucial transformations in both phenomena at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the same period that the United States underwent a profound shift from a production-oriented economy to a consumer-oriented economy, childhood was likewise redefined. As the nation shifted from its agricultural roots to an urban, bureaucratized economy, the child, removed from the labor force, was sacralized: valued for sentimental rather than instrumental reasons.<sup>7</sup> This “priceless” child was also increasingly studied, codified, regulated, and protected through the new fields of pediatrics and child psychology, new agencies devoted to child welfare such as the Children’s Bureau (established in 1912), and the rise of compulsory schooling, child study programs, and “scientific” regimes of parenting. All of these new patterns of study and regulation shifted public attention away from the immigrant/working-class child in need of “saving” and toward the “normal” child whose development parents would want to emulate in their own offspring, and whom advertisers would begin to showcase—and eventually appeal to directly—in their promotion of goods, goods almost always shown as “beneficial” to children. Ultimately, as these books all demonstrate, the sacralization of childhood served not to separate children from the commercial realm but, rather, to aid both in the “commodification of childhood” and in the broader transformation to a consumer economy.

Despite the authors' varied disciplines (Sammond's PhD is in communication, Jacobson's is in history, and Cook's is in sociology), the works share several commonalities, from the period they treat—the early twentieth century—to the sources they draw upon.<sup>8</sup> All begin with the assumption that children and childhood operate as vehicles for expressing core cultural values and working out social anxieties. All, likewise, point to the ways in which the moral imperatives attached to childhood historically meant that marketers seeking to sell goods for or to children tended to start by suggesting that whatever they were hawking would aid the growing child's physical, psychological, intellectual, or emotional development. More concretely, they accept the basic premise that child-rearing philosophy underwent a profound shift between the 1920s and the 1940s, from a regime of behaviorism, emphasizing child management, to permissiveness, emphasizing democracy within the family and cultivation of the child's natural impulses. Finally, all link this transformation to a change in children's consumer culture.

Sammond is most interested in the emergence of a “generic child” as it was defined vis-à-vis mass culture, particularly in the products and productions of Walt Disney. This “generic child,” Sammond argues, served as “homunculus” for an ideal of American character, reflecting changing national and international tensions and preoccupations. Jacobson and Cook, less concerned with this political context, focus on ways in which children helped to shape modern consumer culture, with Jacobson discussing a range of products and giving particular attention to advertising, and Cook discussing the retailing of children's clothing. Highlighting the development of a gendered child *consumer* (rather than a generic child), Jacobson and Cook each suggest children gain identity and, more important, agency, through the act of consumption. Thus the “child centeredness” of contemporary parenting regimes serves consumer culture, which feeds upon parents' wishes—indeed, their sense of duty—to indulge children's needs and desires.

In supporting his basic claim that “Walt Disney and the child are mutually constitutive objects” (10), Sammond presents a complex argument that relies on an impressive array of evidence—from child-rearing literature, popular sociology, and debates about mass culture to Disney products, productions, and publicity—as well as theoretically informed analysis. In this ambitious, challenging, and often fascinating book, Sammond maintains that both Disney and the (consuming) “generic child” helped Americans grapple with transformations in capitalism as well as attendant political and social concerns related to democracy, mass society, totalitarianism, technology, efficiency, and

individualism. Walt Disney Productions' extensive public relations apparatus carefully constructed all of the company's products as extensions of the good, all-American Walt Disney himself. This allowed Disney to build a reputation—and ultimately a multinational corporation—around the idea that its products were good for children. According to Sammond, Disney was thus able to assume a relatively unique position as both the translator and the beneficiary of the latest child-rearing wisdom, at once protecting children from “bad” mass culture and offering them an alternative that made consuming Disney products a positive cultural good.

For Sammond, the shift in child-rearing ideology from a behaviorist or managerial emphasis to a permissive or democratic ethos correlates with transformations in the Disney Corporation's productions, its productive processes, and its projected image of Walt himself. All of these were offered up to the public as models for raising children with qualities thought essential to an ideal vision of American character. In Disney's early era, the 1930s, the Disney Corporation was a model of industrial efficiency—or efficient (child) management—with Walt as benign manager. Publicity describing the company's animation process showed thousands of skilled workers cooperating to embody Walt's vision, for the benefit of the growing child. Likewise, animated films themselves, from *Bambi* to *Fantasia*, showed animal or human parents or parent figures grappling with “the question of generational succession—how one generation would pass on its collective wisdom to the next, and whether the younger generation would make proper use of that wisdom in its inevitable ascension to adulthood” (178). Later, in postwar live-action films, Disney offered models of what Dr. Spock would call “common sense” child rearing, providing lessons in how to bring out the child's “true” nature. Focusing on Disney's series of nature films, the *True Life Adventures*, Sammond argues that Disney addressed contemporary cultural ailments ranging from conformity to “Momism” by grafting the terms of postwar suburban domesticity onto the animal world and thereby naturalizing both midcentury suburbia and Disney's take on it.

Although Cook and Jacobson likewise mark the movement toward a more permissive model of parenting, only Sammond points out that this transformation in parenting ideology was part of a larger effort to distinguish the American way of life from the state-engineered mass culture characteristic of totalitarian regimes, at a moment when sociologists and others increasingly feared that the United States (like its ideological opponents) was becoming a conformist “mass society.” Thus, Sammond argues, “the efficiently managed child of the 1920s and 1930s had acted as a prophylactic against uncertainty

and instability during the Depression; this new natural child would serve a similar function, moderating the conformist excesses of postwar American culture and society” (252).

Likewise, just as Disney had sold itself in the early 1930s as a creator of “good” movies that could counter an array of bad media being consumed by young people, in the 1950s Disney “would play upon fears of the socially disruptive introduction of television into the home to position itself as a prophylactic against TV’s negative effects” (301). The company likewise integrated itself into schools and civic organizations, becoming a valuable community resource. Disney’s ultimate foray into children’s television programming with *The Mickey Mouse Club* and *Disneyland* can be seen to mark the culmination of a carefully orchestrated program to produce a regime of childhood consumption that is marked not as exploitative but rather as beneficial. In Sammond’s book, Walt Disney and the “generic child” become lenses for a compelling portrait of American culture in the mid-twentieth century, especially as national anxieties played out in child-rearing literature and in the mass media.

If Disney was particularly effective in showcasing its products as “good” for children—that is, in line with the latest wisdom on child development—that corporation was certainly not unique. As both Jacobson and Cook amply demonstrate, manufacturers of products ranging from breakfast cereals to shoes, as well as retailers, carefully drew upon popular assumptions about children’s physical, psychological, and emotional needs in the process of marketing their goods to parents as well as children. But, taking different tacks than Sammond, Cook and Jacobson also attribute to children the ability to shape consumer culture, and Jacobson goes so far as to suggest children could occasionally challenge marketing logics.<sup>9</sup>

For Jacobson, greater democracy in the family—that is, the shift toward “permissivism”—correlates with growth in the child marketplace. As children were given a greater say in family expenditures, and as childhood became more organized around peer activities, the children’s market became more lucrative and definable by advertisers—who, in turn, helped to fashion the norms of modern childhood. While the initial emphasis, she argues, was on balancing the concerns and needs of parents with children’s desires, by the 1930s, as children achieved both greater autonomy and more access to spending money, advertisers felt free to market their wares to children with little concern for parental approval, setting the terms for a children’s consumer culture that emerged full blown in the postwar period.

Core to Jacobson’s argument is that developmental psychology and changing norms of parenting enabled the development of children’s consumer culture in

precisely those “companionate” families that were ostensibly meant to protect children “from the vulgarities of the commercial marketplace” (217). Jacobson documents this transition by looking at advertising employing child figures; print advertising and, later, radio clubs aimed at attracting child consumers; programs geared toward teaching children either savings and thrift or sensible spending habits; and sanctioned play and play environments that created incentives for parents to properly outfit their nurseries with the latest gear. She maintains that the figure of the child, particularly the figure of the ideal boy consumer (who emerged full blown in the 1930s), helped aid in the transition from a Victorian culture of thrift to a modern culture of consumption. This ideal boy consumer, especially as he was depicted in advertising, helped make spending money seem vital and manly, rather than feminine.

Although Sammond makes a compelling case for the ways in which Disney tapped into parental concerns and the latest child-rearing wisdom, Jacobson’s research suggests this strategy extended to the marketing of a much wider range of goods. Through advertising as well as thinly disguised “curricular” materials offered to schools (not unlike those provided by Disney’s publicity department), manufacturers offered to aid parents and teachers by suggesting their products would teach children good habits, facilitate wholesome play, or foster creativity, entrepreneurship, or a range of other desirable behaviors and qualities of mind. Cream of Wheat, for instance, used both teachers and mothers as its sales agents, launching a campaign to have teachers ask children every morning whether they had their “*hot, cooked cereal*.” Their HCB Club, with “gold stars and wall charts to document children’s breakfast achievements” (187), was endorsed in company advertising by experts who urged mothers to motivate good behavior through play and incentives, rather than coercion—that is, by adopting advertisers’ techniques. Jacobson maintains that parents and teachers readily embraced such programs, only rarely objecting to the intrusion of commercial culture in the realms of home and school.

Jacobson uses some of the same primary sources as Sammond (e.g., Lillian Gilbreth’s 1927 guide to home management, and advertising from the Warshaw Collection in the Smithsonian’s archives) to track a slightly different course. Jacobson sees a similar tension between a management ethos emphasizing child training and a democratic, permissive ethos emphasizing children’s autonomy. However, Jacobson ties this tension explicitly to children’s spending habits. She suggests that the shift in the 1930s away from thrift education and toward allowances embodies this tension between control and autonomy. On the one hand, the shift toward allowances marks the move from an emphasis on sav-

ing to an emphasis on spending, suggesting that children had a right to some portion of family funds for their own use. Likewise, it points to ways in which advertisers were able to play upon parental selflessness to jump-start family spending even in hard times. And yet, Jacobson argues, allowances also can be seen as expressions of an older management ethos: a way to “discipline parental sentimentality as well as the child spender by replacing parents’ haphazard giving of spending money with systematized money training” (71).

Jacobson suggests that the savvy child consumer was most often portrayed as male partly because girls were seen as more flexible in their gender identification. Thus girls could be encompassed in advertising that targeted boys. But while boys were portrayed and marketed to as independent-minded, informed consumers, when advertisers did target girls they were more likely to play upon “teen insecurities and conformist impulses” (141). With the waning of feminist energies in the 1920s and 1930s, images of feminine achievement gave way to an emphasis on beauty and peer scrutiny, even in ads for products that would seem to have little to do with physical appearances. Yet rather than seeing this as a simple matter of manipulative marketing, Jacobson argues that marketers were as much responding to as fostering an emphasis in the new youth culture upon peer approval and physical appearances.

Jacobson suggests that the culmination of a shift toward recognizing and accommodating children’s desires came with the dawn of radio clubs in the 1930s. In contrast to earlier efforts like the HCB Club, which provided mothers with a tool to encourage healthy eating habits, radio clubs of the 1930s paid far less attention to parental desire and often sought to bypass it entirely. The new clubs offered premiums geared toward linking children’s imaginative play to sponsored radio programming, with no concern as to whether parents approved of the premiums, the programs, or the play. But if radio clubs empowered children, Jacobson suggests, these clubs also gave children a taste of consumer disappointment.

It is apparent that Jacobson was eager to document children’s own response to consumer culture. To describe ways in which children themselves shaped and responded to the marketplace, she draws limited if intriguing evidence from oral histories and children’s letters to periodicals and corporations. To evidence young people’s scorn for the claims of consumer culture, Jacobson relies most heavily upon a publication called the “Whatsit,” which came as an insert in the working-class confession magazine *True Story*. Spoofing advertisers’ claims and offering an alternative universe of clubs and entertainment, the “Whatsit,” in Jacobson’s portrait, was a precursor to *Mad* magazine.



While Jacobson emphasizes that voices raised against consumer culture were never as vocal or as effective as those promoting it, her suggestion that working-class readers may have embraced the “Whatsit” as “an expression of class rebellion” (212) is modulated by her acknowledgment that while the “Whatsit” offered a parody of certain elements of consumer culture, it embraced others. She includes images of “Whatsit”-inspired fashions marketed by Bloomingdales to show the magazine’s wide influence and to suggest ways in which retailers accommodated children’s desires. But the “Whatsit” fashions also show how easy it was to co-opt children’s expression into a sales opportunity, a contemporary trend that Jacobson points to in her epilogue. All in all, *Raising Consumers* is richly documented and engaging, and it offers a compelling portrait of the ways in which children shaped and were shaped by consumer culture in the early twentieth century.

The “Whatsit” fashions in Jacobson’s book invite us to turn, finally, to Cook’s book, which examines “the commodification of childhood” by way of the children’s clothing industry. Like Sammond’s work, Cook’s book is richly and productively informed by cultural theory in ways that serve, rather than distract from, the arguments. Cook traces the development of children’s consumer culture from an emphasis on selling children’s clothing to parents, to marketing directly to children. Whereas Jacobson emphasizes the ideal boy consumer, Cook focuses on mothers and girls.

Like both Sammond and Jacobson, Cook suggests that children’s consumer culture managed to thrive despite “the tension between ‘the child’ and ‘the market’” because of the ways in which retailers accommodated what were understood to be the particular needs and desires of mothers and, later, children themselves. Once children are defined as “*full* persons” who are “desirous of goods,” commercial entities can be cast as aids in the production of autonomous beings, Cook argues. Thus the sentimental valuing of children “serves more like a portal between children and merchants and less as a ‘bulwark against the market’” (11, emphasis in original). And the agency that children gain as consumers extends to other realms, Cook maintains. By this logic, personhood is constituted through consumption: we are what we buy.

The children’s wear industry, Cook argues, made “selling the mother through the child” an explicit merchandising strategy, which other industries would later adopt. Retailers of children’s clothing in department stores consciously created a shopping environment that served the perceived needs of mothers. Staff, sometimes including trained nurses, offered the latest advice on child care, and retailers tied sales to public child welfare initiatives such as the

Children's Bureau's "Baby Week." Cook argues that the *Infants' Department*, a trade magazine established in 1916 and devoted to the retailing of children's clothing, led this commodification of motherhood and childhood by "consistently advocat[ing] the connection between commerce and children's welfare" (60–61).

Just as Jacobson tracks a movement toward appealing to children as consumers in their own right, Cook's narrative moves toward the introduction and full realization of "pediocularity," or "seeing the world through children's eyes" (3). Retailers accomplished this particularly through changes in size ranges and merchandising categories—from toddlers to teens—that recognized and fostered age-specific desires in children. This discussion of merchandising strategy, especially as it played out on the literal floor space of the department store, was for me one of the most interesting aspects of Cook's discussion. As retailers attempted to assume a child's perspective, stores were laid out in such a way as to build upon the assumption that every girl wants to look slightly older. Thus girls entering a store would have to pass through the section for teenagers before moving to the sections for younger girls, and older girls would not have to embarrass themselves by being seen in the sections geared toward less mature consumers. Just as care was taken to assure the comfort of mothers in the early efforts to sell infant wear, so stores not only responded to high school girls' desires to look older, but also "institutionalized and appropriated the clique structure of white, middle-class teen girl peer society into their merchandising strategy" (131), with features such as jukeboxes and special areas for girls to sit and gossip with one another, as well as young clerks who could relate to teens' concerns.

Cook's observations about the marketing of children's clothing provide a clear perspective on the ways in which larger trends in consumer culture played out in a single industry; less compelling, in my mind, are his claims that the retailing of children's clothing *set the terms* for "a process that institutionalized the commodity status of childhood and motherhood" (42). He points to factors distinguishing clothing from other kinds of consumer goods: most importantly, clothes are carried physically on one's person, serving as "the frontier between the self and the not self" (20–21). Likewise, Cook reiterates historian Philippe Aries's central claim that how children physically appear at any given historical moment reveals important information about the construction of childhood.<sup>10</sup> These factors do offer support for Cook's argument that new gradations in sizing indicated a new distinction between "teenagers" and younger girls. However, his assertion that these new categories of childhood

*originated* at a sartorial level is harder to prove. Likewise, Cook's larger claims about the children's clothing industry as the main lever for the development of children's consumer culture lack support without concrete comparison to toys, children's book publishing, or other areas of children's consumer culture that were expanding at the same time.

Indeed, given Cook's emphasis on appearances, one wonders why he did not include more illustrations in the book (those he does provide are quite valuable). In contrast, Jacobson's extensive use of illustrations offers rich support for her arguments: the book includes almost fifty figures reproduced from advertisements, juvenile and trade periodicals, archived photographs, and other sources. Sammond's book is also richly illustrated, although his pictures come from a more eclectic range of sources, reflecting the wealth of materials that informed his inquiry, from Disney publicity pieces to psychological studies, film trade magazines, and works of popular sociology. Simply flipping through the three books thus provides an intriguing visual record of changes in twentieth-century childhood, particularly as evidenced in consumer culture.

In contrast to works that assume childhood's commercialization is a relatively recent, or at least a postwar phenomenon, all three books mark the 1920s and 1930s as the pivotal moment in children's consumer culture, setting trends that continue today.<sup>11</sup> Even Cook's own assertion that children's nagging has only recently "become part of advised marketing strategy" (147) is somewhat undercut by Jacobson's documentation of advertiser-sanctioned begging in the early twentieth century. Together, these books offer a needed historical corrective, as well as important new insights into changes in childhood, consumer culture, and American society more generally in the twentieth century. They are evidence of vibrant work in American studies that uses children and childhood as lenses to examine core issues and trends in American culture.

#### Notes

1. R. Gordon Kelly, "Literature and the Historian," *American Quarterly* 26:2 (May 1974), 141–59.
2. Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America* (New York: William Morrow, 1942), 38.
3. Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 200. Also see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); and James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). For review essays covering recent work in childhood studies see Hugh Cunningham, "Histories of Childhood," *American*

- Historical Review* 103.4 (October 1998): 1195–208; Patricia Crain, “Childhood as Spectacle,” *American Literary History* 11.3 (Autumn 1999): 545–53; Barbara Beatty, “Children in Different and Difficult Times: The History of Childhood, Part One,” *History of Education Quarterly* 40.1 (Spring 2000): 71–84; and, also by Beatty, “The Complex Historiography of Childhood: Categorizing Different, Dependent, and Ideal Children,” *History of Education Quarterly* 40.2 (Summer 2000): 201–19.
4. Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600–1900* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); Katharine Capshaw Smith, *Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children’s Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Paula Fass, ed., *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood: In History and Society* (New York: Macmillan, 2004); Miriam Forman-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Sherrie A. Inness, ed. *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls’ Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Henry Jenkins, ed., *The Children’s Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Kenneth B. Kidd, *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Lynne Vallone, *Disciplines of Virtue: Girls’ Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995). Also see Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds., *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
  5. Peter Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 168.
  6. This is not a new argument. See, for example, Gary Cross, *Kids’ Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 26–37.
  7. See Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
  8. Taken together, the footnotes and bibliographies for these books offer an excellent starting point for anyone putting together a reading list of essential works in childhood studies.
  9. This points to an important trend in childhood studies of grappling not simply with changing conceptions of childhood, but also the actual experiences of children. One example of such work is David Nasaw’s *Children of the City at Work and Play* (New York: Doubleday, 1985). In the realm of consumer culture, see Miriam Forman-Brunell, *Made to Play House*, and Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993).
  10. See Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Robert Baldick, 1962).
  11. Works concerned with current trends in children’s consumer culture include Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004); Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* (New York: New Press, 2004); and Alissa Quart, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).