

*Brown* decision and its aftermath received, Americans have come to understand school segregation as a Black-White issue” (102). This widespread belief has consequential implications for Mexican American educational history, in that “the segregation of Mexican Americans has been framed by scholars as de facto because it was the product of local custom and because state governments in the Southwest never sanctioned it” (103). Upending this widespread interpretation, the authors argue that “policies resulting in the segregation of Mexican American students were intended to keep them apart from White children, no matter the pedagogical or other rationale provided, and should retroactively be considered de jure segregation” (104). Donato and Hanson convincingly contend that, as long as it engenders racial segregation, any “government action”—whether it is a formal law at the state level or a resolution at the local level—should be considered de jure segregation (104). Categorizing Mexican American segregation as de facto obfuscates the “deliberate and racial nature” of it (104).

Written in clear, straightforward prose, *The Other American Dilemma* will be of interest to scholars of education history, Mexican American history, the history of the Mexican Consulate, and ethnic studies, and is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students alike. Using transnational sources to uncover connections between ethnic groups in the United States, this essential text forces us to think more capaciously about how we understand Mexican American and African American educational histories, and the connections between the two.

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## Molly Rosner. *Playing with History: American Identities and Children’s Consumer Culture*

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Amy F. Ogata

University of Southern California  
amyogata@usc.edu

The relationship between objects and mythmaking has long fascinated scholars and critics who examine how cultural information and value systems can be accessed through material forms. In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes famously described ordinary things, including toys, revealing the ways they accumulate abstract meaning. The expansive scholarship on American material culture has aimed not only to read and decode those systems, but also to explore how the seemingly neutral facts of everyday things can have agency—how these discourses organize, frame, or reinforce, often unconsciously, a broad range of identities and cultural values. Molly Rosner’s *Playing with History: American Identities and Children’s Consumer Culture*,

intervenes in this well-trod territory with a study on the relationship between objects nominally intended for children and the enduring myths of an American “consensus” history. Rosner claims that objects such as playthings, dolls, books, and a theme park share an origin in an emerging industrial economy that fortified an often racist, sexist, ableist narrative of American exceptionalism for well over a century. While this general idea is already accepted in existing studies of American children’s visual and material culture (such as coonskin caps, Daisy air rifles, G.I. Joe, juvenile television programming, and sites such as Disneyland), Rosner adds to this scholarship some new evidence.

In five chapters, she recounts how a limited notion of Americanness was increasingly tethered to a capitalist market bent on selling a manufactured national narrative in the form of children’s goods. Rosner calls these “didactic amusements” (2) for the ways these material and spatial objects are entangled with glorified and often racist versions of US history. Yet the book is far more invested in describing how a racist rhetoric of US history was repeated, rather than showing the ways that children may have learned these lessons.

Rosner begins with the emergence of an American toy industry during World War I. German manufacturers long dominated the worldwide production of dolls, small handmade wooden amusements, building sets, paper products, and ceramic tea sets that were imported in huge quantities until the onset of the First World War. Rosner recounts the well-documented fads of Teddy bears, made-in-America cast iron banks and wind-up toys, and dolls, pointing to the ways that they are enmeshed in racist imagery and limited gender roles. Yet her claim that “the influence of toys on children’s understanding of America cannot be overstated” (27) is not actually proved. We learn little about what—and, importantly—*how* children might have understood their engagement with these objects, but quite a bit about what industrialists and journalists wanted their parents to consume in the patriotic act of buying American.

The second chapter explores two instances of adult play with dolls. The Depression-era doll show that members of the Daughters of the American Revolution held in New York City in 1938 upholds the long-standing truism that the most devoted collectors of dolls are adults. These elite women, Rosner explains, privileged dolls with aristocratic associations and displayed fine, handmade specimens wearing special, often bridal, garments, kept dust-free under glass. Their version of US history is read in the emphatic Whiteness of the dolls on view, so that even a “California bride” doll is described as “Spanish.” Paired awkwardly with this pageant of elite, not-for-play things is the doll study that Mamie and Kenneth Clark conducted around the same time. The Clarks famously developed an experiment in which they queried children living in Washington, D.C., about both Black and White dolls, showing how racist perceptions were apparently deep-seated even among young children. The disturbing findings stirred new action to curb laws perpetuating the “separate but equal” doctrine. Aside from sharing this charged historical moment, Rosner has little to say about how these two examples might operate on similar evidential terms, or how adults framed the historical lessons on things nominally for kids.

A chapter about two juvenile literature series is more explicit about the ways that ideas could be consumed through the format of heroic biography, a staple of public and school libraries. Rosner situates the “Orange” series and the Landmark (Random House) series of great Americans as the project of publishers of different political stripes who nonetheless created a similar body of work that aimed to evade the Cold War scrutiny of McCarthyism. By fabricating narratives of virtuous boyhoods and heroic pioneers, Indigenous people as violent threat or docile companion, and the happy slave, both series, Rosner argues, mapped a triumphant historical past on current political tensions. Using archival material to support the climate of fear in juvenile publishing, Rosner also shows how a Landmark book on the FBI was devised to ingratiate the publisher to J. Edgar Hoover. These insights add to an already robust history of children’s literature and, together with the final chapter on the American Girl dolls, is the most well developed and closely argued of the book.

Rosner’s discussion of Freedomland, a short-lived theme park situated on a swampy site in the Bronx (which became Co-op City after its demise in the mid-1960s), is the strange intervening chapter between the books and dolls. Unlike the other objects the author discusses, this theme park, although established on the model of Disneyland with a quasi-educational, living-history mission, is less obviously intended for children. Rosner describes the dramatized and sanitized historical exhibits and concessions including Old Chicago, the San Francisco earthquake, and concepts such as the Old Southwest and Satellite City without much elaboration on the spatial dynamics of the place. If “Old” is the giveaway that reveals the nostalgic commercial impetus, then the backward-looking project was, she argues, already irrelevant and in competition with the future-themed New York World’s Fair of 1964.

The final and most successful case study concerns the American Girl dolls, which were initially a small group of girl-aged doll characters from different historical moments and ethnic backgrounds. After the Pleasant Company sold the series to Mattel in 1998, the American Girl lines expanded, creating numerous new characters, more books, clothes, furniture, and accessories suited to each character and historical moment. Eventually the line minimized the historical conceit in favor of physical resemblance. Rosner’s descriptions are animated with firsthand knowledge of these dolls. She skillfully develops the tensions between the pat historical lessons and easy dramatic resolutions, the underlying lesson of consumerism and the pleasure of ownership, and the ways that the historical themes diminish in favor of the Truly Me dolls that resemble their owners. Rosner observes that as the character and owner merge, the historical lessons recede, leaving even the veneer of historical education to the world of consumption.

Each of these object lessons are nominally things for children, but Rosner does little to explain who that specific child is or how gender, class, or race might inform how they learn the critical historical precepts the adults in this story create. Rosner’s method understands objects and spaces as texts. Newspaper criticism and promotion, advertising language, and book plots form the bulk the evidence. Since most of the analysis lingers on language, the author implies that these are literate, presumably school-aged children. Yet Rosner hesitates to develop the stakes for learning these lessons, landing too often on the bland point that these things “reflect their time” (84). Finding the child’s voice is a problem that challenges everyone working with

historical material, yet most scholars acknowledge that children often depart from the intended script in any adult-designed play situation. To suggest, then, that children uncritically absorbed, repeated, and enacted the text-based narratives of these objects and sites is to cheat them of their own will and agency.

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## Brian Rouleau. *Empire's Nursery: Children's Literature and the Origins of the American Century*

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Elizabeth Dillenburg 

The Ohio State University at Newark  
Dillenburg.1@osu.edu

Current debates around the banning of books are a reminder that children's literature—however innocuous it appears on the surface—is anything but apolitical. The ways that children's literature and discourses around it serve as battlegrounds for broader contestations of power form the focus of Brian Rouleau's *Empire's Nursery*. The book explores how ideas of American imperialism were constructed, contested, and reimagined within a wide variety of genres from the Civil War era to the Vietnam War, a period that witnessed dramatic changes in US foreign policy and in ideas about childhood. These developments may seem distinct at first glance, but Rouleau shows how they were intricately connected. Throughout *Empire's Nursery*, Rouleau emphasizes how child readers were not simply passive audiences but architects who shaped conversations around the US's expanding domestic and foreign roles.

*Empire's Nursery* opens with an analysis of the role of Westerns in supporting and legitimizing settler colonialism during the postbellum period. The second chapter shifts from the US's transcontinental empire to its overseas empire around the turn of the twentieth century. This chapter focuses on the books produced by Edward Stratemeyer and his syndicate, who are best known for writing the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew stories but also published hundreds of books, including many designed to stimulate youth interest in the US's overseas empire, especially as the US engaged in conflicts such as the War of 1898 and US-Philippine War. In both chapters, Rouleau details how the stories encouraged young readers to embrace their imperial responsibility and normalized insensitivity to different ethnic and racial groups by depicting Native Americans as “demonic” and Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Hawaiians, and Filipinos as subordinate, feminine, childlike, and weak. Scholars have long discussed these tropes in literature by and for adults, but Rouleau identifies their robust appearance in the literary world of juvenile audiences.