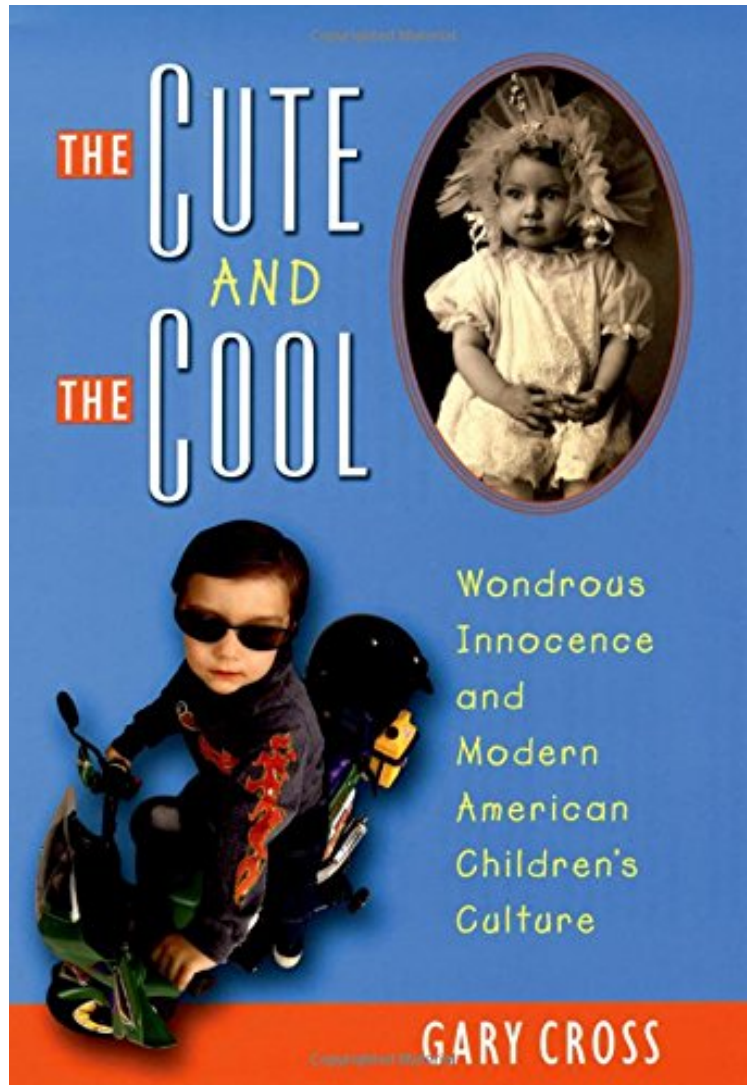


The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture

Gary Cross

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Gary Cross : The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture:

22 of 25 people found the following review helpful. "I believe that children are our future..."By pnotley@hotmail.comGary Cross's book starts out with a painful paradox, and then becomes less subtle and nuanced as it goes on. There is something obsessive with our desire for childhood innocence, there is something unhealthy as

we try to find spiritual meaning them by showering them with gifts and ensnaring them in the consumer marketplace. "We buy more things for the little ones at birthdays and holidays than research shows they want, and then we fret when older children seem so insatiable....We want kids to be kids, and yet we force our young into early adulthood when we introduce them to the consumer market." Cross discusses how children became idealized and innocent at the beginning of this century ("the cute") in such a way as to allow a certain naughtiness. But as time went on, children began to react to the saccharine excess of innocence and became hipper, more sarcastic ("the cool"). Adults became worried at these trends and began to engage in mostly unhelpful moralistic panics, becoming alarmed at video games, comic books, smoking and other pastimes. Cross starts off with looking at ideals of "sheltered" and "wondrous" innocence, and found that the child psychologist supported elitist tone of the first was undermined by the commercial qualities of the second. He then provides a chapter on the image of the cute child in such areas as advertisements, dolls, the rise of teddy bears and Shirley Temple. He then goes on to discuss the charming urchins and coquettes that we see in such comic strips as Buster Brown, the Katzenjammer Kids and Dennis the Menace. We then have a chapter on how holidays became more child-centered. Although somewhat over-reliant on John Gillis' *A World of their Making*, many people will be intrigued to learn how little a role children played in modern holidays until the last century began. The ritual of small children trick or treating did not really get underway until the thirties. Christmas celebrations were much older, but they tended to be more rambunctious and adult-centered until the nineteenth century. Santa Claus did not gel into his present form until Thomas Nast's 1879 illustration. Likewise "Happy Birthday to You" dates to 1893 and family vacations from the late forties and fifties. After discussing Disney World as the apotheosis of the family vacation, Cross then discusses the origins of the Cool. We see the domestication of the Disney cartoon. We see the replacement of Tom Swift and the Hardy Boys with pulp fiction and comic books. The Cool keeps making headway as we see the rise of cartoons in the sixties (as late as 1960 children had to wait until 10:30 Saturday morning to see them), the rise of Barbie dolls and GI Joe, and the birth of video games. We see attempts to control the Cool, tainted with snobbish and racist fears, with proposals to censor movies, ban toy weapons, outlaw Pinball, control comic books, regulate children's television advertising, and preventing youth smoking. As Cross concludes his book we can see that he has discussed a wide range of examples. But he has not been correspondingly deep. It's not just that some of his details aren't right. Contrary to what he says the children in "Carrie" and "The Shining" are not possessed by the devil. And whereas Cross says that Dennis the Menace is never punished, I can remember a lot of cartoons where he ends up sitting in the corner. And whether children take the Katzenjammer Kids' antics in good fun depends, I would suggest on how they react to seeing them spanked at the end of every strip. The larger problem with Cross lies with his conclusions. To wit, the commercial manipulation of children can be crass, but much of it is inevitable. It would be moralistic, elitist and ascetic to be excessively concerned about it. But then genuine empathy for children can transcend selfish adult uses of innocence. It is rather Clintonesque, seeing both sides of the question, providing good wishes for the left, while leaving the economic interests of the right untouched. (The discussion of Disney World is especially gutless.) Cross' argument is not helped by the striking absence of children from the book: this is more a book about representations of children than the actual entity. His book often relies on newspapers, which gives the book a sort of press-clipping feeling, while the opinions of children themselves are ignored. It is rather striking that his examples of children's culture come more from the mass produced world of comic strips, comic books, Hanna-Barbera cartoons and toys, while the more memorable individuals such as Linus van Pelt, Charles Wallace Murray and Matilda Wormwood do not get a mention. We get a brief, not terribly thoughtful description of Bart Simpson, and nothing about his sister. Cross does not appreciate that children may object to the crass, repetitive nature of children's mass culture, and that in retrospect they may despise its makers for taking advantage of their limited knowledge. We may laugh at Rick Moranis in "Parenthood" for getting his four year old daughter to read "In the Penal Colony." But there is almost nothing on television as good as Maurice Sendak and Evelyn Nesbit, and it would not be snobbish for Oxford University Press to point this out.² of 5 people found the following review helpful. Clever and Innovative! By Adelaide Ariel Guy This book is so enlightening! I never really thought about children's culture in this way before. The tension between the cute and the cool has been under looked until this clever and extremely readable account.

The twentieth century was, by any reckoning, the age of the child in America. Today, we pay homage at the altar of childhood, heaping endless goods on the young, reveling in memories of a more innocent time, and finding solace in the softly backlit memories of our earliest years. We are, the proclamation goes, just big kids at heart. And, accordingly, we delight in prolonging and inflating the childhood experiences of our offspring. In images of the naughty but nice Buster Brown and the coquettish but sweet Shirley Temple, Americans at mid-century offered up a fantastic world of treats, toys, and stories, creating a new image of the child as "cute." Holidays such as Christmas and Halloween became blockbuster affairs, vehicles to fuel the bedazzled and wondrous innocence of the adorable child. All this, Gary Cross illustrates, reflected the preoccupations of a more gentle and affluent culture, but it also served to liberate adults from their rational and often tedious worlds of work and responsibility. But trouble soon entered paradise. The "cute" turned into "cool" as children, following their parental example, embraced the gift of fantasy and unrestrained desire to rebel against the saccharine excesses of wondrous innocence in deliberate pursuit of the anti-

cute. Movies, comic books, and video games beckoned to children with the allures of an often violent, sexualized, and increasingly harsh worldview. Unwitting and resistant accomplices to this commercial transformation of childhood, adults sought-over and over again, in repeated and predictable cycles-to rein in these threats in a largely futile jeremiad to preserve the old order. Thus, the cute child--deliberately manufactured and cultivated--has ironically fostered a profoundly troubled ambivalence toward youth and child rearing today. Expertly weaving his way through the cultural artifacts, commercial currents, and parenting anxieties of the previous century, Gary Cross offers a vibrant and entirely fresh portrait of the forces that have defined American childhood.

"The strengths of Cross's work are his extended analysis of the rise of the consumer market and his thorough grounding in the details of children's popular culture in the United States since the late nineteenth century. On balance this is a lively, provocative, and very readable analysis of a persistent social concern about children and youth."--American Historical "A powerful critique of the commercial culture directed at kids--particularly its mockery of adulthood and promotion of highly unrealistic fantasies--the book is the most thoughtful and richly researched work we have on the history and societal implications of the commercialization of childhood."--Journal of Social History "A wake-up call to a culture that acts out its most irreconcilable passions, representations, and convictions through its children. In this bold account of the commercialization of childhood, Cross illustrates the ways in which the child is pinioned by interminably incompatible adult expectations. Engagingly written, compellingly argued, all too enlightening, this is a study that comes as an unremitting corrective to our current social fictions about how to raise children."--Virginia Blum, author of *Hide and Seek: The Child between Psychoanalysis and Fiction* "No historian has thought more fruitfully about the intersection between modern childhood and consumerism than Gary Cross. In *The Cute and the Cool* Cross brings these observations and his accumulation of a group of fascinating commercial sources to an important culmination as he demonstrates how our adult addiction to childhood innocence has created many of the conflicts and frustrations of modern parenting."--Paula Fass, author of *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America* "This sprightly and erudite book dashes us across an impressive array of facts to confront us with the deepest contradictions of child-rearing in our consumer society."--Anne Higonnet, Barnard College, Columbia University "This is an imaginative take on the emergence of new kinds of images for children in American society, and about their role in accelerating consumerism. Vital reading for anyone concerned with adult-child relations."--Peter N. Stearns, George Mason University "Building on a dramatic account of changes in the ways that American teachers, cultural critics, merchandisers, media, and parents have understood children's innocence or sophistication, Gary Cross shows how the history of childhood illuminates American cultural history in general."--Viviana A. Zelizer, author of *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* About the Author Author of *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*, and seven other books relating to the history of modern society, Gary Cross is a Distinguished Professor of Modern History at the Pennsylvania State University.