

History

KIDS' STUFF: *Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood.*

By Gary Cross. Harvard Univ. Press.
352 pp. \$29.95

Toys are us, and they always have been. More precisely, they are the material means of exchange between adult and child cultures, and between the folkways of individual families and the values promoted by teachers and preachers. From the homespun to the elaborate, from the crudely racist to the painfully pedagogically correct, toys convey contesting models of childhood. They make money, too: sales in the United States alone were \$17.5 billion in 1993.

Cross, a historian at Pennsylvania State University, finds the origins of today's toy industry in the late 19th century. Then, for the first time, many families had the leisure, a surging industry the equipment, and chain stores the distribution channels to create a mass market in playthings. Parents, when not buying for their own, sometimes sadistic amusement—one BB gun advertiser merrily suggested using neighbors' dogs and cats for target practice—grew more conscious of their children's development. Toys began not only to prepare children for adult roles and responsibilities through play but to nurture an autonomous world of youthful fantasy. Meanwhile our rosy-cheeked, cornucopian Santa Claus gradually displaced the judgmental, switch-bearing European St. Nick as the bringer of Christmas gifts to the new child-centered American family.

Small, conservative, and successfully protectionist by today's standards, the industry nevertheless exploded in the first two decades of the 20th century. For boys, model railroads, wind-up automobiles, and building kits such as Tinkertoys and erector sets brought new technology into the home. For girls, dolls provided substitute objects of nurturing, now that parents of smaller families no longer entrusted infants to older sisters.

For boys and girls alike, whimsy grew along with realism and competed with it. Cross argues persuasively that the fantasy character is a toy-box counterpart to the branded product: a differentiated, protected version of the formerly generic. Indeed,

trademark characters were spun off as tie-in playthings early in advertising history. The Campbell Kids touted soup, while Kewpie dolls promoted "chocolate, china, soap, and Jello." Having successfully sold groceries, dolls soon were promoting movies. Faced with rising production costs for soundtrack and animation in the 1930s, Walt Disney licensed merchandise rights in Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and other characters. Soon, feature films such as *Snow White* and *Pinocchio* were released to coincide with massive merchandising campaigns.

The postwar toy story is the triumph of the Disney formula, perfected by television. The classic, stable technology of the model railroad and the chemistry set has given way to open-ended change. For the first time, there is a radical break between parents' memories of their own childhood and their youngsters' experience. Indeed, parents, and even Santa himself, are marginalized as children live in an autonomous, television-driven culture that makes its appeals directly to them.

Kids' Stuff is a splendid analysis of dauntingly rich material, mining toys for new insights into American families—and American entertainment.

—Edward Tenner

THE TWO KOREAS: *A Contemporary History.*

By Don Oberdorfer. Addison Wesley.
472 pp. \$30

A year in Korea, Americans who have spent time there say, is like two years in any other country—not because the life is unpleasant (far from it), but because events rocket forward at twice their normal pace. Since the post-World War II separation of North and South, which followed 35 years of Japanese colonial rule, much of Korean history has been one of drama and instability. Tough, sentimental Koreans bridled beneath their superpower protectors and sought to rule their own kingdoms—in the North, a kingdom of hermits; in the South, one of world players.

The South did become a world player during its miraculous economic development of the 1960s, and a true working democracy in 1987 thanks in part to the surprising self-restraint of President Chun Doo-