

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-

hwan, who seven years earlier had brutally suppressed a political uprising. Lurking beneath the fiscal and political successes, though, was a level of violence that became part of the Korean power game. In this regard, the Korean War continued long after the conventional fighting ended in 1953. General Park Chung-hee, who orchestrated a military coup and took over the nation in 1961, was delivering a speech in 1974 when his wife, sitting on stage, was fatally shot by a North Korean agent—yet Park proceeded to complete the speech. (In 1979, Park himself was assassinated by the chief of his intelligence agency.) Amid preparations for the 1988 Seoul Olympics, North Korea blew up a South Korean airliner, but the Olympics proceeded as planned, becoming South Korea's great coming-out party. The North Korean saboteur, who was captured and who confessed, is now a born-again Christian. It is, as the author observes, "a land of surprises."

Oberdorfer, a former *Washington Post* reporter and the author of *Tet!*, provides a useful overview of Korean history since World War II. He describes the frustrations and strains as the two Koreas have tried to get together—the many promising moves that have ended in failure. He offers unforgettable accounts of events that he witnessed, including the assassination of Park's wife. And, in a cloak-and-dagger story reminiscent of John le Carré, he recounts the defection in 1996 of Hwang Jang Yop, the highest-level North Korean to change sides. I wish I could have read this book before going to South Korea as American ambassador in 1986. It's a fascinating account for anyone who cares about Korea, who worries about the United States in Asia, or who just likes a good read.

—James Lilley

SHIFTING FORTUNES:
The Rise and Decline of American Labor, from the 1820s to the Present.

By Daniel Nelson. Ivan R. Dee.

181 pp. \$22.50

Why have American labor unions grown strong in some periods and withered in others? For answers, both friends and foes of organized labor usually point to dramatic events and personalities: state militias stamping out strikes in the Gilded Age, class-conscious workers surging into John L. Lewis's CIO during the Great Depression, leaders of the Teamsters getting married to the Mob in

the 1950s.

Nelson, the author of several fine books on labor and business history, discounts any explanation that relies so much on headlines. To him, working people are rational men and women whose reasons for joining or not joining unions have changed little over time. Three intersecting factors, he argues, account for the ebb and flow of union membership: the leverage of workers who enjoy some autonomy on the job, the fear of reprisals by employers, and the larger economic and political environment. As that list suggests, labor organizers have had to make the best of a situation shaped by more powerful forces. Their fortunes have shifted over time, but the structures that govern those outcomes persist.

Nelson's approach enables him to resolve some of the nagging anomalies of U.S. labor history. He describes, for example, how coal miners were able to build the United Mine Workers, the only durable industrial union in the nation until the mid-20th century. Mining was dangerous work but difficult for bosses to supervise, and the camaraderie miners forged both underground and in their isolated communities sustained the UMW against employer attacks.

Factory labor was much harder to organize. At giant companies such as Ford and U.S. Steel, workers toiled for decades under the constant eye and thumb of management. Everyone knew a troublemaker could easily be replaced. It took the political earthquake of the New Deal—which established the pro-union National Labor Relations Board—to alter that condition. In recent years, as federal support for organizing has eroded, manufacturing unions have again become vulnerable. As Nelson notes, "By the late 1980s the NLRB did not even give lip service to the goal of encouraging collective bargaining. Instead it provided a veneer of legality for traditional open-shop policies."

Nelson's pithy survey is full of such sensible judgments. Writing in a crisp if bloodless

