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Huck's Raft: A History Of American Childhood



Synopsis

Like Huck's raft, the experience of American childhood has been both adventurous and terrifying. For more than three centuries, adults have agonized over raising children while children have followed their own paths to development and expression. Now, Steven Mintz gives us the first comprehensive history of American childhood encompassing both the child's and the adult's tumultuous early years of life. Underscoring diversity through time and across regions, Mintz traces the transformation of children from the sinful creatures perceived by Puritans to the productive workers of nineteenth-century farms and factories, from the cosseted cherubs of the Victorian era to the confident consumers of our own. He explores their role in revolutionary upheaval, westward expansion, industrial growth, wartime mobilization, and the modern welfare state. Revealing the harsh realities of children's lives through history--the rigors of physical labor, the fear of chronic ailments, the heartbreak of premature death--he also acknowledges the freedom children once possessed to discover their world as well as themselves. Whether at work or play, at home or school, the transition from childhood to adulthood has required generations of Americans to tackle tremendously difficult challenges. Today, adults impose ever-increasing demands on the young for self-discipline, cognitive development, and academic achievement, even as the influence of the mass media and consumer culture has grown. With a nod to the past, Mintz revisits an alternative to the goal-driven realities of contemporary childhood. An odyssey of psychological self-discovery and growth, this book suggests a vision of childhood that embraces risk and freedom--like the daring adventure on Huck's raft.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

No aspect of American life is as shrouded in idealizing myth as childhood. In this compelling work of historical synthesis, University of Houston history professor Mintz argues forcefully "if not originally" that for most of the past three centuries childhood has been the exception rather than the norm. Responding to the exigencies of colonial life, Mintz writes, the Puritans unsentimentally mentored children as "adults in training." With the explosive rise of an urban, factory-based economy in the mid-19th century, childhood first emerged as a discrete period of development. Limited, home-based instruction was replaced by compulsory instruction in public schools "but not all children benefited. For most young people in the years after the Industrial Revolution" despite the mixed results of reformers "childhood meant grim factory or farm labor, poverty, loneliness, exploitation (economic and sexual) and often unspeakable cruelty. Poor, immigrant and black children suffered disproportionately as the class gap widened. More recently, Mintz recounts, childhood has been refined and extended into the phenomenon of protracted adolescence. That childhood has mostly been less than ideal is not surprising. What may be, for many readers, is Mintz's portrait of just how far from the ideal this country has been "and perhaps continues to be" in meeting the health needs, education and welfare of all its children. 36 b&w photos.

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Starred Review Mintz uses Huck Finn's raft as the image of the quintessential ideal American childhood, filled with adventure and exploration. But he reminds readers of the seriousness of Huck's life and the grim realities of American childhood from the early colonies, through the progressive era, and up to modern times. Mintz confers special attention on the childhoods of American slaves, Native Americans, and immigrants. Tracking the major social, economic, and cultural developments in the nation's history, Mintz focuses on their impact on the lives of children and adolescents. Culturally, children have been viewed as both inherently corrupt and as innocent, eventually coming to be seen as objects of affection; economically, they have been viewed as property, financial contributors, and major consumers; socially, they have spurred the creation of asylums, orphanages, and reform schools. Mintz traces changes in the legal status of children and in such laws as those establishing the age of sexual consent and restricting child labor. He also examines the evolving image of adolescents and their impact on modern culture and commerce.

Readers who enjoyed Ann Hulbert's *Raising America* [BKL Mr 15 03] will love the breadth of perspective in this engrossing book. Vanessa Bush Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The author is giving a historical account of American childhood. While the content is somewhat interesting, the flow is not always very smooth. Sometimes, the writer is speaking about one time in history and then goes back to another. He will make a statement and then a couple of sentences later, say something opposite. Therefore, sometimes, it gets confusing. I have to read this book for a class, I would not choose to read it and would probably put it down if I did not have to have a quiz on it, at every class. The author has used a lot of resources to write his book.

I initially purchased this book because the subject matter interested me, but lo and behold, subsequently it was the required text for a college history course I was enrolled in. It is a unique and fascinating look at 400 years of childhood in America. Mintz does a great job of explicating the changes that childhood underwent over the years and centuries. For instance: adolescence is a 20th century creation! Also, the Puritans viewed children as little adults and made no exceptions for their age. In the colonial period American Indian children (especially boys) lived such a carefree existence that frequently abducted colonist children refused to be reunited with their white biological parents mainly due to the life of arduous drudgery which constituted childhood in 18th century New England. This fine work is filled with fascinating bits of information as the aforementioned. It spans the period between the 17th century up to the period of the Columbine massacre, showing the myriad changes which accompanied childhood in America. Great reading and great history, highly recommended. If you have an interest in this subject matter you will not be disappointed. READ IT!!!

Very interesting and great read! Sometimes you have to take it with a grain of salt because the sources aren't always there and facts are obviously not true. But this is a minor thing and obvious when it happens. Overall excellent history of children in America, a rare glimpse at something not often studied.

Great book on the development of American adolescence!

Great text.

The book was in better condition than I thought it would have been because I have had some bad experience with ordering books so sometimes I expect the worse. I haven't read the book but seem to fit the requirement that I'm using for my History class.

Huck's Raft is a very readable survey of the history of childhood in America. It includes copious notes at the back with sources for more information on any subject it touches. It is an excellent place to start for those interested in the subject.

It's a textbook

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