

## How Childhood Has Changed! (Adults, Too)

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

At first glance, it could be a 16th-century version of a modern schoolyard. A piggyback tug of war is going on just in front of a game of leapfrog. Two girls play with dolls, another is in a wedding costume. One can imagine the cacophony: the grunts of the wrestling boys, the echoing hallos of a girl shouting into a hollow barrel, the frenzied teasing of blindman's buff.

But look more closely at Bruegel's 1560 painting "Children's Games," as Edward Snow, a professor of English at Rice University, does in "Inside Bruegel" (North Point Press), and something unsettling emerges. Bruegel treats the children of this bizarre urban landscape as if they were younger versions of his more familiar burghers, peasants and ecclesiastics.

Some scenes bear an eerie resemblance to icons of religious suffering — a monk whipping a penitent, a Christ being taunted with a crown of thorns. Others are clearly rehearsals for adulthood. Whether acting out a bridal procession or fanning the flames at a burning stake, these earnest children are adults in training. As Mr. Snow points out, the play takes place on the border of adulthood as children try on roles, test limits.

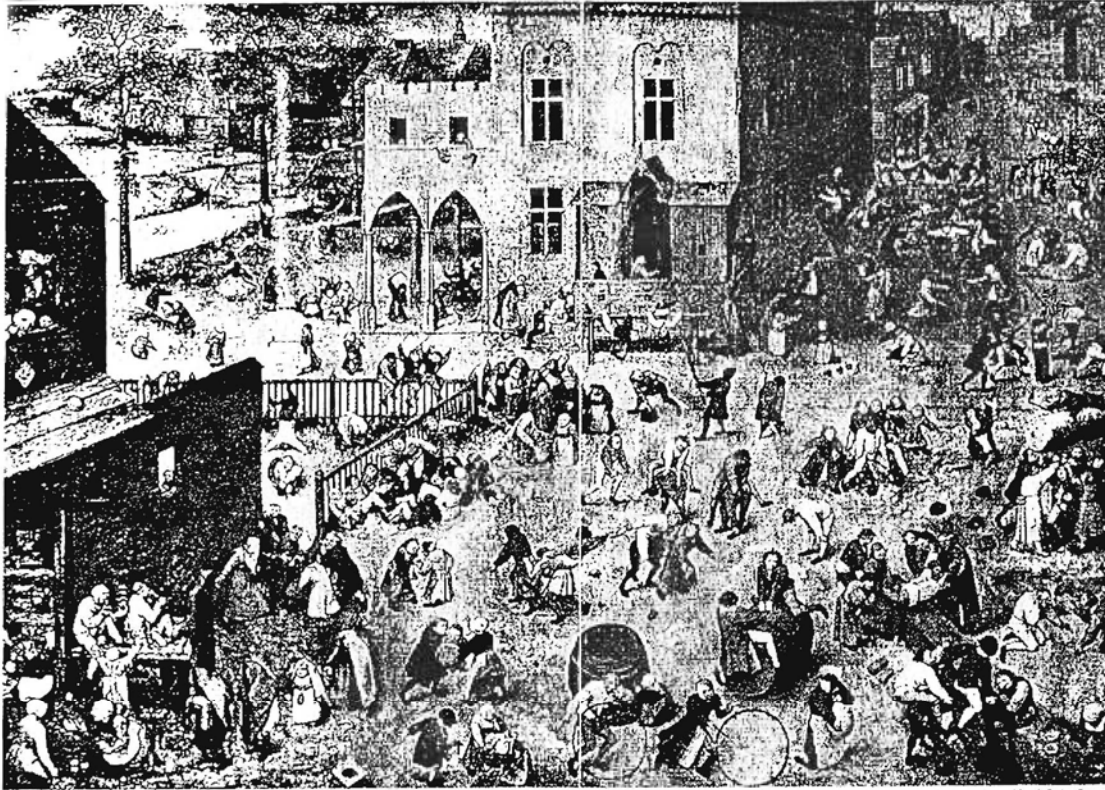
This is unsettling to contemporary eyes because we no longer see children as Bruegel did. A contemporary version of "Children's Games" — aside from including Barbie dolls with downloaded voices and video games about mutant cyborgs — might well include plenty of adults following the games of children each step of the way. Instead of children aspiring to adulthood, it can sometimes seem as if contemporary adulthood aspires to childhood.

Some scholars are also giving children pride of place, spurred partly by the sense that some enormous change has taken place. Three years ago, at Brooklyn College, the sociologist Gertrude Lenzer founded a pioneering program in "children studies," applying anthropology, psychology, literature and history to the study of children and adolescence. Nearly 100 students now minor in the area; other schools have begun similar programs.

A two-volume anthology of papers by European scholars, "A History of Young People" (Harvard University Press), edited by Giovanni Levi and Jean-Claude Schmitt examines such subjects as youth in Ancient Rome, the nature of youthful mischief and criminality in medieval Europe, and the military and economic roles of youth in the 19th century. In another new book, "Kids' Stuff" (also Harvard), a historian, Gary Cross, leaps into the contemporary fray, examining "toys and the changing world of American childhood."

Some scholars treat children studies as an enterprise resembling race or gender studies, giving attention to a victimized "other" apparently overlooked by history; many essays discuss the prevalence of youth in

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North Point Press



Who is Suzy Homemaker???

Above and right: Thisard '08

In "Children's Games" (1560), above, Bruegel depicted children as little versions of adults. Some 400 years later, toys like ovens were practice for adulthood. Today, Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles suggest a world independent of grown-ups.



# How Childhood Has Changed! (Not to Mention Adulthood)

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servant classes and the military, stressing their marginality. But a larger story can be pieced together from varied sources about what youth and childhood once were, allowing us to see more clearly what they have now become.

The key transformations probably began about 300 years ago. Distinctions had always been made between adulthood and the subservient conditions of the adolescent and child, but the emphasis changed. Children started to be treated as if they were something other than small adults. John Locke urged that children be given toys to play with. European Romanticism began to cherish childhood as a lost, Edenic past from which adults have fallen. Rousseau wrote: "Nature wants children to be children before they are men."

Children's books developed around the same time. According to Michael Hearn, one of the curators of a recent art exhibition devoted to illustrated children books and a contributor to its catalogue, "Myth, Magic, and Mystery" (Roberts Rinehart Publishers), illustrations first tended to be produced for adult books like "Robinson Crusoe" and "Gulliver's Travels." But a breakthrough occurred with the English translation of Grimms' fairy tales, illustrated by George Cruikshank in 1823. Eventually, picture books became a separate literary genre, created for children.

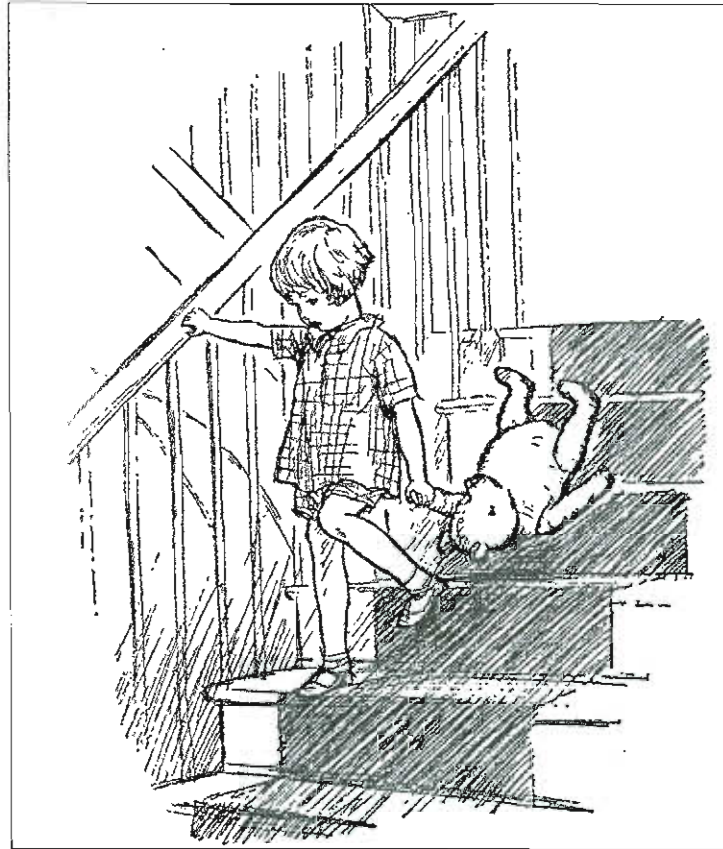
Childhood was transformed. In the nursery image of Mother Goose and the tales of Winnie-the-Pooh, in the cinematic images of Mickey Mouse and stories about Curious George, the animal kingdom came to reign supreme. Cribs became manglers for cuddly creatures from the English

countryside accompanied by domesticated bears, lions, rodents and owls. In this adult fantasy of childhood, even animals of prey are tamed, invoking an Edenic world that is prehuman, linguistically primitive, instinctively loving and obeying rules of nature, not culture.

## Associating Youth With Revolution

This pastoral vision of the natural child ended up being extraordinarily influential even in changing the far-from-pastoral world of childhood labor. In 1841, for example, it became illegal in France to make children under 16 work more than 12 hours a day; even more significant distinctions were made during the next half-century. The social role of children and youth changed as well. In a provocative essay in the Harvard anthology, Sergio Luzzatto, an Italian historian, suggests that beginning with the French Revolution the concept of "generation" first came into common use, associating the idea of ever-renewing youth with perpetual revolution. "One generation," reads the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" (1793), "cannot subject future generations to its laws." Rebellion was expected, even encouraged, in attempts to rectify a flawed world or restore a lost one.

The Harvard anthology also suggests an accompanying fear of that rebelliousness: since the 19th century, disruptive youth in France have sometimes been called Apaches. In part, youth was fearsome because it was revolutionary, because it represented forces meant to sweep away the past. Several historians point out that in Italian and German fascism, this aspect of youth became a cult. Mussolini's anthem was "Giovin-



E. P. Dutton & Company

Christopher Robin with Edward Bear (Winnie-the-Pooh).

ezza" ("Youth"); Il Duce was referred to as "the youngest of us all." The leader of the Hitler Youth in 1934 said, "Only the eternally young should have a place in our Germany."

But not even these horrific examples undermined the romance. The postwar American preoccupation

with urban gangs and juvenile delinquency also ended up as a homage to youth. In "Rebel Without a Cause" and other films and novels, delinquency was partly a sign of authenticity, a dissent from the supposed hypocrisy and insensitivities of society. Later the political rebellions of the counterculture ended up codify-

ing the centrality of youth in American culture.

But in the last 10 years, something has changed. Some aspects of the old Romantic myth have become threadbare. We are less likely to think about youth-crime as an indictment of the adult world (though shaggy remnants of those ideas persist in Paul Simon's musical, "The Capeman"). We are also less likely to think of childhood as a pastoral state. But youth still retains a special status, as if it possessed a power that adult society can only envy from a distance. What is happening here?

Gary Cross, in his book on the history of American toys, notes that for a century or so, manufactured American toys — dolls, trains, soldiers, board games — encouraged children to fantasize about joining the adult world. In that way, they were Bruegelsque. Childhood may have been seen as a privileged time, but there was still a fundamental message: someday all this was to be left behind, as Winnie-the-Pooh was when Christopher Robin went off to school.

## Irrelevant Adults, Lost to the Game

But more recently, Mr. Cross argues, the game has changed. Contemporary toys, particularly for boys, including figures like the Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers and video games like Virtual Fighter and Quake, encourage a fantasy world independent of adult influence and adult rationality, a world with its own languages, rules and culture. Adults are irrelevant as either players or models.

Girls' toys tend to preserve the female role-model formula, but something has changed. Both the

Romantic vision of childhood and the revolutionary view of youth, after all, included the adult world either as nurturer and protector or as supporter or opponent. But children are now ceded their own realm, and adulthood often defers.

Although there are intermittent attempts to impose legal controls over youth by raising the drinking age, inventing a V-chip or setting up Internet ratings, it seems that the adult world is increasingly uncertain just how much governance can be imposed on this now autonomous universe. Adult powers have been challenged in the courts in attempts to expand children's legal rights. And they have often been withdrawn at home, where adults have felt uneasy or bewildered about how to set limits on adolescent desires, whether for sexual experiences, explicit films or other restricted entertainment. As a result, childhood and youth have taken on many characteristics of a premature adulthood.

Meanwhile, adult culture is doing just the opposite. Its games and entertainments now often aspire to the condition of childhood. Youth is courted for ideas about style and fashion. Adult films imitate video games. And while fascist and revolutionary worship of youth is no longer accepted, imitation of youth has become so common it is barely noticed. The confusion is complete. Youth declares the adult world irrelevant but ends up living a kind of ersatz adulthood. Adults are so solicitous of youth's authority, tastes and desires that adults end up living a kind of ersatz childhood. Academics try to discern in the midst of the tumult who is doing what, when, and why. In every corner of the landscape, roles are being inverted, battles fought, games played. It could almost be a Bruegel painting.