

allocate chapters to successive heads. This is symptomatic of a bigger weakness. Needed in a book on *Class Wars* was more discussion of the evolving context of Australian society and economy. This includes the accelerating importance of school. In the late 1940s, only about one in ten young people finished school. Increasing sevenfold by the turn of the new century, mass dependence of the population on schooling had arrived. But success at school has remained closely bound up with family SES and selective schooling (both public and private) and it is doubtful whether the funding wars can be separated from the achievement wars.

Social conflict tends to be overshadowed in Taylor's book. *Class Wars* privileges the ideas and behavior of politicians and neglects the stresses and strains of the population. An injection of economic history would have shown the tensions to which Australians were exposed by structural change and the need to manage this through schools unhelpfully bolted onto the past. A cultural history would have seen in the slow response of schools their ability to manage change, if not on their own terms, then on behalf of the universities (ever their masters). A social history would have observed the shrinking size of families, their ever-greater concentration in cities, the intensity of academic pressure on the individual child, and the multiplication of family strategies. *Class Wars* wins on the intricacies, the dialogue between and within party and the machinations of the media, but loses on the sociology of schooling. Politicians and media may lead, but demand for schooling is an economic and social phenomenon as are the ways families invest or fail to invest in their children and what they get or fail to get in return.

Likewise, the Catholic story favours the corporate, not the parents' view. Hidden are the many non-Catholic families using the church's schools and the gentrification of the Catholic population itself. Besides its own self-interest, for whom and for what was the hierarchy fighting for under its banner of social justice? But even the corporate view is treated rather lightly. No-one knows how Catholic systems reallocate government funds, but on this staunchly defended prerogative the long-term survival of the diocesan system depends.

Somewhat inaptly named, *Class Wars* remonstrates against the shallowness of political divisions, the flagrant bias of the Coalition, the always-fractious ALP, mind never made up, ever the master of ineffectual compromise and tergiversation. Unsurprising that 60 years of warfare has produced no resolution. But why, when a solution has been at hand since the invention of needs-based funding in the early 1970s has this been surrendered to the mediocrity and electoral venality of the major parties? That is indeed a question of social, not only political history.

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“The Right Thing to Read”: A History of Australian Girl-Readers, 1910–1960

By Bronwyn Lowe

Routledge

New York, NY

2018

1+188pp.

ISBN: 978-1-138-54277-8

Review DOI 10.1108/HER-10-2018-064

Australian historians have long struggled to locate the child's voice in the archives. Occasionally, they notice a fleeting impression in a handwritten letter, a scribble in the margin of an old book or a small rhyme in a recorded interview. More often, however,

the child's voice is thought to be elusive – like laughter on a crowded playground, it is commonplace, but difficult to pin-point amid all the clamour and commotion. Yet, the idea that children of past eras did not voice or preserve their own experiences and traditions is increasingly coming under challenge. Children's folklorists, museum scholars, archivists, anthropologists and the growing community of children's historians are drawing scholarly attention to the rich tangible and intangible heritage of childhood.

In her book *"The Right Thing to Read": A History of Australian Girl-Readers, 1910–1960*, Bronwyn Lowe contributes to the scholarship of children's literature and the historiography of girlhood by examining the history of Australian girl-readers. She focuses on the era of two of Australia's most famous children's Authors – Mary Grant Bruce (1878–1958) and Ethel Turner (1870–1958) – tracing several major developments in reading, education and publishing over the half century.

While the decade-by-decade chronology of the five chapters in *The Right Thing to Read* does not always capture the messiness of the phenomenon considered, nor girls' lived realities, Lowe emphasises that adults' views about what constituted "healthy literature for girls [...] endured across generations" (Chapter 2). Economic, social and political change (especially caused by the two World Wars and the Depression) exacerbated adult anxieties, but such worries were not unique to these periods. Adults, argues Lowe, have remained concerned about the ideas and knowledge being circulated among young girls through popular media such as books, magazines, radio and cinema. In fact, as she alludes to elsewhere in the book, adult anxieties have also been accompanied by the sustained, sometimes subversive, efforts of girls not only to control their own reading, but also to interpret what they read on their own terms. "Girls", observes Lowe, "did not simply 'swallow whole' the meanings and messages that authors and publishers sought to present" (Chapter 1).

The Right Thing to Read has an energising breadth. Lowe's efforts to examine the way adults monitored and controlled girls' reading leads her to consider the enduring influence of the British publishing market; the disruptions caused by war, economic change and government policy; the rise of school and local libraries; debates over citizenship and moral hygiene; wariness of American literature, comic books, radio and film; and the development of committees, advisory boards and regulators to monitor children's reading, especially in the 1940s. This was the decade that gave life to the Children's Book Council of Australia, an organisation that continues to exert a strong influence over children's reading today.

One of the great challenges for historians of reading is not only defining what children read, but also how they interpreted it. Lowe makes important headway in recognising the potential of a number of rich archival collections, including the correspondence of the children's pages, school and class magazines, juvenile literary societies, oral history collections and children's folklore, including rhymes, taunts and songs. Somewhat surprisingly, however, she does not use these collections in her research. The hundreds of letters exchanged between children's editors such as Ella McFadyen, Mary Gilmore and Ethel Turner, and young Australian girls, accessible to researchers in state collections and published newspapers, are largely overlooked. So too are the private papers and correspondence of many distinguished children's authors – including Turner and Mary Grant Bruce. Instead, the primary archival sources of *The Right Thing to Read* are the published autobiographies and oral histories of Australian women – a surprisingly large collection. But even here, Lowe's examination of these texts poses some major challenges. She dissects these texts for relevant excerpts and struggles to negotiate the rich and vivid character of women's writings and their inherently "remembered" content, neglecting the extensive literature of life writing and autobiography in her analysis.

What motivated these women to write about their childhoods? Who was their imagined audience? The fact that Eleanor Spence and Mary Steele wrote their autobiographies after

long and successful careers as children's writers, or that many of the extracts from Jacqueline Kent's *In the Half Light* are carefully edited extracts from oral history interviews (of which the originals do not survive), is central to the story that Lowe is trying to tell in *The Right Thing to Read*. As Lowe recognises, although women's autobiographies can offer insight into the lives of girl-readers, they are also entangled with contemporary concerns about how "women" – not "girls" – used their memories of reading (or not reading) to compose their girlhood identities.

When seeking to explore girls' experiences, historians such as Lowe need to be careful not to marginalise the girl-reader herself – and not just as a reader, but also as a writer. Contemporary girls' writings are essential to writing a history of girl-readers. Such records would have pointed to the role of politics and religion in defining "the right thing to read", as well as the popularity of adult literature, serial stories, fantasy and fairy tales, botanical writings, poetry (especially bush poetry) and play scripts. They would have exposed the prevailing influence of aunts, older cousins and sisters in determining what girls read as well as the lively efforts of young readers to make demands of authors and publishers. And, perhaps most importantly, they would also have revealed that Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner were not only beloved children's authors, but that they also represented the feminine ideal for many Australian girls who aspired to the career of an "authoress". Wide and "subversive" reading habits might be a form of entertainment or a pedagogical imperative, but they could also be a girl's pathway to literary success and cultural status.

Like many historians before her, Lowe has struggled to locate children's voices in the archive. But by exploring the way girls' reading in Australia "became the locus of a range of adult concerns" in first half of the twentieth century, and the way women composed their memories of girlhood reading later in their lives, *The Right Thing to Read* deepens our understanding of how girls were bound up in broader social change and continuity (p. 162). It also, perhaps inadvertently, highlights how removed adults often were from girls' lives. We know through the work of Folklorists such as June Factor, Gwenda Davey, Wendy Lowenstein and Ian Turner that at the same time adults were trying to monitor and control girls' reading, girls themselves were finding ways to use their literary knowledge to their own advantage, contesting existing, often idealised, understandings of girlhood and creating new ones with the ink at the end of their pens.

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Empathy and History: Historical Understanding in Re-enactment, Hermeneutics and Education

By Tyson Retz

Berghahn Books

New York, NY and Oxford

2018

xi+241pp.

ISBN: 978-1-78533-919-6 (hbk/ebook)

Review DOI 10.1108/HER-10-2018-063

Rising right-wing populism, climate change policy paralysis, anti-immigration sentiment, terrorism, drone strikes on civilians, abysmal disaster relief efforts; do these circumstances signal a crisis of human empathy? "If empathy cannot motivate us to cross a street [...]", Tyson Retz asks in the opening of this book, "[...] how can it inspire us to journey into a past full of characters who take work to understand?"