

PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG, *The Nature of Childhood: An Environmental History of Growing Up in America Since 1865* (Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 2014), 273 pp.

Starting from her personal childhood experiences in Denver, Colorado, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg takes up the challenge of writing an environmental history of childhood of the past 150 years for the American Midwest. In a very personal take on a topic that has recently garnered renewed attention in a transnational perspective,¹ she focuses on the freedom of children to explore nature. Beyond her personal experience, she broaches this important and neglected subject from the perspective of interviews that she conducted, photographs, diaries, periodicals, films, and other primary sources as well as children's books such as Laura Wilder's autobiographical novel *The Long Winter* (1940). She makes use of a substantial number of manuscript sources, some unpublished and most from Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, and demonstrates how children's relationship to nature has changed drastically over the past 150 years. She encourages one to examine more carefully the historical context of reform pedagogy that gave rise to the dogma of experiential learning. After distinguishing between adult and child perspectives on nature, and making clear that her focus is on "the Midwest and Great Plains with some attention to the major cities of the east," she points out that the Far West and the South deserve their own treatment, while the Mountain West has already been dealt with (3–4).² In light of these restrictions in the introduction, it quickly becomes clear to the reader that the scope of her work is much more specific than suggested by the title of the book.

Following Elliott West,³ she is interested in determining how children appropriated the landscape and made it their own, which pertains especially to a children's history of the Western American States. Furthermore,

¹ Sarah Mill and Peter Kraftl (eds.), *Informal Education, Childhood and Youth: Geographies, Histories, Practices* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

² Elliott West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico P, 1989).

³ Ibid.

she aims at retrieving an environmental history of childhood from "social, policy and cultural histories" where it is presently embedded (5).

Overall, the great merit of the work lies in Riney-Kehrberg's suggestion that the potential gradual loss or regimentation of children's outdoor experiences and spaces over the past 150 years may prove an unheeded obstacle to conservation efforts. The large field of urban versus rural environments and corresponding migrations poses the most obvious challenge to this study, for it constitutes a complex field of social geography that the study can at best do limited justice to (6). Rather than focusing on the field of environmental health, which has already received much scholarly attention in several studies (213n3), Riney-Kehrberg is interested in the social and educational as well as ecological aspects of her topic. Using longer quotations from primary and secondary sources as well as chapter epigraphs, she brings together material from this disparate field to flesh out a highly readable and suggestive environmental history. Although her view is at times nostalgic and romanticizing, this helps her readers imagine central elements of her descriptive history. In mining photographic archives, she brings to light gems that illustrate her narrative. She chose historically and artistically valuable photographs which help to reinforce the significance and neglect of her topic in scholarship (cf. 23; 51; 182).

In seven chapters, she analyzes rural childhood (ch. 1), urbanization c. 1870–1950 (ch. 2) and the ensuing substitutes for experiences of nature (ch. 3), the commercial institutionalization and medialization of such experiences in the mid-twentieth century (ch. 4), urban wild spaces (ch. 5), the move of childhood to the indoors at the end of the twentieth century (ch. 6) and the reaction against this move starting in the 1990s (ch. 7). She thus extends her narrative from childhood in the nineteenth century to the present "No Child Left Inside" movement.

In stylistically pleasant fashion and through primary sources, Riney-Kehrberg shows that children in the nineteenth century were "outdoorsy" by force of their family's rural living conditions, as they were brought up in a world radically dependent on nature (12), in which boys were generally better positioned than girls due to the gendered division of labor (13). Early on, beginning with the first waves of industrialization, the ethical importance

for children to grow up in close contact with nature was realized (24).

In environmental terms, she points to natural (or agricultural) disasters such as the Dust Bowl of the 1930s (31). She makes clear that educational policies such as Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission suggested that the solution to stem the tide of migration towards the cities and the exodus from the countryside lay in the improvement of rural schools (32). She suggests that ideas of experiential learning stipulated for this improvement may have influenced concepts of reform pedagogy in general, inviting social geography to take up questions of the history of education.

One point of critique worth mentioning—which does not take away substantially from Riney-Kehrberg's achievement, but does point to further avenues of research which she herself intends with her book—is that she might have reflected on the linearity of the history she thus writes, which makes the reader wonder what other aspects and dimensions of the environmental history of childhood may be added to this narrative. While she nicely conveys the ambivalence of rural existence in the West and foregoes the danger of writing a simple pastoral jeremiad, it is not exactly clear what she means by the “moral” advantages of a rural childhood (24). Charles Loring Brace's New York Children's Aid Society tried to win

over urban families to send their children to rural families in need of cheap labor between c. 1850–1920 (24–25); this movement may be comparable with European child labor migration at the time. An additional minor critique is that her work would have been more useful if the images had been dated and if the book included a complete list of all the illustrations.

Without bias or tendentiousness, Riney-Kehrberg nonetheless succeeds in drawing attention to the field of environmental history of childhood, while saving several important topics from oblivion and thereby counteracting and preempting presentist, “adultist,” and utilitarian tendencies in both environmental and historical discourse. She also succeeds in keeping her personal investment, history, and experience as transparent guiding forces of her narrative without ever venturing into the banal. The meticulously edited volume contains endnotes, historical photographs, a short bibliography (249–61, including numerous websites as guides to further research), and an index. Both as a springboard for further research (4) and as a highly readable and convincing first foray into a neglected field, it is an excellent addition to libraries of children's literature, education, and sociology, and to anyone interested in the environmental history of childhood.

Philipp Reisner (Düsseldorf)