

Innocent Experiments: Childhood and the Culture of Popular Science in the United States. By Rebecca Onion. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. xiv, 226 pp. Paper, \$29.95.)

As a child, I never liked science. Chemistry sets bored me, science museums were interminable, and science fairs seemed pointless. Growing up, this felt like an alienation from the kind of person I wanted to be: smart, thoughtful, good. But in Rebecca Onion's excellent examination of children's popular science, she makes clear that, by design, there was no winning at science play for a child like me.

During the twentieth century, she argues, popular science and children were placed in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop that cemented the moral goodness of both science and (certain kinds of) children. Children were positioned as natural-born scientists with an innate sense of curiosity about the world, thus giving professional scientific activities a veneer of purity. In return, particular aspects of professional science (such as masculine vigor and a racist rhetoric of meritocracy) were read back onto children, where they came to be seen as natural facts of humanity rather than social values.

In chapters on children's chemistry sets, science museums, science fairs, and science fiction, Onion demonstrates how this feedback loop created a view of science play as innocent, a turn that exonerated science from implications of social harm and reconfirmed the unmarked innocence of white male children. The Exploratorium, a hands-on science museum in San Francisco, acts as somewhat of a counter-narrative, representing an attempt at "the recouping of a utopian world of science play" (p. 164). Yet even there, innocence was mobilized in the same loop. Childish wonder was to be the antidote to the fear of science and capitalism brought by the counterculture and media such as the television movie *The Day After* (1983); in the face of wide-eyed exploration, critique of science's power as an institution could not be sustained.

This is a compelling argument, though I wish Onion had more fully developed its implications. While discussing chemistry sets,

she partially credits "innocent experiments" for Americans' love affair with any industry that has the whiff of scientific achievement, correctly noting the impact this love has had in encouraging both children and adults to partake in postwar consumer culture and pursue careers in science. But, for example, it also seems that without the decades of groundwork she describes, Americans might be less likely to turn a blind eye to the disastrous effects on labor, the environment, and political speech wrought by Silicon Valley's so-called wunderkinds.

Even so, *Innocent Experiments* still makes an argument we all sorely need: the boyish innocence of popular science has always been a weapon, wielded on behalf of those who are maintaining their innocence (white men) and those who want to become, or re-become, innocent (people working in science and industry). So when Onion concludes the book with an anecdote about her frustrated experience as a child who failed at science play, my heart feels for her while I nevertheless applaud her failure. With her book, she has proven that such play was never meant for girls like us, nor was it ever about girls like us, anyway.

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