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Review Essays

Working Children in the History of American Periodicals

Cub Reporters: American Children's Literature and Journalism in the Golden Age. By Paige Gray. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019. 132 pp. \$28.95 (paperback).

Crying the News: A History of America's Newsboys. By Vincent DiGirolamo. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 712 pp. \$40.95 (hardcover).

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In histories of American periodicals, we rarely encounter stories about children who participated in newspaper production and management by working as newsies. Although we are familiar with the newsboy archetype from a range of popular culture representations, from Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* to the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical *Newsies*, newsies have not received enough scholarly attention. Perhaps this is the case because the majority of children working as newsies were born into the political and economic margins of American society, and also because their often temporary and replaceable labor was considered insufficiently impactful on the development of the newspaper. It is remarkable, then, that two recent studies shed light on them. Vincent DiGirolamo's *Crying the News* and Paige Gray's *Cub Reporters* demonstrate that children not only played an important role in the newspaper industry and journalism but also shaped the meaning of American childhood through their involvement in periodicals. Writing at the intersections of history, journalism, and children's literature, Gray, a literary critic, and DiGirolamo, a historian, reclaim these children's legitimate place in political, cultural, and economic history during a time when American periodicals were evolving quickly and expansively.

DiGirolamo's *Crying the News* offers a comprehensive and compelling history of American newsboys from the rise of the penny press in the 1830s to the New Deal era of the 1930s. The appearance of the cheap daily press in the early nineteenth century not only signaled rising demand for mass-produced print commodities but created demand for contingent laborers in the field of print, including the children for whom paper-peddling became essential to their survival. As DiGirola-

mo insists, even though we cannot estimate exactly how many children worked for the newspaper, “distributing newspapers was one of the first and most formative occupational experiences of America’s youth” and newsboys formed “one of the nation’s first urban youth subcultures” (3, 41). Unsurprisingly, we learn of famous leaders in various fields who sold newspapers in the street as children, including inventor Thomas Edison, President Grover Cleveland, writer Jack London, and columnist Walter Winchell. DiGirolamo quotes from their memoirs and biographies to offer first-hand accounts of former newsboys’ experience. In addition to such testimonies, the author reveals the ubiquity of newsboys whose names were rarely recorded, finding their traces in literature, as well as posters, art, and photographs, many of which are reproduced in thirty-three beautiful color plates. DiGirolamo’s historically contextualized close readings of these visual artifacts bring newsboys to zestful life for the reader. His book emphasizes that the newsboy’s role was not limited to selling and distributing newspapers but expansive enough to reshape the newspaper business, social reform movements, children-related government policies, and even literary representations of children. DiGirolamo depicts newsboys as vulnerable to social volatility as well as resilient, capable of meaningful economic and political participation in that society. DiGirolamo’s *Crying the News* encapsulates the dynamic history of the newsboy as “a story of opportunity *and* exploitation, profit *and* loss, agency *and* victimization” (551).

If DiGirolamo offers a panoramic view of the newsboy across a century of American journalistic history, Gray’s *Cub Reporters* focuses on the Golden Age of children’s literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the conjunction of journalism and literature was particularly important. Literary realism in this period imitated a journalistic approach to the human experience because the market economy and rapid urbanization compelled writers to reconsider ways of portraying society as realistically as possible, while the newspaper “narrativizes” using the art of storytelling essential to its commercial success in the competitive market. Writing from a literary critic’s perspective, Gray uses the term *artifice* to characterize this overlapped area between children’s literature and journalism where children participate in the meaning-making process of the newspaper. Without its negative association with fakery, artifice can be a “human-made apparatus devised and used to both communicate ideas and compel others to acknowledge those ideas” (xix). By reading, circulating, and creating the newspaper, children can navigate the adult world, and at the same time, claim agency challenging it in their own terms. This “reciprocal process of reception and creation” through the newspaper suggests that children are never passive receptors of reality (xxi). Rather, because of their active use of the newspaper as artifice, the children are branded by Gray as *cub reporters*, the newsies who report on their invention of “truths” as a means of rejection or revision of established authority without merely transcribing facts. Young people cast as reporters of artifice in children’s literature represent an American cultural shift away from viewing children as passive followers of instruction toward perceiving them as active agents of imaginative

pursuits. *Cub Reporters* argues that literary representations of children in texts by Horatio Alger, Jr., L. Frank Baum, and Richard Harding Davis transformed social and cultural understandings of childhood. In addition, the book's last chapter analyzes the "Bud Billiken" parade and the *Chicago Defender Junior* to examine the case of actual child writers and reporters who contributed to media culture. Through the lens of artifice, the book examines the fictional and real children who use the newspaper to craft narratives of their experiences.

The virtual conversation between *Cub Reporters* and *Crying the News* enriches our understanding of the literary and cultural history of the newspaper and of the role of young newsies in these histories. Both Gray and DiGirolamo argue that the newspaper never functions as a mere mirror of society when it reports on events and facts in a specific time and place. Both also agree that the newspaper serves as a vehicle for children's self-empowerment and engagement in the adult world, and that this in turn has influenced American perceptions of childhood. However, the two authors differ in discussing what rendered young people working for the newspaper independent from adult authority and the established system. For DiGirolamo, children discovered their autonomy or "independence of feeling" in competition with other children and authorities for limited opportunities in the newspaper market (42). Gray, on the other hand, takes artifice as "a form of liberation" that allows children to navigate their potential to transcend societal boundaries set against their rebellious desire (xx). Thus, even when both studies discuss the same textual evidence, such as Horatio Alger's novels, their different approaches to children's agency lead us to see multifaceted aspects of childhood in literature and history.

Horatio Alger's commercially successful works helped develop the newsboy into a mythical figure. Alger, who coined the term "American Dream," offered readers idealized depictions of hard-working men's elevation from humble beginnings to financial (and therefore social, moral, and cultural) achievement. Remarkable on Alger's significant influence on the popular image of the newsboy as a symbol of the capitalist success story, DiGirolamo points out that literature more than any other art determined attitudes about newsboys. Yet even before Alger, the newsboy as a cultural icon arose when young peddlers and hawkers appeared as "Bowery b'hoys" on the early nineteenth-century stage. They continued to appear in popular media such as advertisements, comics, statues, games, and songs that depicted "news peddling [as] a harmless, even beneficial, childhood activity" unshadowed by poverty or exploitation (350). DiGirolamo suggests that the newsboy myth feeds the larger myth of American capitalism that glorifies individual effort and achievement rather than the collective empowerment of workers. In this way, the archetype of the newsboy's success, which DiGirolamo calls a type of "urban nostalgia," justifies the capitalist order and the exploitation of child laborers (5). Whereas DiGirolamo critiques the newsboy myth for perpetuating the capitalist trope of "rags-to-riches," Gray portrays Alger's newsboy as a cultural revolutionary. According to Gray, because heroes like Rufus in Alger's *Rough and Ready*

(1869) understand the significance of artifice for their own benefit, they “challenge the legitimacy of foundational hegemonic structures” instead of conniving with the system (3). These “street-smart” children possess an acute understanding of the newspaper’s influence on public consciousness rather than proving their qualification for success through mere hard work and industry. For this reason, Gray considers these children to be “young people with a powerful subversive potential” and significant agency (16). Alger’s novels inspired his contemporary child readers to consider how to straddle the line between fiction and fact in order to justify their “skillful handling of artifice, a different kind of truth” (Gray 13). In other words, because children’s truthfulness can be found in artifice with which they identify and express their “curiosity, bravery, and a sense of moral goodness,” artifice suggests “more essential than explicit facts” about childhood (Gray 21).

Regardless of this invented archetype of the newsboy, newsboys not only lived *in* but also *for* history because any historic event could boost paper sales and make their role as messengers meaningful. They facilitated the quick spread of information by crying the news in the busy street. Newsboys often exaggerated news and even fabricated “fake news” to hook curious readers. Notably, DiGirolamo shows that, while informing people of news, newsboys underwent the formative process of acquiring a national identity and came to view themselves as citizens. He meticulously documents newsboys’ involvement in national crises such as the Civil War, international wars, and the Great Depression. They performed patriotic roles by joining the military, circulating papers on the front line of the battlefield, and serving as spies abetted by their disguising innocence. Some newsboys also fought for social justice by boycotting newspapers that promoted anti-Semitism and white supremacist nationalism. Expressing their opinions through a deliberate act of newspaper peddling, newsboys considered themselves to be “guardians of a free press” that was “essential to the well-being of the republic” (DiGirolamo 68). Furthermore, belying the archetype of the newsboy as “rugged individualist,” actual newsboys and newsies might have comprehended that the myth of individual success was also—to borrow Gray’s term—a mere *artifice*. DiGirolamo offers remarkable examples of newsboys whose stories function as a counter-narrative of collectivism in opposition to individualism, arguing that newsboys’ perception of industrial capitalism was “far more complex and critical” than popular culture depictions of newsboys suggested (205). Beyond delivering news about workers’ unions and strikes, newsboys also participated in these political movements by unionizing themselves and by collaborating with other newsboys and laborers. For example, in early 1890s Seattle, when a vital trade union movement was organized by fishermen, lumberjacks, miners, and longshoremen, newsboys in the city joined the movement, leading to a vigorous strike against the *Press-Times* in April 1891. DiGirolamo suggests that such collective actions demonstrate “the pronounced class consciousness of Gilded Age workers” and the “working-class solidarity and anti-monopoly sentiment” of newsboys (299, 359).

Nevertheless, we should not expect underrepresented and underresourced children to solve systemic problems caused by those with access to power. The societal frame in which newsboys found “the liberating potential of a democratic society” is limited to “a wide-open market economy,” a place where “the bamboozlement of mass politics and the sham of self-interest masquerad[ed] as concern for the greater good” (DiGirolamo 76). In addition, despite newsies’ collective resistance to unjust business practices, the popular image of the newsboy as capitalist success story was not sustained by popular literature alone. While mitigating the negative image of their exploitative practice of child labor, newspaper companies amplified the myth of individual success to maintain the cheap, readily available child laborers as if they offered a training opportunity for newsboys to make their way in the capitalist society. The Cincinnati newspaper the *Penny Post* in the 1880s attempted to indoctrinate newsies into the logic of capitalism by providing them with night classes on “the principles of business: efficiency, salesmanship, and the profit system” while also organizing sports teams, bands, and literary clubs (266). Similarly, regarding the circumscribed space for children’s agency, Gray notes, in her analysis of Davis’s “The Reporter Who Would Be King,” that children’s pursuit of American identity might easily become abused at “the whims of youth, the economic interests of those in power, or both” (38). Therefore, the romanticized view of the news industry as a platform for ambitious young people to enter the competitive yet “rewarding” world of business might end up manufacturing little capitalists who would exacerbate the very social injustices which initially forced them into the streets.

The fact is, we cannot accurately measure how much control newsboys had over their own labor or how much impact on society young newsies made. We can only infer their influence by tracing their society’s responses to them. DiGirolamo reveals the harsh reality that newsies were children forced to work outside of the nurturing home at a tender age which requires education and protection for growth. In the street, newsies were constantly exposed to such dangers as robberies, threats, sexual predators, kidnappings, fights with other newsboys, and murders. The small profit they could make by peddling papers was also the price for an innocence that they were fated to lose too soon in the adult world. The images of newsboys and newsgirls photographed by Progressive Era sociologist and muckraker Lewis Hine, some of which are reproduced in *Crying the News*, bear witness to their precarious lives. Such depictions of their exclusion from domestic comforts triggered social reform and welfare acts to ensure children’s well-being into the early twentieth century, although these changes offered at best a safety net to sustain capitalism by easing the most extreme hardships of working children.

It is not coincidental that children’s literature flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the period when American society paid more attention to marginalized children like newsboys than before. Whereas children in reality were most likely helpless and vulnerable to the given environment, those in the literary texts that Gray examines are often powerful enough to challenge

the deterministic structures of their society. These child characters studied in *Cub Reporters* offer an alternative social vision that would be barely possible outside of fiction. In her analysis of L. Frank Baum's *Aunt Jane's Nieces* series, Gray argues that Baum's girl reporter suggests the "necessary negotiations that girls and women made with male authority and consumer capitalism to achieve a greater sense of cultural autonomy and identity" (45). Women reporters play the role of "spectacle" because of the public nature of the newspaper. But they don't become spectacle as an object for the pleasure of viewers; they perform a spectacle that "underlines the required artfulness and artistry behind individual identity and social reality," indicating their subjective notion of self-making (Gray 50). Nevertheless, Baum's ambivalence toward the newsgirl hints at his own hesitation to accept the character as realistic within the "implicitly masculine public sphere" of the newspaper business, as DiGirolamo describes it (17).

Undeniably, the newsies who appear in the majority of historical documents and cultural products do not fairly represent the numbers of minoritized children working for newspapers, such as girls, immigrants, and children of color, not only because of the lack of remaining documents and the relatively small population but also because of the inequity embedded in any American institution. Furthermore, the subculture that early newsboys formed in urban areas was not innocent of the discriminatory practices of racism, sexism, and xenophobia characterizing society at large. For example, Black newsboys often faced draconian penalties levied by the government, and were portrayed as inferior to white newsboys in literature and visual arts (DiGirolamo 323–24). Nevertheless, Gray and DiGirolamo significantly illuminate minoritized children's news work. DiGirolamo excavates archives to delineate the persistent existence of minoritized newsboys. Debunking the myth of Benjamin Franklin as the "first American newsboy" who became an exemplar of the self-made man, DiGirolamo introduces a 1705 note that constitutes the earliest written record of a newsboy, an enslaved child who delivered the *Boston News-Letter*, the first successful newspaper published by Boston postmaster John Campbell (DiGirolamo 6). His namelessness suggests that the myth of newsboys as self-made men is hardly applied to minoritized children regardless of their involvement in the newspaper industry.

Given historical lack of attention to minoritized newsies, both books' observations on the most influential Black newspaper in the twentieth century, the *Chicago Defender*, as well as its edition for young readers, the *Chicago Defender Junior*, is particularly welcome and meaningful to our understanding of the Black press and African American children's literature. DiGirolamo locates the *Chicago Defender* in the long history of the ethnic newspaper from *Freedom's Journal*, the nation's first African American newspaper, to the *Cherokee Phoenix* and *Indian Advocate*, which employed Black and other newsboys of color. Whereas other chapters in Gray's *Cub Reporters* deal with fictional newsies using the newspaper to claim their agency, the last chapter examines archives on real children and young adults who reshaped cultural ideologies of Black childhood by contributing their writings to

the *Junior* under the leadership of “Bud Billiken,” a pseudonymous editor played by several young boy-writers. Gray argues that the *Junior* “not only gave voice to the black youth of Chicago” but “also helped create a sense of identity for African American children across the country” (70). Reflecting the national popularity of the *Defender*, for example, children in New York joined the *Defender* Newsies’ Club, founded in 1921, and the nationwide network of Bud Billiken Clubs boasted 250,000 young reader members by 1927 (DiGirolamo 513). Given that Black-run newspapers offered a major publication venue for African American writers, the *Junior* also validated Black children’s literary potential when Bud Billiken asked young readers to write for the newspaper. Both DiGirolamo and Gray highlight the Bud Billiken parade, sponsored by the *Chicago Defender*, that displayed spectacles of African American cultural life in connection to the education of Black children in Chicago’s Black community. Likewise, the *Junior* served Black children’s need for a literary community that would appreciate their experience and expression.

If newsies shaped national perceptions of children as active and assertive in claiming their place in American society, how did those perceptions reciprocally affect children working for the newspaper? Ironically, efforts to empower them as equal members of society provoked leaders to contrive more protective measures for working children. In the early twentieth century, as DiGirolamo observes, newsboys were “[c]aught up in this tug-of-war between a paternalistic capitalist press and an expansive welfare state,” which rendered them “a symbol of working-class resentment” rather than “an icon of bourgeois virtue” (517). Celebrations of rugged individualism lost their charm during the Great Depression, when increasing numbers of people realized the need for labor movements and saw working children not as the future of industrial America but as those whose well-being demanded dramatic social reforms. This change in people’s views of the newsboy facilitated extensive reforms in family protection, the education system, and welfare policies in the mid-twentieth century. Accordingly, DiGirolamo warns against uncritical abstraction or a romanticization of the newsboy that may blind us to the reality of their hardships and lived experiences. By contrast, Gray embraces the fictionality of artifice as a key to discovering children’s genuine voices. She argues that the newspaper became undistinguishable from artifice when the 1960s New Journalism abandoned “the pretense of objectivity” (94). By responding to this trend, children’s literature about the newspaper shows a thematic confrontation with adult authority that denies or underestimates child agency. For example, the fictional eleven-year-old Harriet M. Welsh in Louise Fitzhugh’s *Harriet the Spy* (1964) publishes a paper with fabricated “facts” in order to express her subjective (and unruly) selfhood. In this radical imagination about the newspaper as artifice, children can report on their version of truth beyond restrictive ideologies and expectations imposed on them.

Children do not have the same access to tools for recording, disseminating, and preserving their voices as adults possess. Any newsie’s account of their work, whether fictional or factual, is most likely filtered and mediated by their grownup

selves or other adult writers. Regardless of the two books' attentive examination, we wonder about real newsies left out of the historical picture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even with the incredible body of historical evidence that DiGirolamo offers, we still do not know much about enslaved newsboys for antebellum southern newspapers. Although the literary texts in Gray's *Cub Reporters* allowed their contemporary child readers to gain agency through the newspaper, that agency is ultimately imagined by the adult white male writers who project their desire onto their child characters. Therefore, it is challenging to recover the children's agency because the (hi)stories of newsies demand our consideration of diversity and dynamics within them. Nevertheless, this limitation does not diminish the value of DiGirolamo's and Gray's distinctive contributions to multiple disciplines. *Crying the News* and *Cub Reporters* pave the way for future studies on newsies as an essential part of the nexus between journalism, history, and literature, by dialogically revealing the persistently significant presence of children in the history of American periodicals.