

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder

Richard Louv

Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2006. Notes, suggested reading, index. 334 pp. \$13.95 paper. ISBN: 9781565125223.

The Dangerous Book for Boys

Conn and Hal Iggulden

New York: HarperCollins, 2007. Drawings, photographs, charts. 270 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780061243585.

The tradition of making claims about threats to American children began in the late nineteenth century, when a group of professional “child savers” emerged to campaign for policies and programs meant to protect children from the ravages of modern cities and of modern industrial capitalism. That tradition remained strong through the twentieth century, and as the culture wars heated up in the 1980s, many of the battles were fought over children. Worried adults came to see children as vulnerable prey, and Neil Postman’s provocative book, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), condensed adults’ concerns by blaming the mass media and commodity capitalism for the loss of an innocent time of life. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many claims were made about threats to children, from predatory marketing to children to sexual predators on the Internet. School shootings were blamed on the music kids listened to, and stranger abductions (more a symbolic fear than a significant threat) made parents reluctant to let children out of their sight. Feeding these fears was nostalgic amnesia among baby boomers about how kids used to have free run of the neighborhood and did not find themselves indoors, “addicted” to computer play and video games.

So when I approached Richard Louv’s new book about “saving our children from nature-deficit disorder” (as his subtitle tells us), my scholarly skepticism about claims of threatened children kicked in. At war with that skepticism is my own experience living with and writing about the Boy Scouts of America. I was a nature counselor at Boy Scout camp, and until my junior year of high school I thought that I was headed for a career as a naturalist. And I still savor Boy Scout camping trips into the California wilderness with my grandson. So I ought to be an easy audience for Louv’s argument.

And therein lies the paradox of this book. Louv has written a jeremiad laying out how we have gone wrong and exhorting us to restore children's life-enhancing connection to nature. But parents, teachers, youth workers, and policy makers have seen a fierce acceleration of claims about threats to children, and aside from the "fear fatigue" factor, it is getting increasingly difficult to sort out the serious threats to children from the ones that say more about the adults than about real threats to children. Add to the threatened- children chorus the very loud voices about the end of nature (e.g., Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989)) and you see why the audience for Louv's book might not be poised for action. Each successive jeremiad simply wears us out.

Louv makes an elegant argument in this book for giving as much attention to nature deficit disorder as we give (for example) to Attention-Deficit Disorder in kids. He uses published evidence and interviews with children and adults to show how pervasive is "the broken bond between our young and nature," and he points to programs in schools and communities aimed at repairing the bond. He shows his knowledge of American history by discussing the notion of frontiers and how they have shaped American cultures, and he describes the present Third Frontier in the United States, a frontier marked by our distance from the origins of our food, by blurred lines between humans and animals, by science's replacing myth as the privileged makers of stories about animals, of the increasing invasion of human space by wild animals, and of the rise of new suburban forms (pp. 19–26). Children have paid a dear price for these developments, says Louv, but he provides rich accounts of programs aimed at getting children back in touch with nature, programs ranging from school gardens to nature/wilderness adventure programs for at-risk youth, from Girl Scout and Boy Scout programs to the zoopolis movement aimed at rediscovering and restoring what is "wild" in urban areas.

Louv draws on many disciplines and experts to make the case for the therapeutic, restorative qualities of our experiences with nature. Psychologists show up in these pages, as do anthropologists and a number of youth workers whose tacit knowledge about children complements that of the experts. Louv has a strong sense of the moral imperative for healing the broken bond between children and nature, and this book is almost encyclopedic in its coverage of programs aimed at repairing the bond.

The argument here explicitly resembles that of the movement to restore recess and

children's access to outdoor play spaces (to playgrounds, but also to public parks). Adults have restricted these experiences out of fear—in the case of recess, a mix of fears about unruly children and the need for them to perform well on standardized tests; in the case of playgrounds and parks, a fear about sexual predators, injuries, and lawsuits. Louv knows very well the threatened-children discourse I mentioned above, and he blames the bogeyman syndrome for these fearful responses when parents and other adults make nature the bogeyman. Louv makes an interesting, counterintuitive argument that getting children out into nature actually makes them more self-confident, competent, and resilient—in short, increasing children's safety in all corners of their lives. The sort of risk nature offers is manageable and has the benefit of opening the child to “beauty and wonder.”

Still, my skepticism shadowed my reading of Louv's book. I am sympathetic with its message, but he seems to me to fall into the common nostalgia trap of romanticizing children as innocents and of romanticizing the therapeutic power of nature. These are very American ideas, but they are also ideas with a history, and that history is tinged with ideology and with invisible assumptions about social class, ethnicity, and gender. As knowledgeable as Louv is about American history, he never steps back to acknowledge the ideological tinge of his argument, especially the social-class assumptions.

The Igguldens' book has become a publishing phenomenon, spinning off versions for girls, for special populations, and even parodies. The book owes much to the classic in this genre, Daniel Carter Beard's *The American Boy's Handy Book* (1882), full of how-to information for making boys' fun, but it also reminds me of E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987) and Hirsch's subsequent *Dictionary of American Literacy* (1988) in its entries on topics like The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and Famous Battles. There is even some of the survivalist information reminiscent of Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht's *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* (1999) and its spin-offs. All this makes for an odd mix.

Some of the entries (most of them only a few pages, some not even that long) are of the sort familiar from the Beard classic, such as articles on “Building a Treehouse” and on “Hunting and Cooking a Rabbit.” We find instructions on playing games (e.g., chess, rugby) and on folk play (e.g., “Five Pen-and-Paper Games”). The Hirsch-type entries on some

topics—the “Declaration of Independence,” famous battles, “The Fifty States,” and “Sampling Shakespeare”—reflect the current worry that a common heritage has been lost, a worry fraught with ideological tensions about multiculturalism, though you would not know that from this book. The authors assume here a very middle-class, very white, very Eurocentric view of the world (read “The Alamo,” for example).

Despite the title’s tantalizing promise that this is a “dangerous book for boys,” I feel certain that the boys who buy and read this book are nostalgic baby boomers living in a white, middle-class, safe world. This book is fantasy material for these readers, just as Martha Stewart books and magazines are fantasy reading for white, middle-class women who imagine that they will create fabulous parties but who won’t. The reason I feel certain that *boys* will not read this book (even if somebody gives it to them) is that the current crop of boys knows where to find any information or any instructions on how to do or make something—they are adept at finding things on the Internet. Boys in scouting learn a lot of this from their handbooks and camping experiences; other boys acquire skills not represented in these pages. Those skills sometimes are not the sort we want boys to have—truly dangerous skills, illegal skills, violent skills. Who teaches boys how to play? Not books, and not even the Internet.

One of the mantras of the 1990’s culture wars held that the culture is waging a war on boys. While there are statistics to bolster the claim that by many measures boys are more at risk than girls, there is more adult ideology at work in these claims than actual evidence that today’s boys lack the creativity and ability to play. The book gives voice to baby boomer nostalgia for the largely imagined, romantic, and idyllic childhoods of the 1950s and 1960s.

The books by Louv and by the Igguldens share the child-saving pedigree that tells us more about adult anxieties than about kids. The authors sound the alarm that today’s children have lost creativity, wonder, an aesthetic sense, and the ability to play. Louv’s book at least actually consults some children about their view of the world; the Igguldens cannot possibly have talked with or observed real boys, who are plenty creative and know very well how to play. Parents, teachers, youth workers, and other adults need to pay attention to the real threats to children, to the real dangers for boys, and stay away from the politically loaded nostalgia that misdirects our efforts.

—Jay Mechling, *University of California, Davis, CA.*