# Book Reviews

## Ambiguous Commitment

**Raising Children in Modern America: Problems and Prospective Solutions.** Papers from a series of seminars. NATHAN B. TALBOT, Ed. Little, Brown, Boston, 1976. xiv, 590 pp. $17.50.

**Raising Children in Modern America: What Parents and Society Should Be Doing for Their Children.** NATHAN B. TALBOT. Little, Brown, Boston, 1976. xii, 180 pp. $8.95.

Through the century, Americans who love and study children have often gathered together to regret the condition of the nation's young. Whether as grandly ritual and eternal as the serial White House Conferences on Children or as modest and local as the 27 academic seminars reported in *Raising Children in Modern America*, the occasions—usually overseen by Cassandra or by Chicken Little—have shared not only the uniform conviction that we are going to hell in a handbasket but several telling lesser certainties. We must protect the American family from further erosion, the children of the poor are an especially troublesome problem, and the basic solution to our woes is the immediate enlargement of the federal bureaucracy. The working through of the themes in Talbot's books is informative in its own right and as a primary source for students of contemporary American culture.

Talbot, a notable clinician and academic pediatrician, chose his seminarists well; the meetings in Cambridge that, all told, brought together 107 concerned and illustrious watchers of American children stretched from birth control to day care, from moral development to urban design, from the biological needs of children to the politics of a presidential veto. The work of the seminars is presented twice, once in a fat volume that records what the speaker at each session said (and that reports little of the consequent discussion) and once in a thin volume of narrative summary meant to make the big book more accessible to the general. Unfortunately, the little book of summary is tired and sloppily put together; it adds neither conceptual integrity nor clinical color and it makes the seminars comparable by bleaching them all. The significant move of the book is its major recommendation for change in policy, a recommendation that will claim our attention later on.

> What is needed is a universal child-family screening and support program centered around a national health plan [p. 153].

The big book, for all its unevenness and disconcerting variety, is remarkably deficient in nonsense (peace to Pringle's opening assertion that "the urban environment . . . is hostile to the young," p. 189"), a field for pleasant plucking. You can put together a garland of toughness and beauty by joining Bok's balanced, hurting discussion of abortion, and Minuchin's detailed illustration of the embeddedness of children in social institutions, and S. H. White's cool recognition of the organically resistant character of American ideology, and Patterson's candid and accusing proposal for a black "micropolis," and Edelman's scarring account of why Nixon vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, and Lesser's informed sensitivity about television in the United States, and, at last, R. R. Rowe's outline of the radical choices before us if we mean to help all our children. Much of the rest is informative. Yet, at the end, you have only your garland and no clear instructions for thought or for action; like so many of its ancestors, the big book of *Raising Children in Modern America* is not so much a statement of theory or policy as it is a diagnostic document, testifying to a moment in American history. What then is the witness of this unpretentious collection of papers?

In the center is the ambiguity of commitment Americans have to children. No longer an economic asset, no longer a comfort in our old age, no longer a continuation of our *people* in the traditional pattern of our forebears (we must ask how long a society that exiles its old folks can preserve its continuity with the young), the American child is becoming, both in his own life and in the lives of his parents, without function. Talbot's quick assumption

> Obviously children are needed to insure the survival of the human race. So there is no question that human beings should continue to have children [little book, p. 9]

will not do. No longer can we smile comfortably at Faraday's quip, "What good is a newborn child?"; in many young minds, the question has become serious. Chapters in *Raising Children in Modern America* bravely address the complicated questions of why people have children and what considerations should guide population growth and how we should regulate abortion, but they fail to measure the rapidity of change in the attitudes of young Americans toward the prospect of having and raising children.

A second mark of our changing times lies in the occasional and still tentative references to the child as a creature who is capable of remarkably varied adaptation to complicated social and material circumstances. In addition to Minuchin's careful essay, Kagan mentions adaptational diversity and Bronfenbrenner makes a case for understanding the child in his ecological context. Still, the books more often speak with the voice of classical individualistic psychology—the vision of the self-contained child with "needs" who "develops." *Raising Children in Modern America* may stand between two eras in the study of children as risky and promising attempts are made to see adaptation in children as continuous, not necessarily linear, and always embedded in the values and institutions of their culture. Moreover, to the degree that the child is context-determined, to that degree it becomes important to consider the central moral question: What kinds of adults do we want our children to become? To call for "optimal development" or for the realization of "optimal potential," calls that can still be found in Talbot's books, is, in part, a way of avoiding that prickly question. *Raising Children in Modern America* treats well and in some detail the deficiencies and injuries that American children suffer, but the books share with most writing about children a tendency to slide off positive assertions about expectations for our children. S. H. White is plainly accurate:

> Two principles now widely in use are that *older is better* and *faster is better*. . . . Another principle, widely used to locate "deprivations," "deficits," or "disadvantages" in childhood, is that *middle-class is better*. [Yet another] principle, used sometimes in locating "mental health" measures in childhood, is the principle that *not visibly perturbed is better* [p. 137].

Perhaps White should have added *as-long-as-you're-moving-ahead is better*. But, again, the books reflect the present state of child study, sensitive to what is not right with children and uncertain

about the definition and the variety of health.

Yet a third diagnostic symptom is the distinction, never made fully explicit in *Raising Children in Modern America*, between children truly in jeopardy and the vast majority of American youngsters who may suffer no more than a drunken parent or a strikeout in a Little League game. We have always been a society that defines virtue by exclusion; the valued people are better than the slave, the Indian, the immigrant, the poor, the handicapped, the dumb. What Talbot and his colleagues do best is to demonstrate that we continue to set aside (in the sometime hope that they will disappear) a significant fraction of our citizens. Although they appear in different chapters, it turns out that the malnourished, the early pregnant, the abused, the accident-victimized, the desperately poor, the children "at risk" are all the same folks, the refused ones, the outsiders. Until we can devise a way to bring the excluded Americans into hope and respect, books like *Raising Children in Modern America* will remain, in large part, commentaries on injustice.

A fourth marker of now, and a bittersweet one, is the books' conflicted view of policy and politics. There were some savvy political movers among the seminarists but they did not define the whole. In the small, Kempe would apparently give up fundamental civil protections to reduce child abuse (he recommends that regular home visitors evaluate the care of children in all American families). In the large, Talbot makes the recommendation cited earlier without serious consideration of cost, political implementation, relation to other proposals, or historical precedents. A normal academic move, perhaps, to suggest grand careless solutions, but the glibness of the recommendation is surprising when one of the most incisive papers in the big book (Sugarman's) tells of the apparently irredeemable failings of the men and women who run support programs and when one of the very last lists in the little book (p. 158f) tells the excuses bureaucrats use to avoid effective action. An interesting intellectual exercise for Talbot's seminarists and a consequential contribution to the cause of American children would have been the drafting of a bill on child care to be submitted to Congress. Then, perhaps, the omissions, contradictions, and disagreements in our image of American children would be made visible.

*Raising Children in Modern America* is a proper product of its time and its context. Talbot and his colleagues report their data accurately, they worry about the right issues, they reach for the salvationist conclusion, and, when all is done, we are left with the sense of a society in some disarray about its children, getting them raised one way or another but not sure quite how or, lately, why.

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## The Inner Earth

**The Earth's Core.** J. A. JACOBS. Academic Press, New York, 1975. viii, 254 pp., illus. $22. International Geophysics Series, vol. 20.

The radius of the earth's core is more than half that of the earth, and the core is the undoubted seat of the earth's magnetic field. Almost 3000 kilometers of rock insulation effectively prevents the secrets of the core from being revealed to us. We understand the properties of the core and the processes of the production of the magnetic field only poorly. Even less well understood is the inner core, a region with a radius about one-fifth that of the earth, two-fifths that of the outer core.

The large-scale features of the outer core (radius, mean density, and mean sound velocity, as well as general fluidity) have been known for more than 40 years. From these properties it has been inferred that the outer core is probably molten iron alloyed with some unidentified lighter element or elements. The radius of the outer core and the mean compression-wave velocity of the inner core are also well known, but only recently has it been possible to measure the compressibility of the inner core. The author of the book under review was one of those who proposed more than 25 years ago that the inner core is a solid iron-nickel condensate from the outer core.

The rest is conjecture. Answers to questions regarding the thermal regime of the core, the origin of the magnetic field, and the origin and subsequent history of the core are clouded in uncertainties generated by lack of precision in knowledge of the other physical properties of the inner and outer core. There are similar uncertainties concerning the status, or even the existence, of the cores of the moon and the terrestrial planets.

Jacobs has provided an intensive summary of what is known and what is argued about the core. He presents a terse review of the methods of performing observations that relate to the core and summaries of the results of these observations. Modern conjectures regarding the core are usually based on large-scale extrapolations from laboratory data or from often unconvincing plausibility arguments. Jacobs, with an unusual sense of impartiality, presents almost all the contemporary conjectural models of the history and development of the core, as well as of its mechanical and hydromagnetic state. Only rarely does he insert his own gentle assessment of certain models.

The book is a storehouse of references to the literature as well as an encyclopedic summary. It is engagingly written. In the hands of a different author, the book might have been three times as long; it is attractive because of the significant effort made to provide the reader with references for the models described rather than detailed reviews of them. The book is valuable and stimulating for any scholar, from graduate student to senior scientist.

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## Effects of Salinity

**Plants in Saline Environments.** A. POLJAKOFF-MAYBER and J. GALE, Eds. Springer-Verlag, New York, 1975. viii, 216 pp., illus. $31.30. Ecological Studies, vol. 15.

This volume provides a broad view of the effects of salinity, with contributions on soils, ecology, and the quality of water used in irrigation as well as on plant physiology and biochemistry. The importance of salinity can be very much in the eye of the beholder. To ecologists, whose view of the matter is presented in this volume by V. J. Chapman, salinity problems have "till now been primarily of academic interest," but to agriculturists, represented by D. L. Carter, they are anything but academic; crop production is limited by salinity on 25 percent of the irrigated land in the western United States. Doneen presents criteria for the quality of irrigation water. These criteria are debatable, but a book review is not the place for such debate. Peck's chapter is a detailed exposition of the effects of alterations in land use on hydrology and soil salinity, an important problem in some areas. The more general causes of salination are given only cursory treatment in the book.