

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 12

January 2020

Saguisag, Lara. *Incorrigibles and Innocents: Constructing Childhood and Citizenship in Progressive Era Comics*. Rutgers UP, 2018. 248 pages. ISBN: 978-0813591766.

Cristina Rhodes
Shippensburg University, CSRhodes@ship.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl>

Recommended Citation

Rhodes, Cristina (2020) "Saguisag, Lara. *Incorrigibles and Innocents: Constructing Childhood and Citizenship in Progressive Era Comics*. Rutgers UP, 2018. 248 pages. ISBN: 978-0813591766.," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol2/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by SOPHIA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research on Diversity in Youth Literature by an authorized editor of SOPHIA. For more information, please contact amshaw@stkate.edu.

Conceptions of children and childhood have evolved rapidly in the last few centuries, aided in no small part by the representation of young people in art and other visual media. Visual representations of childhood give shape to ideologies of children and child culture. In examination of such ideologies, Lara Saguisag's *Incorrigibles and Innocents: Constructing Childhood and Citizenship in Progressive Era Comics* grapples with visual representations of childhood at the turn of the twentieth century, questioning how such images simultaneously reproduce new, global epistemologies and reify existing anxieties of Otherness and American exceptionalism. Saguisag's particular focus on Progressive Era comics allows for an exploration of these competing notions through both text and image. Saguisag explains, "[I]mages of children in the comics drew and redrew the lines, demonstrating the rigidity and permeability of social boundaries, the intertwinings of the hegemony and counterhegemony" (23). In other words, as the nineteenth century melted into the twentieth, attitudes toward increasing globalization took root in media both for and about children. Nevertheless, as Moira Hinderer notes, speaking about children's literature in the 1930s and '40s, these representations' ostensible acceptance of globalization is a facade concealing "white America's anxious twentieth-century embrace of racial hierarchy" (41). Though Saguisag's focus is on comics produced slightly earlier than the texts Hinderer discusses, this sentiment holds true. Ultimately, Saguisag's exploration of racial, social, and class tensions proves invaluable to the study of both childhood and literature and related media.

In her introduction to *Incorrigibles and Innocents*, Saguisag immediately states the significance of her work. She concedes Progressive Era comics are often a topic of discussion, but little research explores those comics' depictions of childhood. According to Saguisag, Progressive Era comics leveraged childhood as "a metaphor that at once infantilized and

humanized” minoritized populations (13). For Saguisag, Progressive Era comics establish a new sense of childhood for white children recently liberated from child labor, but they also reveal anxieties and acceptances of immigrant populations newly arrived to the United States. Though many of the comics Saguisag discusses centralize white children’s experiences, their interactions with and emulations of minoritized populations are an important focus in her work, as I will explain later. This monograph opens with a discussion of Richard F. Outcault’s “Yellow Kid,” who both literally and figuratively gestures at new imaginings of childhood and nation in popular comics of the time. Captured within the image of the “Yellow Kid” is Saguisag’s assertion that these comics reveal important manifestations of childhood and citizenship.

From this introductory discussion, Saguisag moves into Chapter 1: “Foreign Yet Familiar,” which “examine[s] how Progressive Era discourses on immigration, ethnic difference, and childhood played out in newspaper comics” (Saguisag 25). The impressionability offered by childhood within these comics demonstrates that ethnic minority populations and recent immigrant populations can be molded into productive members of U.S. society. In discussing comics that depict the immigrant experience, Saguisag points out child immigrants are more easily modeled into citizens than adults. In this way, immigrant children are redeemable, and, while often considered devoid of agency, they demonstrate more access and capital than their adult counterparts. Saguisag succinctly notes, “immigrant children had the potential to become valuable future citizens” (51), an opportunity that would not have been afforded to them in other mediums or other epochs.

With the salvageability of immigrant populations in mind, Saguisag moves into Chapter 2: “Crossing the Color Line.” This chapter articulates racialized anxieties as they appear in comics. In the opening to this chapter, Saguisag models potential questions raised by Progressive

Era comics readers when she writes, “Were white children under threat? Could segregation of black and white childhoods be maintained?” (52). Ultimately, the comics discussed in this chapter reveal how white privilege is maintained, but the separation between white and Black children is more easily elided. In her discussions of the use of blackface and minstrelsy in comics, Saguisag highlights the comic trope of a white child switching places with a Black child. Oftentimes, these exchanges are seamless with white adult characters unable to recognize their own children behind the blackface. While this may also impart adults’ transitioning into a position of absence or withdrawal from the process of childhood, Saguisag also underlines these moments intimate “that children of different racial identities are more alike than dissimilar, given the ease with which they switch places” (53). However, representations of actual Black characters in Progressive Era comics were rife with stereotypes and racist portraits of people of color. African American adults were often infantilized in their depictions within Progressive Era comics, thus linking them to a sense of powerlessness within childhood. Yet, Saguisag notes this might not be entirely damaging, as it potentially builds a sense of empathy for Black peoples within white readers of the time, thus fostering the potential for equality in the future.

Even as Black adults are treated as children within Progressive Era comics, Saguisag notes in Chapter 3: “Family Amusements” that white adults are also treated with a shifting sense of (dis)respect. Focusing on the *Buster Brown* comic, Saguisag explains this series “questions parental authority, exposes the flaws of adults, and portrays the home as a site of conflict,” but even so, its portraits of the white family struggling with an incorrigible child like Buster “[emphasize] the resilience of the Anglo-Saxon middle class family” (85). Interestingly, Saguisag spends some time in this chapter focusing on Buster’s mother, a complex character in and of herself. Like Buster, who works against tradition and builds new ways of being a child,

Mrs. Brown redefines motherhood for a new generation. This focus on parents and other adult figures within the space of child-focused comics also gives room for Saguisag to briefly discuss how adults commodified childhood through the comics of the time. An entire way of being a child was built around series like *Buster Brown*.

However, this way of being didn't quite extend to girls, even though "[y]oung female readers' response to *Buster Brown* suggests that girls performed or had fantasies of performing mischief" (Saguisag 110). Saguisag *does* explain girls' place within Progressive Era comics, but this discussion doesn't come until Chapter 5 within the monograph. Instead, Saguisag shifts focus from mischievous boys to the fantasy worlds those boys inhabit before she explores girls' place in Progressive Era comics. Thus, Chapter 4: "The 'Secret Tracts' of the Child's Mind" meditates on the theory that "the child had an inherent attachment to fantasy" (Saguisag 114). In this chapter, Saguisag ultimately reveals how comics both "romanticized the elusiveness of the child while simultaneously making claims of knowing the child" and "showed how the imaginative child who supposedly reigns and commands did so under the watchful eye of the adult" (115). Embedded within this discussion of fantasy worlds is also a reminder of the "anxieties about racial and imperialist legacies [projected] upon white children in the early twentieth century" (Saguisag 129). Even within these fantasy worlds, white children interact with racialized Others. Their mobility within these fantasy spaces and through their interactions with racially-coded fantasy characters serves to reify their sense of power within those spaces and within the real world.

Chapter 5: "What Would You Do With Girls Like These?" returns to Saguisag's discussion of female characters/readers of Progressive Era comics. Though there are comics about girls, Saguisag sharply points out that little to no research has been done on these texts.

She questions, “why do historians and critics tend to overlook these comics about misbehaving girls in the first place?” (143). Nevertheless, despite this gap, these comics “expressed contemporary debates about the present and future duties of white, middle-class girls” (Saguisag 144). In other words, as suffrage and other feminist movements were gaining traction, comics of misbehaving girls were one way to make sense of these shifts in gender ideologies. In pushing the boundaries of girls’ social roles, such comics challenge patriarchal notions of what girls should be in the early twentieth century. While these comics and other forms of media at the time reveal divergent messages about girls, Saguisag’s extensive discussion ultimately reveals the cognitive dissonance within these comics and their desire to keep girls/women in specific roles even as the New Woman ideal was gaining traction.

Saguisag’s *Incorrigibles and Innocents* gives a thought-provoking discussion of race, nation, gender, citizenship, and the child. As I was reading about these comics, I was continually struck by their contemporary connections. What Saguisag explores in these Progressive Era comics has current political, cultural, and social impact. In the end, Saguisag doesn’t just imply these connections, but explicitly states the trope of the incorrigible child has held over into the twenty-first century. While I am hesitant to name whom Saguisag positions as the ultimate incorrigible “child” depicted in contemporary comics, as I think the reveal is powerful and political, I will say that she notes he is often “depicted [in comics] as a petulant child-king, tantrum-throwing toddler, spoiled schoolboy, and a hopelessly incorrigible child” (186). Ultimately, Saguisag’s work in this monograph is salient and thorough. Not only this, but Saguisag’s writing is accessible, sharp, and engaging. She clearly charts the political lineages of these comics from the nineteenth century to today. In doing so, she opens avenues for scholars of many different areas within children’s literature or adjacent fields to engage with her research.

Works Cited

- Hinderer, Moira. "Talking to Children about Race: Children's Literature in a Segregated Era, 1930-1945." *Ethics in Children's Literature*, edited by Claudia Mills. Ashgate, 2014, pp. 41-53.
- Saguisag, Lara. *Incorrigibles and Innocents: Constructing Childhood and Citizenship in Progressive Era Comics*. Rutgers UP, 2018.