

BOOK REVIEWS

Recess Battles: Playing, Fighting, and Storytelling. By Anna R. Beresin.
Foreword by Brian Sutton-Smith. (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2010. Pp. xii + 168. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, index.)

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A spate of books lately have signaled a dire warning about the threat to free play with the elimination of recess by school administrations and the regimentation of children at camps and after-school programs. Folklorists have much to contribute to this discourse in the “war on recess” because of the association of recess play with spontaneous, evolving traditional practices controlled by children rather than administrated by adults or influenced by corporations (in the form of video games and other gadgets directing play). Some advocates such as Joe L. Frost have even referred to a movement to counter the detrimental effects on child development with the redesign of playgrounds and the war on recess with the urgency of a “child-saving movement” (see his *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Toward a Contemporary Child-Saving Movement*, 2009). To date, much of the folkloristic attention to the issue of the decline of free play seems to have been centered in Great Britain with the publication of Steve Roud's sweeping tome, *The Lore of the Playground* (2010), and Julia C. Bishop and Mavis Curtis's editing of nine insightful essays in *Play Today in the Primary School Playground* (2001). To this bookshelf can now be added an incisive ethnography by Anna R. Beresin of recess at one American urban school between 1991 and 2004.

Readers might wonder if this focus on one school severely limits the possibility of generalizing about play and the framed activity of recess. Beresin is good about contextualizing the distinctive background of the children and their environment, and yet at the same time she draws lessons from what she saw in the schoolyard that could contribute to the discourse on “the war on recess.” She clearly falls on the side of advocates for recess as essential to children's development and she views detrimental effects to children when recess is removed. She explains the assault on recess as an adult fear of violence and she uses ethnography to show that the “roughness” of time that children have to themselves occurs primarily in the transitions in and out of organization time rather than in the activities of recess. She confirmed this observation with video and showed it to administrators who set new guidelines for moving in and out of recess. This section is probably the most revealing of the book, not only for childhood and play studies, but for the uses of ethnography.

Beresin also uses a narrow ethnographic lens for a wider vision about play in her drawing out children's own views on what constitutes play—and for that matter violence—in a brief but provocative section on “Keywords of the Playground.” She raises, as others have done, the linkage in children's cognition of

play and “fun,” and readers might wish for conversation that reveals the rhetoric of play as a mode of self-awareness. Also on the wish list is visual material, since *Recess Battles* more than other studies of children’s play refers to patterns evident in visual terms. To be sure, she includes illustrations rendered by the children themselves, a reminder of the “native” terms she seeks through ethnography, but perhaps out of concern for children’s privacy, photographic figures are omitted from the book. To Beresin’s credit, the photography is instrumental not only as a tool but also as a concept of frame and paradox borrowed from Bateson. She sees, perhaps more readily than many folklorists, the power of child-controlled frames in the form of supposedly invented games to resist, and comment on, adult control.

There is text, and musical transcription, that add to the understanding of changing expressive forms in twenty-first century childhood environments. Beresin is especially concerned with a reading of the many adaptation, and in many instances, apparently unique expressions, that draw on commercial references (“Mine costs more, Yours costs less, Mine Footlocker, Yours Payless”). She considers the reflection of corporate exploitation of inner-city youth in this folkloric “incorporation” on the playground. She also astutely interprets the “old school” rhymes, or rather their adaptation (e.g., “Mailman mailman, Do your duty, ‘Cause here come miss American beauty, She can do the pom pom, She can do the twist, Most of all, she can make the boys kiss”) as framed performances of bodily asset and control. This question of children’s culture in conflict when expressed as free play with adult sense of restricting movement, and hence the body, also comes into play in the resources of popular culture, and especially hip-hop music, in the content of rhymes and actions. Beyond this one schoolyard, Beresin coins the term “gamestory” to designate the narrative intrinsic in activities children associate with the playground. Her book is a starting point to decode the frames and patterns elsewhere, that is, if recess survives administrative fiat that Beresin shows to derive from serious misunderstandings of what children do when they play.