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Review of "Captain Cook Chased a Crook: Children's Folklore in Australia" by June Factor. Victoria: Australia, 1988.

For those of us who work at Children's Folklore, June Factor has now entered our small band of "mutant" scholars which includes such names as Newell, Gomme, Douglas, Brewster, McDowell, McCosh, the Opies and the Knapps. Apart from the first two, who emerged from a nineteenth century paradigm about origins and survivals, none of the rest were anymore predictable than is Factor herself, though she spends honorable time paying tribute to her precursors in Australia, the equally anomalous, Dorothy Howard, Ian Turner, and Wendy Lowenstein. Some of the earlier children's folklorists were novelists primarily, some schoolteachers, though the more recent tendency has been for them to be professors, and Factor's book is heavily drenched in footnotes from multiple sources. In many ways her book is as much about the state of children's folklore in the Western World as it is about children's folklore in Australia. One has to look to her other popular works: "Unreal, Banana Peel" (1986) "All right, Vegemite" (1985) and "Far Out Brussel Sprout" (1983) and her "Australian Children's Folklore publications" (1986) for the dinkum stuff.

The continuing theme throughout this book is the universal resilience of children's folklore across cultures, throughout history, and in the face of modern television, child abuse and neglect. While she emphasizes the importance of tradition (like the Opies) she also expounds on the power of the imagination (like Vygotsky and Winnicott) particularly in the play of Australian aboriginal children who are not often called on to be such exemplars of modern belief. She particularly mentions their large amounts of adult and child play together, which is usually supposedly to be a very modern achievement. Another persistent theme is the healthily vulgar character of much of Aussie children's folklore. She admonishes the Opies for their more sanctimonious attitude to such things but also records the outcry in Australia and the post office censorship when Ian Turner's "Cinderella dressed Yella" first appeared replete with dirty rhymes in 1969. I was reminded of my own chapter on New Zealand children's vulgarities collected 40 years ago in 1949, which I was required to expunge from my doctoral thesis of that time. Despite Gershon Legman, any folklorist who explicitly collects obscenities from children is still in considerable social danger. Childhood has, if anything, become more, not less sacralized during this century, just as it has become more subject to abuse by the psychotic amongst us. If you want to defile a modern consciousness, you don't bother with Jesus, you abuse or murder a child. In these circumstances June Factor's "liberal" reading of child obscenity and subversive laughter as agencies of creative reversibility needs to be handled with some prudence.

She also defends children against the notion that they are particularly innocent of the prejudices, hostilities, racisms and sexisms of the parents and argues instead that whatever the parents do or feel is reflected in the unpleasant acting out of their children. The last chapter of the book is an extended diatribe against the oversimplification of those modern child commentators such as Neil Postman ("The Disappearance of Childhood") who deal in the doom and gloom that childhood has gone forever as a result of television. Paradoxically, after her vigorous defense of the autonomy of child play and children's folklore she ends the book with her own "gloom" that children are being limited in their choices and made vulnerable by the increasingly commercialized world in which they live. But again as a final note she veers in the opposite and more romanticist direction saying again "The traditions of child lore contain much that sustains the young and protects them, for a time, from the deformities of the adult world." Apparently those of us who deal in childhood seem always to get caught in these oppositions, asserting the integrity of our "natives", fighting the adult world's encroachments, being romantic for ourselves and being cynical about the culture. June Factor or Captain Cook chasing a crook mirrors the predicament of all of us.

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