



The Tortoise's Tale (The Monitor)

"... we went to school in the sea. The Master was an old turtle-we used to call him Tortoise-"

"Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?" Alice asked.

"We called him Tortoise, because he taught us, " said the Mock Turtle

Home Free: A Meditation on Computers, Books, Hide-and-Seek, Class Conflict, Kids and Play

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Dusk on a summer night; 1956. Firefly time. Hiding deep in the lilac cave, hunkering on the moss in the basement window well or perched like gargoyles on the garage roof, we listened for the "ollie-ollie-oxen-free" summons from the hide-and-seek game which occupied most of our twilight hours. Eventually, the slam of screen doors punctuated our distant calls as mothers drew the players home. We dumped the night's catch of fireflies in a Mason jar (although the fitful bugs never really generated enough light to read by) and sat in bedroom windows watching bats swoop through the walnut tree, while the cicada chorus overwrote the faraway nonsense of grownup voices on the front porch.

I don't hear those sounds of summer in my city neighborhood. Sunhatted, screenblocked, retreating inside Fisher Price playhouses in stockaded yards, today's too-precious children are so surrounded and supervised by adults I rarely hear them out on their own. Instead of scratch games of sandlot baseball involving every available kid, adults select the teammates for kids' sports. Further sequestered by age divisions in school, removed from class conflicts by French immersion, squeezed into narrow age slots in dance and gymnastics, children are driven to indoor arenas to perform ritual encounters for an adult audience, diverting the peer interaction of childhood to grownup agendas.

Worried (and entranced) by the electronic world swirling around our adult lives, we filter their Internet access, rate their television shows and censor their reading. Like Peredur, we wall them up to keep out our own fears. We're clearly trying to make their world as narrow as Colin's Secret Garden, defining childhood in our terms, not theirs.

But you can't discover your own strength and learn to offset weakness with adroitness when grownups watch every move. You can't gang up on a bully or play tricks on a rival troupe of kids or ponder imponderables or daydream, when inundated by adult advice. Even when retreating to a computer screen or fading glassy-eyed into television, it seems there's always an omnipresent adult asking, "What are you doing?"

The only defense is withdrawal. So despite the earnest agendas of educational computer games and socially responsible television, politically correct books and highly organized after-school enrichment, kids denied social play are increasingly turning to internet chat rooms, online MUD games, or single-player software which only mimics interaction. In this new electronic world, they stay in touch with pagers and cell phones. They define their separateness by reading horror novels (or not reading at all) while blocking out adult noises with headphones. When we're too understanding they submit to the initiation rituals of body piercing and tattoos, trying desperately to define themselves as NOT US. They're on the run.

We should understand their wish to escape. Surely we can all recall the halcyon days of our own childhood, untouched by grownup interference. This was the peer-defined world of adventure, discovery and play which we celebrate in our most loved literary classics. Although indulgent adults are present in these books (from Miss Clavell, to the Man in the Yellow Hat, to the mothers of Peter



Rabbit and Max the Wild Thing) their role is solely to Warn, Watch and Forgive, and their chief task to provide "someone to come home to".

Some books dispense with adults altogether. Astrid Lindgren, Arthur Ransome and Roald Dahl dump the adults in the first chapter, so Pippi and James and Titty and legions of similar characters can get on with things. And in the inverted world of Wonderland, Alice becomes "everychild", parrying misplaced adult advice and interference, from the fussy white rabbit to the vague Knight to the imperious Red Queen.

The lack of adults does not indicate an absence of hierarchy. Serious children's play mirrors life, reflecting class and power divisions. This is most obvious in the Edwardian Era of Ransome and Nesbitt and their modern imitators Edward Eager, Elizabeth Enright and Eleanor Estes. Adults may be mysterious, boring and pitied, but in their absence the older children take over, organizing the younger ones, reproving the recalcitrant and even looking after the vulnerable (who sometimes have no real names and are merely called "Baby" in Nesbitt or "the Twins" in *Mary Poppins*). And in recent literature, from Ken Oppel's *Dead Water Zone* to Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat*-- the Pippi of the 90s--we have left children even more to their own devices in a *Lord of the Flies* world with no responsible adults in sight.

An unhappy awareness of impending adulthood also lurks in these books. In E. Nesbit's *The Wouldbegoods*, Oswald Bastable complains, "I wish you didn't grow up so quickly. Oswald can see that ere long he will be too old for the kind of games we can all play, and he feels grown-upness creeping inordinously upon him". We know ominously from the start what will happen to Wendy Darling, forced to play mother to the Lost Boys even in Never-Never land. Too soon, Peter and Susan are too old to return to Narnia, and even Jane and Michael Banks can't understand the language of birds. I still remember my ten-year-old son sobbing uncontrollably at the end of *Peter Pan* because of his sudden visceral comprehension of the inevitable loss of childhood.

We need to remember. Long ago, we were allowed the time to work out the rules of life through play, free from adult agendas and timelines. We substituted our own rules. Our games had protocols and complex rituals, tightly organized by the oldest kid, or the one with the big yard, or by the martinet we knew would grow up to be a corporate secretary--who lined us up in strict order of age to play "red light green light" on the steps of the local church, and chose the victim for poison tag with chilling implacability.

But such power was not absolute. The structuring mechanism of a day crammed full of "serious" play is a rich vein of social anthropology. As mysteriously as our group games began, cadres diverged. Subgroups--the shy, the social, the "attention deficit" daredevils--hived off to separate clubhouses in trees, garages, attics and vacant lots (well-stocked with tins of crackers, mysterious chemistry concoctions in glass bottles, sun-faded comics, dead snakes and lacy cicada husks to put in the hair of the timid). We emerged from these secret lairs in the cool evening to rejoin the conglomerate for the world of statues, red rover, king of the mountain and touch tag. And then hide-and-peek, the end of every endless summer day.

Left alone, children have played like this forever. A hopscotch pattern is engraved on the floor of the Forum in Rome and Caesar's legions taught the pattern to children all over the empire. Egyptian children played hide-and-peek and capture-the-flag. Edward III had to outlaw Prisoner's Base outside the Parliament Buildings because the grownups wanted to play. In the Egyptian dusk and the long shadows of Hadrian's Wall and the woodland enclosures of early North American villages, children of every age tested their quickness, daring, campaigns and alliances, free from adult interference. For in the strict but inclusive social order of childhood, there is room for the daring, the bold, the shy, the bully, the fast, the slow, the schemer, the dreamer and the poet.

Time is so short for this vital discovery. As readers ourselves, long past the magic years, we hope vaguely that "good literature" will do the trick. Lovers of culture, we think exposing children to the Louvre website and the *Beethoven Lives Upstairs* CD-ROM will enrich their worldview. It's an admirable ploy, but an adult perspective. Children need only to play---with each other. Let's leave



them alone again, and perhaps the games of childhood will allow them to work out a better agenda for the world they will, too soon, inherit.

(a version of this piece appeared in *Pic Press*, Summer, 1997).

A little reading concerning "Serious Play"

(Literature which treats childhood play with the respect it deserves)

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