

Oh, Golly, What a Happy Family! Trajectories of Citizenship and Agency in Three Twentieth- Century Book Series for Children.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Oh, Golly, What a Happy Family! Trajectories

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Michelle Beissel Heath (bio)

A Curious George drum, a cookie jar, placemats, salt and pepper shakers, lunch boxes, mouse pads, calendars—these are but a few of the items Daniel Hade laments in his critique of commercialism and the children's publishing industry today (513). As Hade's list indicates, a common complaint against children's consumer culture is the sheer quantity of available items. A tremendous output of diminishing quality is, of course, a frequent complaint levelled against series books as well, particularly against series books for children, which, as Hade rightly notes, reveal the influence of powerful marketing forces. Series books for children seem to beget television series, toys, and other material items. A difficulty scholars like Hade often have is reconciling the perceived lack of literary merit offered by many of these texts with the obvious attraction that they hold for their readers. Yet scholars must also contend with the reality that what Hade condemns is nothing new within the history of children's publishing and children's culture: as Lissa Paul suggests, there may be a "difference in scale" since the eighteenth century, but that does not translate into a difference in "content" (Hade, Paul, and Mason 139).

Concerns about the quality of such texts tend to obscure two other important realities: first, material items have also spawned literary texts since at least the eighteenth century, and second, the commercialism and consumerism inherent in these texts converge with notions of child citizenship today. As David Buckingham and Verbjørg Tingstad observe, "the idea of the child as sovereign consumer often slips into **[End Page 38]** the idea of the child as citizen, as autonomous social actor; and it is often accompanied by a kind of 'anti-adultism'" (3).¹ This slippage emerged by the nineteenth century, according to Courtney Weikle-Mills, who argues that "the freedom to participate in government could be re-imagined as the freedom to participate in the market" (138). She also

points out that "definitional crises involving children and citizenship continue to arise in times of internal conflict" (8). Sarah Banet-Weiser is more explicit in her analysis of the cable network Nickelodeon, insisting that "[c]ommercial media play a pivotal role in creating cultural definitions about what it means to be a citizen—indeed, our sense of ourselves as national citizens emerges *from* (not in spite of) our engagement with popular media" (2). The concept of child citizenship, as these and a variety of other critics suggest, has increasingly found itself at the intersection of rights discourses, protectionism, and consumerism.²

In this article, I explore three British picture-book series for children through the lens of debates regarding quality, quantity, and consumerism that highlight some of the stakes involved in discussions of child citizenship today: Florence Upton and Bertha Upton's Dutch Doll and Golliwogg books, published between 1895 and 1909; Enid Blyton's initial Noddy books, published between 1949 and 1963; and Allan Ahlberg's Happy Families series, published between 1980 and 1997. These series not only spawned material goods for children but were themselves created out of such goods, given that each series originated with children's playthings: the Uptons' books centre on the exploits of a doll Florence Upton had as a child, Blyton's Noddy books borrow the Uptons' doll figure while also creating their own Pinocchioesque toy, and Ahlberg's Happy Families series is based on a nineteenth-century card game of the same name. These three series, I argue, serve as snapshots to situate changing notions of child agency within shifting ideas of child citizenship throughout the twentieth century. In this way, child citizenship, like the historically and culturally constructed concept of "child" itself, is a flexible term, available for use for a wide array of adult political and ideological purposes. Notably, the picture-book series that I examine both participate in and defy such purposes as they evolve. The Uptons' series acknowledges—if not critiques—turn-of-the-twentieth-century views of children as citizens-in-training³ and resists gender-based constructions of...



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