

# The Street Life of Children in 20<sup>th</sup> Century New York

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**Abstract**

This article explains how and why over the course of the 20th century the street life of children in New York City disappeared. It draws on the very rich resources of memoir and fiction to understand what happened and, in doing so, it comes to understand the importance of street life in stirring the literary imagination.

*For a child growing up on the Lower East Side, life was endlessly absorbing. In a neighborhood bursting with people, actually spilling out onto the streets, it was always possible for a bright girl or boy to experience pain, sorrow, or pleasure merely by walking around and being observant.*

—Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo, “Growing Up in Cities,” *How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America, 1880-1930*.<sup>1</sup>

*I’m so grateful for the little TV in my room. When I’m stuck inside, it sort of brings me outside to the world.*

—Latoya Hunter, *The Diary of Latoya Hunter: My First Year in Junior High*.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

What was it like to grow up in New York City in the twentieth century? The most vivid answers came from New Yorkers themselves, who were often moved to write about their coming of age in the city. Looking back from the twenty-first century, we can see that they produced an absorbing and substantial literature revealing what it was like for the rich, poor and middle class to grow up in the metropolis. From the suburbs, on the other hand, where a large and growing part of the metropolitan population lived for the better part of the century, no comparable body of work has yet appeared.

In trying to make sense of the cacophony of city voices and the relative silence of the suburbs, the focus here will be on crowded streets that served as the setting for urban fiction and memoir. As the Mississippi spelled freedom for Huck and Jim, so neighborhood streets offered kids a break from the confinement of school and home. Here they could hang out with other children, shopkeepers, and strangers. Danger lurked, but city streets served as the backdrop and essential inspiration for stories of growing up.

This paper shows how over the past century, street life diminished in importance and then practically disappeared as parents saw the street as increasingly dangerous and a threat to the child’s performance in school. At the beginning of the century, city streets were filled with peddlers, traffic and kids—playing, fighting and hawking wares. By century’s end we contemplate streets

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo, *How We Lived, 1880-1930: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America* (New York: Signet Books, 1981), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Latoya Hunter, *The Diary of Latoya Hunter: My First Year in Junior High School*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 22.

devoid of children. Meanwhile, upstairs in a Bronx bedroom, a vibrant 12-year old sits alone watching TV, while in the suburbs another youngster begs to be driven to the mall.

### The Lower East Side and Williamsburg before World War I

Let us begin with two autobiographical novels that offer compelling views of growing up in New York before World War I. In *Jews without Money* (1930), Mike Gold takes us to the Lower East Side, where parents, children and numerous boarders eat, sleep, and fabricate clothing while confined to a few stifling tenement houserooms.



Mrs. ALA and her three children, 11,9,6 at flower making (1915). Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Courtesy, historyinphotos.blogspot.com



Parents today would be arrested for letting these small children out in the street. But the kids could hardly wait to escape the apartment. What fun! Photograph by Jacob A. Riis, courtesy of The Library of Congress, Prints and Photographic Collection.

As Gold explained, children in overcrowded rooms viewed the street as “an immense excitement. It roared like the sea. It exploded like fireworks.”<sup>3</sup> Kids, little more than toddlers, sold papers, candy or gum while mingling with pushcart vendors, tradesmen, and cops. Memoirs of the turn-of-the-century Jewish Lower East Side tend to be nostalgic, summoning up recollections of egg

<sup>3</sup> Michael Gold, *Jews without Money* 2nd edition (New York: Carroll & Graff, 1996), 30, 113. The Jews were the single largest ethnic group on the Lower East Side, followed by the Italians. Other major groups included the Germans, Irish, Slovaks, and Chinese. On Italian street life and play see, Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 95-99.

creams, the Yiddish theater, rabbis and radicals.<sup>4</sup> Gold, the quintessential proletarian novelist, certainly loved street life, but he also depicts its darker side: kids run over by horse drawn wagons, gang fights, and hanging out with pimps, prostitutes and thugs.<sup>5</sup> Still, the enormous appeal of street life for children resonates through a broad range of the Lower East Side memoirs. Sophie Ruskay, who grew up on East Broadway in a relatively well-to-do household, remembered that "...children owned the streets in a way unthinkable to city children today. There were a few parks, but too distant to be of any use and so the street was the common playground." Boys and girls played separately, with the boys hitching illegal rides on the back of streetcars and wagons, shooting craps, taunting the cops and fighting. The girls played less dangerous games, but "we shared the life of the street...unhindered by our parents, who were too busy to mold us into the more respectable pattern...." In overcrowded apartments where there was little privacy or room to breathe, it was the street which became the refuge, offering children play, work and as Ruskay put it, "freedom from restrictions."<sup>6</sup> Here children interacted rather easily with adults, and to the extent that the kids usually spoke English much better than their Yiddish-speaking elders, they had a distinct advantage in dealing with the world beyond the ghetto. Children who worked at home were obliged to turn their earnings over to parents, but those who took to the streets, selling wares, shining shoes or scavenging for junk, could retain some earnings, providing themselves with a discretionary income to be used for candy, entertainment or gambling.<sup>7</sup>

Across the East River, in quieter yet lively Williamsburg, Brooklyn, novelist Betty Smith introduces us to Francie Nolen and her brother Neeley who scavenge for scrap metal, newspaper, rags and bottles. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) is a coming-of-age story based on Smith's childhood during the early 1900s.<sup>8</sup> Though not the story of newly arrived immigrants—Francie and Neeley are third-generation Austrian-Irish—it is very much an account of growing up poor in the city. Like the indestructible ailanthus tree, which thrives in Brooklyn's rubble-strewn vacant lots and yards, Francie has the grit to make her way in a difficult world.

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<sup>4</sup> Harry Golden, *For Two Cents Plain* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1959); Harry Golden, *The Greatest Jewish City in the World* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Gold, 5-21. See also [Samuel Ornitz], *Haunch Paunch and Jowl: An Anonymous Autobiography* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 48-51.

<sup>6</sup> Sophie Ruskay, *Horsecars and Cobblestones* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1948), 38.

<sup>7</sup> David Nasaw, *Children of The City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 119.

<sup>8</sup> Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Harper & Row [1943] 1947).



*It grew in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps and it was the only tree that grew out of cement. It grew lushly, but only in the tenement districts. That was the kind of tree it was. It liked poor people. Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.<sup>9</sup> Photo courtesy, knowingtheland.com*

Francie's story has for so long captivated prepubescent girls that we sometimes forget that *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, a 1943 adult best seller, offers an unparalleled view of turn-of-the century saloon-based politics, of ordinary people working in city shops, factories and offices, and of kids putting in endless hours in dull classrooms. The novel also provides a realistic account of a failed marriage, alcoholism, abortion and the activities of sexual predators. That the book has not been banned is probably because school librarians, parents, and politicians have not read it since junior high.

Scavenging, running errands and interacting with other kids and neighborhood shopkeepers define Francie's Williamsburg as they also define Mike Gold's Lower East Side. Through street play, children forged intimate connections to their lively neighborhoods. And whatever the dangers of working and playing in the street, it is often home and school that come across as the more troubling places. Johnny Nolen, Francie's charming n'er do well dad who drinks himself to death, is one of a long line of feckless though usually far less engaging fathers who often appear in other memoirs as detached, remote or abusive. As Selma Hannish, who grew up on the Lower East Side put it, "In my family the father figures are very vague. They're there to make babies, to beat up on you, and to make trouble."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Smith, 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Kisseloff, *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890s to World War II* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1989), 72.

School, too, could be a problem. "...A jail for children," wrote Mike Gold, "one's crime is youth, and the jailers punish one for it. I hated school at first; I missed the street. It made me nervous to sit stiffly in a room while New York blazed with autumn."<sup>11</sup> Francie sees the classroom as a confining and mortifying place ruled by desiccated spinsters. What she does appreciate is that school provides a measure of order and security when home life is disturbed or unsettling. But as important as street and school were for Francie, it is her love of books that allows her to escape a difficult world. The final poignant image of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is of a girl on a fire escape—reading.

### **The Twenties: Kazin in Brownsville, Simon in Tremont**

During and after the First World War, working class families seeking to escape the congested Lower East Side often found larger apartments built near newly constructed subway lines in the outer reaches of the Bronx and Brooklyn. Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* tells of growing up in one such neighborhood, Brownsville in Brooklyn; Kate Simon's *Bronx Primitive: Portraits of Childhood* describes another, the Tremont section of the Bronx.

"We were the children of immigrants," wrote Kazin, "...camped at the city's back door, in New York's rawest, remotest, cheapest ghetto."<sup>12</sup> Yet poor as they were, Tremont and Brownsville were a world and not just a long subway ride away from the Lower East Side. Apartments there were usually large enough so that that eating, sleeping and working no longer took place in the same room. Children less frequently shared bedrooms with parents and boarders and because of somewhat higher family incomes, children were under less pressure to help support the family.

No matter the specific family situation, American childhood during the nineteen twenties was undergoing a remarkable transformation. Prior to World War I most children had some schooling, but relatively few made it beyond the eighth grade. In fact, the demand for child labor nationally was so great around 1900 that school attendance for children five to eighteen years old was actually declining.<sup>13</sup> It was understood that kids from poor families like Francie Nolen and Mike Gold would start working around the age of fourteen or fifteen.<sup>14</sup> When children sold papers or anything else they could lay their hands on, parents saw such activity not as the road to perdition but as supplementing family income.

The rich street life of children began to change during the twenties when enforcement of compulsory education and child labor laws signaled that the child's main job would now be to attend school, though for how many years

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<sup>11</sup> Gold, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in The City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Dwight Porter Bliss and Rudolph M. Binder, eds. *The New Encyclopedia of Social Reform* (New York: The Arno Press, [1910] 1970), 171.

<sup>14</sup> Gold started work at 12.

often depended on the child's ethnicity. For example, working class Italian families were often indifferent or downright hostile when a young man or especially a young woman expressed an interest in going to high school.<sup>15</sup> Jewish boys, on the other hand, might be under pressure not just to stay in school but also to excel. As Alfred Kazin wrote, "it was never learning I associated with that school; only the necessity to succeed." He saw himself as "...the first American child, [my parents'] offering to the strange new God; I was to be the monument of their liberation from the shame of being what they were."<sup>16</sup>

Kazin's warm feelings for Brownsville's streets, shops and working people led him to write his celebrated memoir, *A Walker in the City*. When he needed to escape from the pressures of family and school, he played handball against the wall of his house and baseball in nearby empty lots. What ultimately seemed to shape this young man's life, however, was the Stone Avenue public library where he could read what he wanted.<sup>17</sup>



*In the long peaceful reading room there were storybook tiles over the fireplace and covered deep wooden benches on each side of it where I read my way year after year from every story of King Alfred the Great to 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.'* Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in The City*.<sup>18</sup> Stone Avenue Library, Brownsville, 1901. Photo courtesy, The Brooklyn Public Library

<sup>15</sup> Joel Pearlmann, *Ethnic Differences: Schooling and Social Structure among the Irish, Italians, Jews and Blacks in an American City, 1880-1935* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90; Claudia Goldin, "America's Graduation from High School: The Evolution and Spread of Secondary Schooling in the Twentieth Century," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 58, No. 2, (Jun., 1998), 345-374; Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), 181-87.

<sup>16</sup> Kazin, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Kazin, 86,87,91,108.

<sup>18</sup> Kazin, 91.

Kate Simon's Tremont in the Bronx was a step up from Brownsville. In the summer of 1918, her Polish-Jewish family moved to 2029 Lafontaine Avenue, which Kate described as "...the last house on the west side of the street from 178<sup>th</sup> Street to 179<sup>th</sup>, a row of five-story tenements that ended at a hat factory." Parents in Tremont understood that when their kids were not at home or school they were probably playing in the street or in nearby Crotona Park which Kate described as "our suburb, our summer camp, our America the Beautiful..."<sup>19</sup>

As on the Lower East Side and Williamsburg, young children in the Bronx quickly learned to get around without their parents. On her first day of school, Kate's mother told her to "hold his hand [her little brother was beginning kindergarten] and don't talk to strange men."<sup>20</sup> No one in the neighborhood suggested that it was irresponsible to let a six-year-old and her younger brother walk alone to school, although those cautionary words about strange men betrayed a certain anxiety. As Betty Smith explained, "in all poor and congested city areas, the prowling sex fiend is a nightmarish horror that haunts parents."<sup>21</sup> Kate Simon recounted how she learned about sex from watching dogs copulate in the street. She told of a pedophile who lured her into his apartment and then, after showing her pornography, asked Kate and her girlfriend to expose themselves. Kate ran away; her friend did not. And one day when Kate and her friends were playing outside their own apartment, they were set upon by the boys from Arthur Avenue who tried to grope under their skirts. Kate's younger brother, his friends, and the local workmen came to the rescue.

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<sup>19</sup> Kate Simon, *Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood* (New York: Harper&Row, 1982), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Simon, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, 212.



Street games, thirties and forties. Photos by Rebecca Lepkoff from *Life on the Lower East Side: Photos by Rebecca Lepkoff, 1937-1950* (2006)(text by Peter E. Dans and Suzanne Wasserman. Courtesy of Princeton Architectural Press.

Such incidents did not deter kids from playing in the street, although at one point, Kate's father warned that "running in the street with boys" meant that she would become "...a street girl, a prostitute who will be shipped to a filthy diseased brothel crawling with hairy bugs in Buenos Aires."<sup>22</sup> Kate had no idea what he was talking about. The disturbed father then turned on his son, calling him a dirty, disobedient street kid who would end up in the electric chair. Their mother calmly pointed out that Kate and her brother were no different than the other neighborhood kids, and they were doing just fine. In fact, it was parental quarreling that sometimes drove Kate toward the street and beyond to those enormously important mediating institutions, the public library and the movies.



*The brightest most informative school was the movies. We learned how tennis was played, what a swimming pool was, how tables were set, with 'How do you do?' and 'Pleased to meet you.' Fathers kissed their wives and children when they came home from work and spoke quietly and nobly like kings, never shouted or hit if the kids came in late or dirty. Kate Simon, Bronx Primitive.<sup>23</sup>* Fox Crotona Theatre, The Bronx, August 3, 1929. Photo by vaudevillian (see marquis) George Mann, courtesy, Brad Smith.

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<sup>22</sup> Simon, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Simon, 44.



*The most ...debated form of leisure time activities by far was the movies. Many children went... three times... [and] with a bit more pocket change... six times a week. Peter Dans and Suzanne Wasserman.<sup>24</sup> Photo by Rebecca Lepkoff from *Life on the Lower East Side: Photos by Rebecca Lepkoff, 1937-1950* (2006). Text by Peter E. Dans and Suzanne Wasserman. Courtesy of Princeton Architectural Press.*

Although Kate did not feel Kazin's pressure to excel, her mother advised her to keep studying, go to college and not to get married until "you can support yourself or better still don't get married at all." Kate was astonished. "I don't want to report her as altogether eccentric," she wrote of her mother, "but in our [Jewish-Italian-Polish] community girls were to marry as early as possible, the earlier the more triumphant."<sup>25</sup> Having seen her uneducated mother suffer at the hands of an abusive husband, Kate was amply motivated to continue her studies, which meant inevitably that she would be drawn away from the street.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Dans, Rebecca Lepkoff and Suzanne Wasserman, *Life on the Lower East Side: Photographs by Rebecca Lepkoff* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), 128.

<sup>25</sup> Simon, 48.

*Bronx Primitive* concludes with thirteen-year old Kate, having just graduated from grammar school, setting off to Crotona Park wearing a new, grownup and provocative dress. At this moment we begin to see the park as a wonderful retreat for youngsters. But Crotona Park, which seemed so beautiful in the twenties, would for a later generation become a dangerous place to play.

### The Privileged Child and the Problem of Confinement

Well-kept and secure city parks and playgrounds might have been inviting, but local streets continued for decades to exercise a profound hold over the lives of city children. Sheiky Lenowitz remembered desperately poor Brownsville in the thirties and forties as absolutely “wonderful” because as soon as he left the apartment, he was “...surrounded by friends [ready]... for punch ball or stickball.”<sup>26</sup> On weekends and after school, kids might be gone for hours, but so long as they returned home for supper, their parents seemed relatively unconcerned even if they did not know exactly where they were playing. Working class kids had few alternatives to the street, but even the better off parents felt that if their children played in neighborhood, they would be safe enough. In the first half of twentieth century, city kids enjoyed a degree of autonomy and freedom from parental supervision that strikes us today as remarkable.<sup>27</sup>

What were the kids actually doing in the streets? After surveying 20 cities (not including New York), *The Journal of Educational Psychology* reported in 1931 that about half of the street kids were working or playing, while the other half, on average, were “idling”, that is, doing nothing. Such activity or indeed inactivity proved so appealing that even in relatively uncrowded neighborhoods where parks and playgrounds were accessible, kids seemed to end up in the street. With street play becoming both “more frequent and also more dangerous,” (auto accidents in 1922 killed 477 New York City children,) the report recommended that cities close certain streets to traffic to allow children to play safely under adult supervision.<sup>28</sup> New York continues to do this.

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<sup>26</sup> Gerald Sorin, *The Nurturing Neighborhood: The Brownsville Boys Club and Jewish Community in Urban America, 1940-1990* (New York: NYU Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>27</sup> A study of Inwood, a working class Manhattan neighborhood, suggests that five-year olds were on their own in the twenties and thirties in contrast to the nineteen sixties and seventies when children in that neighborhood were not allowed out by themselves until seven and a half. See Sanford Gaster, “Urban Children’s Access to their Neighborhood: Changes over Three Generations,” *Environment and Behavior* 23 (Jan.1991), 79. Memoirs of growing up in The Bronx in the forties, fifties and sixties, show that in both working and middle class neighborhoods children enjoyed a remarkable freedom to come and go as they pleased. See for example, Maureen Waters, *Crossing Highbridge: A Memoir of Irish America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001); Michael Pearson, *Dreaming Columbus: A Boyhood in The Bronx*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999); Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (NY: Random House, 1995). On very young children moving freely about a Norwegian coastal city see: A.E. Parr, “Urbanity and the Urban Scene: The Child in the City,” *Landscape* 6, no.3 (spring, 1967) 3-5.

<sup>28</sup> Will R. Reeves, “Report of Committee on Street Play,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 4:10 (June, 1931) 607-18; Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: New



*The best that can be said for play streets is poor indeed...concrete streets, brick walls...[a] depressing environment... but it is at least a place where children can play without danger of accident or death and where under trained supervision, such play may become a contributing means for an educational factor for decency and order.* Will R. Reeves, "Report of Committee on Street Play," *The Journal of Educational Psychology* (June, 1931). *Play Street Sign*, ca. 1916-20. Photo courtesy, NYC Municipal Archives

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York University Press, 2007), 108.; "Traffic and the Child" in Colin Ward, *The Child and the City* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 116-25 provides an overview of the subject from a British perspective. With its exemplary photos, the book is among the best treatments we have of twentieth century urban childhood.



Doing nothing? Photo by Rebecca Lepkoff from *Life on the Lower East Side: Photos by Rebecca Lepkoff, 1937-1950* (2006). Text by Peter E. Dans and Suzanne Wasserman. Courtesy of Princeton Architectural Press.

In their city survey, sociologists might have had but a fleeting glimpse of one particular group—kids from wealthy families who were not likely to have been found hanging out on street corners. Live-in servants kept an eye on them from morning to night. In the nineteen forties, little Anne Roth, living on the Upper East Side, rode her tricycle on a Park Avenue sidewalk under the watchful eyes of doormen. In *1185 Park Avenue*, (1999) Anne (Roth) Roiphe wrote of playing in Central Park with her little brother while attended by a governess who continually towed off their hands to ward off dirt, disease and infection. It was hard to imagine these kids being sent out to pick up a loaf of bread or a bottle of milk. Their city was defined not by neighborhood streets and shops, but by private school, play dates, orthodontia, Saks, Bonwits, and tea at The Plaza.<sup>29</sup>

How different it had been for Anne's father, Fritz, a Hungarian Jew who had

<sup>29</sup> Anne Roiphe, *1185 Park Avenue: A Memoir* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

played in the rough-and-tumble Lower East Side and gone swimming in the East River. Although Roth knifed a kid in school, he proved to be such an able student that he made his way all the way through Columbia Law and after polishing his manners, losing his accent, and learning golf and tennis, he could marry into the Van Heusen shirt fortune.

The Roth children want for nothing except freedom. When Anne goes to fix something to eat, the cook tells her to get out saying, "... I did not belong in the kitchen. I was not allowed to open the icebox door myself or get myself a glass of water from the tap. I had to ask Greta [the governess] to get it for me."<sup>30</sup>

This tale of the poor-little-rich girl comes across as joyless, not simply because the relations among parents, children and servants seem so cold, but also because the kids are cut off from the street and neighborhood. The saving grace for Anne may have been summer camp where she bunked with other girls and learned archery, swimming, and other sports. To the extent that camp allowed escape from the tensions of school and home, it served as a substitute for street and neighborhood with the obvious difference being that camp kids were under constant adult supervision. In our own time, when few children are free to roam, parents themselves assume the role of camp counselors, scheduling after-school and weekend activities to ensure that their children are suitably engaged or entertained—an obligation that would have bewildered previous generations of parents whose children's camp had been the city street.



*1185 Park Avenue... looked like a mock fortress, a combination cathedral and castle, secure, imposing... always two Irish doormen at the front and one at each entryway, their uniforms similar to police uniforms and at their waist... [a] billy stick...Anne (Roth) Roiphe, 1185 Park Avenue<sup>31</sup> Photo courtesy, Corcoran Group Real Estate.*

<sup>30</sup> Roiphe, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Roiphe, 4.



Privileged and protected. (Chicago? 1954). *Untitled* photo by Vivian Maier. Courtesy, estate of Vivian Maier.

## Street Play in Harlem

If Anne had walked just three blocks uptown to where the passenger trains entered or emerged from the Park Avenue tunnel at 97th Street, she would have found herself in an astonishingly different world—El Barrio or Spanish Harlem. During her early childhood in the nineteen forties, a dark-skinned Puerto Rican teenager, Piri Thomas, could be seen hanging out on 111th street which he remembered as a fantastic playground, especially in summer when “the stoops [were] crowded like bleachers at a ball game, beer flowed and musicians pounded on tin cans, bongos and congas...kids were everywhere on fire escapes, under cars, over cars, back yards, hallways... roll[ing] marbles along the gutter edge oblivious to dog filth, people filth and street filth.”<sup>32</sup>

If the streets were a joy for Piri, then school and home were hell. Sitting in class was such an agony that one day, after being tormented by a teacher, he slugged her and was chased through the streets by the principal. At home, he confronted a father who beat him, Piri said, because he was darker-skinned than his siblings. Meanwhile the street promised freedom and stickball. Here you could stay out all night, sleep on fire escapes and steal girls’ panties. In *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Piri explained that “the worlds of home and school were made of rules laid down by adults; the world of the street belonged to the kid alone. There he could earn his own rights, prestige, his good-o-stick of living. It was like being a knight of old, like being ten-feet tall.”<sup>33</sup> But he soon discovered that it was hard to earn a living, and he took to shoplifting and selling marijuana. Later he became hooked on heroin and at twenty-two began serving six years for a botched robbery in which he had almost killed a policeman and badly wounded himself. 2 A similar story was played out a few years later in Central Harlem. “When I ran away from shelters,” Claude Brown wrote in *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), “I never ran away with the thought in mind of coming home. I always ran away to get back to the streets. To me, home was the streets.” Brown earned a reputation as a precocious thief and maniacal street fighter, but he also confessed that whenever he hit the streets he remained almost “morbidly” afraid.<sup>34</sup> During the fifties, amidst a growing heroin epidemic, Brown spent a good deal of time in reformatories where he began to understand that street life would probably lead to prison or the morgue. In his late teens, Claude developed a genuine interest in reading and moved away from Harlem, giving up the gun that he had needed for protection.

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<sup>32</sup> Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (New York: Vintage Books, [1967] 1997), 14.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Signet Books, 1965), 428-29.



*Tug of War* (1947) Photo by Arthur Leipzig, courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery

The stories of Piri Thomas and Claude Brown seem to confirm the elder Simon's awful prophecy: if you hang out in the streets, then you will be destroyed. Were the Harlem streets of the thirties and forties too dangerous for play? Violence and gang warfare were certainly part of the Harlem scene, but that might also have been said of Mike Gold's Lower East Side where Lucky Luciano, Lepke Buchalter (head of Murder Incorporated), and Meyer Lansky had learned to fight and extort protection payments from pushcart peddlers. In Brooklyn, Alfred Kazin observed that all you had to do was look into the faces of kids who "...before they are ten have learned that Brownsville is a nursery of tough guys...[the kids]... walk with a springy caution, like boxers approaching the center of the ring."<sup>35</sup> Claude Brown and Piri Thomas may have been incorrigible, but most boys, whether on the Lower East Side, Brownsville, or Harlem, did not become criminals or mobsters. What we should add, however, is that by the

<sup>35</sup> Kazin, 6-7.

thirties and forties, the changes triggered by the enforcement of compulsory education and child labor laws were all but complete. With far more youngsters graduating from high school, employers could now demand a diploma for jobs where a grammar school certificate might have previously sufficed.<sup>36</sup> Under such circumstances, it was all the more difficult to raise a child in a poor, tough, neighborhood. In Ann Petry's *The Street*, a novel set in Harlem in the forties, Lutie Johnson, a single mother, wonders whether it was better to leave her eight-year old "alone in those dreary little rooms or ... playing in the street..?" The speeding traffic on 116th Street was the least of her worries. Of greater concern was that street gangs might recruit her son. But what drove her into a complete rage was her boy's modest request that he be allowed to shine shoes. For Lutie, the shoeshine boy was emblematic of the black man's failure to make his way in the city: "You're afraid if he is shining shoes at eight, he will be washing windows at sixteen and running an elevator at twenty-one... and you're afraid that this street will keep him from finishing high school."<sup>37</sup>



Despite the Great Depression, World War II, riots and segregation, the main street of black America looks far more prosperous in 1943 than now. Harlem, 125th Street looking west from Seventh Avenue (Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Blvd.) Photo courtesy, New York Tours by Gary.

<sup>36</sup> Percent of youth between fourteen and seventeen years old enrolled in school:  
1900: 11%,  
1910: 15%,  
1920: 32%,  
1930: 51%.

U.S. Office of Education, "Statistical Summary of Education, 1939-40," *Biennial Survey of Education in the US, 1938-40, 1940-4*; Claudia Goldin, 345-374.

<sup>37</sup> Ann Petry, *The Street*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974[1946]) 67.

However difficult growing up in Harlem might have been, the juvenile delinquency rate declined slightly during the Depression, while school attendance for black children increased to the point where it approached the figure for whites.<sup>38</sup> Further, memoirs of Harlem in the thirties and forties offer a picture of neighborhoods that were poor but otherwise relatively stable, at least compared to what they would become in the years that followed.<sup>39</sup>

### The End of Street Life

Why did the street life of children come to an end? In *Fist Stick Knife Gun* (1995), Geoffrey Canada offers a compelling explanation. In the summer of 1959, just before he started second grade, Geoff's family moved to 1165 Union Avenue in the Morrisania section of what later was called the South Bronx. Their two-bedroom apartment had to accommodate a family of five, but to Geoff, his mom and three brothers it seemed spacious enough. What really delighted the boys was the sight of all the kids playing in the street, "...laughing and running and having the time of their lives."<sup>40</sup> But as the brothers looked out from their apartment, a street kid caught sight of them and balled up his fist. The boys then realized that in order to play, they would have to fight.

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<sup>38</sup> Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, "Or Does It Explode?" *Black Harlem in The Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press 1991), 190-91. The relatively high attendance rates may have reflected discrimination in the hiring of black youth whose labor participation rates were generally lower than, for example, Italians.

<sup>39</sup> On Harlem in the thirties and forties: Katherine Butler Jones, "409 Edgecombe, Baseball and Madam St. Clair," Sonia Sanchez, "Home Girls on St. Nicholas Avenue," and James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," [From *Nobody Knows My Name* (1954)] in Herb Boyd, ed. *The Harlem Reader* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003).

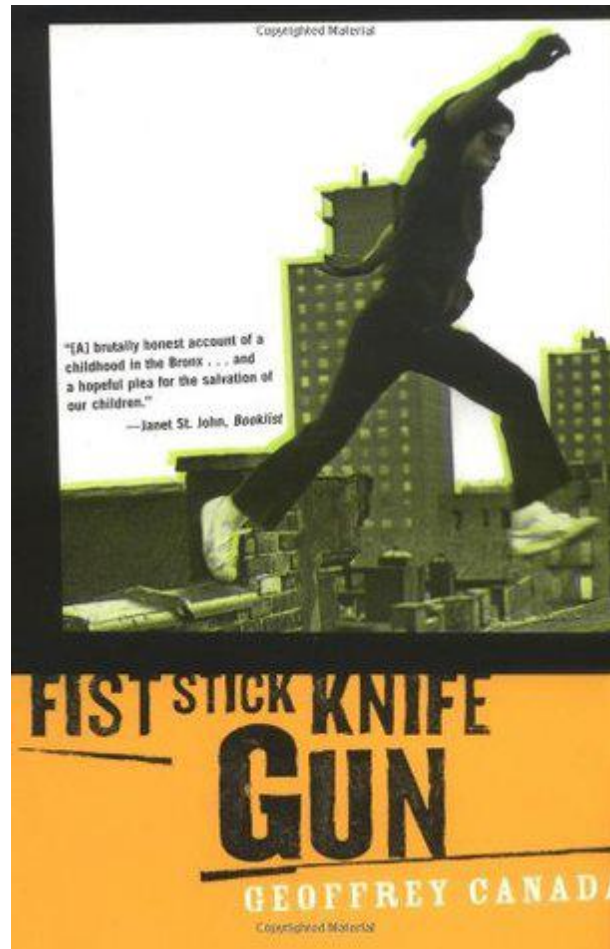
<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Canada, *Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 13.



*David put up his balled-up fists and said, 'Come on.' I didn't know how to fight, but I knew how to pretend to fight. Luckily for me, David didn't know how to fight either. Geoffrey Canada, *Fist Stick Knife Gun* (1995)<sup>41</sup> Photo by Rebecca Lepkoff from *Life on the Lower East Side: Photos by Rebecca Lepkoff, 1937-1950* (2006). Text by Peter E. Dans and Suzanne Wasserman. Courtesy of Princeton Architectural Press.*

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<sup>41</sup> Canada, 21.



*The nature of the violent act has changed from fist, stick, and knife to gun. But violence I remember.* Geoffrey Canada, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* (1995).<sup>42</sup> Cover courtesy, Little, Brown.

Union Avenue's street society was built around well-defined rules of combat. At the top of the pecking order were seasoned fighters, boys sixteen and seventeen, who ran the block and arranged fights among the younger boys. Little boys like Geoff played on the sidewalk; when they learned to fight, they graduated to the street. "The pecking order was important," Geoff explained, "because it was used to resolve disputes that arose over games, or girls, or money and also to maintain order and discipline on the block."<sup>43</sup> The ranking system also prevented violence: if everyone knew you couldn't beat someone, then you could back down from a fight without losing face. But it was essential that every boy be prepared to fight in order to maintain the neighborhood's reputation as a place that could protect itself from intruders. Any boy on Union Avenue who refused to fight would be pounded into submission. Since fighting

<sup>42</sup> Canada, xi.

<sup>43</sup> Canada, 22. The same warrior hierarchy could be found more than half a century earlier on the Lower East Side. See: *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, 14.

ability was so critical, in arranged fights boys of roughly equal size and strength were fairly matched against each other. No wrestling, only fist fighting was allowed. Knives were allowed only when you ventured into enemy territory, outside the neighborhood. Handguns were not yet part of the scene.

According to Canada, teenaged boys maintained dominion over city streets because adults had largely forfeited their responsibility to protect children. The workingmen who, in earlier generations, maintained a conspicuous neighborhood presence had, like Geoff's alcoholic father, drifted away. Police were unresponsive to pleas for help. Canada explained that "the child coming home, scared, scarred, looking for protection... [turned]... inevitably to single women raising children in the midst of an urban war zone."<sup>44</sup> These mothers had no alternative but to teach their kids to "act more violently than the others."<sup>45</sup> What the Union Avenue teenagers brought to this brawling society was a semblance of order—a self-policing, hierarchical society.

But soon enough the social fabric began to unravel. In the early seventies Geoff was attending Bowdoin College. On returning home during a break between terms, he began to feel increasingly uneasy walking the streets. He was a skilled fighter and a good deal older than the street kids, but he felt so threatened by a local gang that he decided to buy a gun. This not only boosted his confidence, but also made him feel so cocky that he found himself almost itching for a confrontation. On his return to campus, he realized that if he went home again, it would only be a matter of time before he pulled the trigger. "My Christian upbringing," he wrote, "was stronger than my fear of the gang...I didn't want to kill anyone."<sup>46</sup> He unloaded the gun, wrapped it in newspaper and took it to the dump.

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<sup>44</sup> Canada, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Canada, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Canada, 85.



Cops and robbers in the thirties and forties. By the seventies the game was over; the guns were real. Photo by Rebecca Lepkoff from *Life on the Lower East Side: Photos by Rebecca Lepkoff, 1937-1950 (2006)*. Text by Peter E. Dans and Suzanne Wasserman. Courtesy of Princeton Architectural Press.

As Canada was giving up his gun, more and more Bronx boys were getting their own. During the seventies, drug dealers recruited boys thirteen to fifteen- years old who as juveniles could escape the longer sentences being meted out under the newly enacted Rockefeller drug laws. Then came the demand for crack, which proved so profitable that young teens now had the wherewithal to buy leather coats, gold chains and powerful firearms. The “fair fight” became irrelevant when any youngster could blow away a brave and skillful street fighter, the very sort who had previously laid down the law. Anarchy reigned to the point where responsible parents made sure that their children were increasingly confined to home.<sup>47</sup> So ended the street life of New York, and the ability of kids to come and go as they pleased.

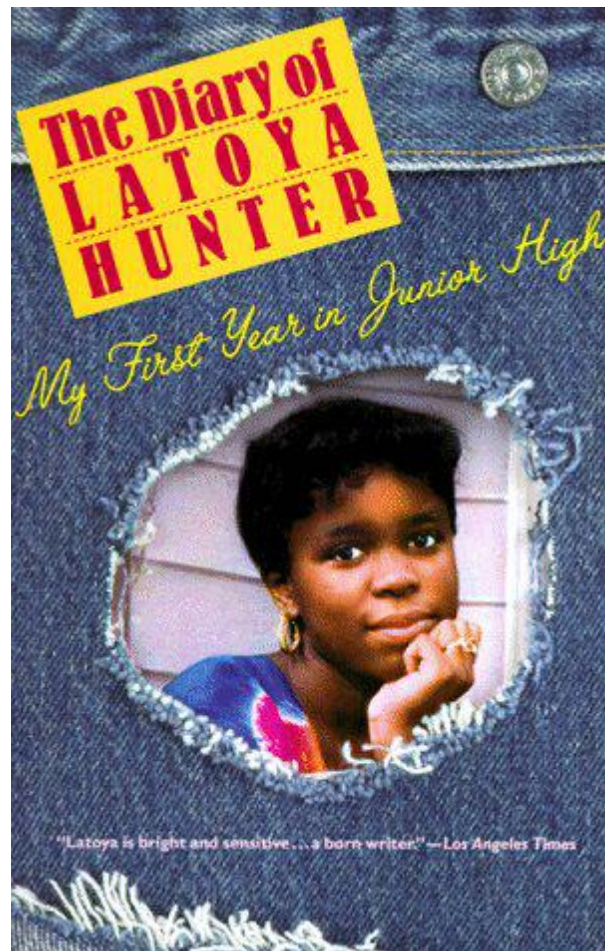
### Safety in Television Land

In the spring of 1990 when *The New York Times* sent a reporter up to the Bronx to write a feature story on the graduating class at PS 94, a genial sixth grade teacher, Robert Pelka, singled out one of his students, Latoya Hunter, for her special writing ability. An enterprising editor at Crown Publishers read about Latoya in *The Times* and commissioned her to keep a diary of her first year at junior high. For years pre-teens had been jotting entries into those little bound books with the miniature locks and keys, but from all those diaries it was

<sup>47</sup> Canada, 77-85.

Latoya's that emerged as that rare document—a published account of childhood written by a child.<sup>48</sup>

Is the book authentic? Editor Richard Marek acknowledged correcting errors in spelling and syntax and occasionally prompting Latoya to develop a few points, but he insisted that she wrote every word. Latoya herself confided to her diary, that while “I tried never to keep anything back from you... there was always that feeling that someone would be reading your pages not too long from now.” Self-censorship was inevitable, but Latoya was perfectly willing to skewer her tedious or incompetent teachers and to write about such painful matters as getting dumped by a boy, menstruation, abortion and the difficulties of getting along with her mother.



*You've become like a best friend ...someone I can talk to without being argued with. I'll call you Janice after my best friend in Jamaica.* Latoya Hunter, *The Diary of Latoya Hunter*.<sup>49</sup>  
Cover courtesy, Penguin, Random House.

<sup>48</sup> The greatest account of childhood written by a child is, of course, by Anne Frank, but beyond that, one is hard-pressed to find other authentic published accounts.

<sup>49</sup> Hunter, 15.

Raised by relatives in rural Jamaica, Latoya hardly knew her parents until the age of eight when she joined them to begin a new life on Bainbridge Avenue in The Bronx. Moving from St. Ann Parish where she ran barefoot through the fields amidst chickens and goats to living in a drab north Bronx neighborhood with its troubled streets was not as difficult as it might have seemed. Latoya's father proved to be warm and affectionate and her mother, though anxious and forever pushing Latoya to excel in her studies, was-- as even Latoya acknowledged-- a deeply devoted parent. After a somewhat hesitant start, Latoya did well in school, and then, thanks to the inspired Mr. Pelka, blossomed into a good writer and a lively and curious student. Junior high, with its indifferent teachers and unruly student body, almost immediately dashed her enthusiasm for learning, but she settled down and did well enough to make the honor roll. Yet her first year in junior high afforded so little satisfaction that Latoya hardly wanted to write about it. And so the diary is much more about family than school.

And Latoya does have a good family life. She enjoys fast food and talking on the phone to boys, and will, during her "diary" year, serve as bridesmaid at her older brother's wedding and enjoy an extended vacation in Jamaica. With grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins in Jamaica, Toronto, and London, she has a far broader and worldlier outlook than most children.

And here, too, another rarity among our memoirs, a reasonably well-adjusted family. Latoya's dad does "security work" and her mother is a nurse's assistant. "It isn't a big income family," writes Latoya, "but I'll make it. I think we all will."<sup>50</sup> Having few responsibilities other than baby-sitting her nephew, Latoya is simply expected to do well in school, and this she does with so little effort that her parents have no objection to her watching TV in the privacy of her own bedroom.

It is precisely because we are in the company of a bright, well-adjusted and comfortable young woman that *The Diary of Latoya Hunter* seems so disturbing. The Hunters rent a small three-bedroom house on Bainbridge Avenue in Norwood, a neighborhood seemingly far removed from the troubled South Bronx. Yet no youngster we have yet encountered is so expressly alienated from the neighborhood. "I'm living in the Bronx," she writes, "a place where walking alone at night is a major risk. The streets are so dirty and there's graffiti everywhere. Maybe if the streets were cleaner... I would see colors like red and yellow... but for now, all I see is dullness and cloudiness."<sup>51</sup>

Still, Latoya yearns to explore the city beyond the neighborhood, but except for one memorable excursion to Brooklyn to attend a cousin's party, she feels "locked up." "They always want to keep me in the house," she writes "... but keeping me locked up just means that when I do go out there I'll be unprepared." Yet Latoya is by no means naïve. In the October 1 entry, she writes

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<sup>50</sup> Hunter, 10. Commentary on Latoya Hunter relies on James Wunsch, "Growing Up in The Bronx: A Review Essay," *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*, Vol. XLI, No.2 (Fall, 2004) 96-102.

<sup>51</sup> Hunter, 5.

of "... walking to the store when a gray car pulled up beside me.... a middle-aged Puerto-Rican man with a terrible looking beard ... blew his horn and called to me to come inside ...holding up money which was supposed to be a lure..."



*There's a girl in my school who actually had a baby already. She's in the ninth grade. I know how it happened, but how could she let it? I think being ready for sex and ready for a child are two different things. Latoya Hunter, Diary.<sup>52</sup> Photo, "Anthony Hitting on Giselle, Vivien Waiting, Lorimer Street, (1996) Photo courtesy, Vincent Cianni from *We Skate Hardcore, a study of Williamsburg, Brooklyn*.*

Is Latoya over-protected? We begin to think so when her parents become furious after learning that she has ventured to walk home from church. But we soon appreciate their concern. One January night Latoya is awakened by gunshots from across the street. A man is crying for help. In the morning, she learns that the friendly clerk at the corner store has been gunned down; the street is stained with blood. Afterwards Latoya writes, "I haven't been particularly interested in going outside. For every car that passes... a thought comes...I'm going to die now...."<sup>53</sup> A resilient young woman, Latoya overcomes these fears while acknowledging that her father was almost shot when he drove a cab, her brother was held up at gunpoint in a movie theater, and her friend Lisa's brother, probably involved in drugs, was shot to death. No wonder Latoya's parents are happy to have her watch TV in the safety of her bedroom.

<sup>52</sup> Hunter, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Hunter, 66.

“My life is so boring,” she writes, “[but]... I’m so grateful for the little TV in my room. I don’t know how people ever lived without it. It’s scary just thinking about it. When I’m stuck inside, it sort of brings me closer to the world.” That world includes *General Hospital*, *Loving* and other weekday soaps as well as *Soul Train*, *Star Search* and *The Golden Girls* on weekends.

At the end of the school year, as the Hunters prepare to move from the Bronx to suburban Mt. Vernon, Latoya concludes that “where I’m living now isn’t the best place in New York, but it isn’t the worst either. I mean I look across the street where the guy from the store was shot and I walk around the corner and I look at the banner hung in remembrance of George Gonzalez (he was kidnapped then killed...) I’m with no hesitation ready to go. But then I have to hesitate when I look at the familiar faces up and down the blocks ... I understand we’ll be living in a bigger, nicer house in a quiet neighborhood.”<sup>54</sup>

*The Diary of Latoya Hunter*, in print for many years and marketed as young adult nonfiction, continues to stand out among all sources on urban childhood as an authentic view of how during troubled times, the freedom to play and explore was sacrificed for safety and security.

### Growing Up in the Suburbs

Up to this point, we have seen that city streets once served as public spaces where kids worked, played, fought and escaped the pressures of school and home. The end came during the second half of the century, when parents felt that streets, especially in troubled neighborhoods, had become so dangerous that kids would be better off at home, watching TV.

But the argument that fear drove kids inside does not explain why in otherwise safe and quiet neighborhoods, with little crime or traffic, suburban youngsters were also missing from public view. Of course some could be found in the backyard—the little ones on the swing set and the older ones shooting hoops, or the teens, perhaps, sneaking a smoke. But most were indoors watching TV while today they may be online, texting friends or playing video games. Yet even before the coming of TV, the streets of residential neighborhoods were quiet because in the newly developing areas of the outer boroughs and in the suburbs, neighborhoods were zoned for one or two-family detached houses. Since multi-family apartment buildings could not be built along those residential streets, the population density of those neighborhoods was far lower than in the older parts of the city. As a result, there were not enough children, especially after the baby boom collapsed in the sixties, to establish a youthful presence on residential streets.

There were other losses for suburban kids. In the older city neighborhoods, kids were sent out to buy groceries, newspapers and other items and in doing so they learned to handle money and to deal with store clerks and other adults. Hanging out at the corner store connected kids to society.

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<sup>54</sup> Hunter, 128.



Bodega, Mott Haven, The Bronx. Photo courtesy, DNAInfo New York

In the suburbs there were fewer kids at the store because commercial activity was not allowed on most residential streets. Since planners presumed that shopping would be done by auto, stores were often located well beyond walking distance of housing. In some of the newer developments, no provision was made for sidewalks at all. So when youngsters wanted to buy junk food, candy or comics, they needed to ask for a ride, usually from their mother. When it came to getting to the store, a teenager without a driver's license seemed little better off than a toddler. Parents and small children often enjoyed the suburbs, but older brothers and sisters did not.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> On the difficulties of the teenager in the auto-dependent suburb, Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1967, 206-219. "A second survey of Levittown, 10 years after Gans (1967) ...showed a desire amongst youth to leave the area, with 50 percent citing boredom as a significant problem...." David Ley, *A Social Geography of the City* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), 158.



*The neighborhood stores are an important part of a city child's life... his contact with the supplies that keep life going... Betty Smith, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.*<sup>56</sup> Photo by Rebecca Lepkoff from *Life on the Lower East Side: Photos by Rebecca Lepkoff, 1937-1950* (2006). Text by Peter E. Dans and Suzanne Wasserman. Courtesy of Princeton Architectural Press.

How then did kids manage the transition when they moved from city to suburb? In *Paperboy: Confessions of a Future Engineer* (2002), Henry Petroski wrote that when he turned twelve in 1954, his family moved from Park Slope in Brooklyn, then a crowded working class neighborhood, to spacious Cambria Heights in Queens. Henry's dad explained that "moving up in the world [meant] ...leaving behind an ice box for a refrigerator, a bathtub for a shower, a party line for a private phone, the subway and trolley for buses and a car."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Smith, 114.

<sup>57</sup> Henry Petroski, *Paperboy: Confessions of a Future Engineer*, New York: Knopf, 2002, 3. On moving to suburban Long Island in the fifties: James Howard Kunstler, "Memoirs of A Suburban Pioneer Child." [http://www.kunstler.com/mags\\_LIchild.html](http://www.kunstler.com/mags_LIchild.html) retrieved July 15, 2014.

What Henry also discovered was that his family had moved from a lively neighborhood to a dull one. They had traded "...a world of curbs, sidewalks and stoops [for] ... driveways, lawns and porches."<sup>58</sup> A stoop in Park Slope connected you to a street filled with activity; what you saw from a Cambria Heights porch was a sidewalk where almost nobody passed by. Henry appreciated that a single-family house offered his parents privacy and served as a "fortress within which we could retreat."<sup>59</sup> What he wanted, however, was the company of other kids. In the old neighborhood, so many kids played outside, especially in summer, that the police closed the streets to traffic, painted lines on the pavement for games, and opened the hydrants so the kids might cool off.



Street play in crowded Sunset Park, Brooklyn, where police still close streets and equip hydrants with sprinklers. Photo by Lauren Epifanio, courtesy, *The Home Reporter*.

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<sup>58</sup> Petroski, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Petroski, 5.

In Cambria Heights there were not enough kids playing outside to justify any street closings, though now and then a few boys could be seen playing stickball. At other times, out of sheer boredom, they ended up throwing rocks at street lamps.



Cambria Heights: Irish-American and Italian-American in the fifties, African-American and West Indian today. Still a quiet waystation on the road to suburbia. Photo courtesy, Trulia.com

To deal with the boredom, Henry biked over to *The Long Island Press* where he got a job delivering papers. This job set him apart from most other teenagers in Cambria Heights where even working class parents took pride in the fact that their children did not have to work during the school year or even summers. Henry was proud of being a paperboy, of working outside and making his way through the streets, but when he told the class about it on his first day back from summer vacation, Sister Michael, his eighth grade teacher, advised him to quit. Delivering papers, she said, would distract him from what was more important—doing well in school. Henry, in fact, did well enough, but he found school tedious and he wanted to earn money. He also welcomed the responsibility of holding down a demanding job that sometimes required him to get up early, fold a hundred papers and deliver them in bad weather.



Since the seventies, paperboy deliveries have dropped precipitously. Parents feared that kids would be hit by cars or molested. Also, with the spreading out of residential population, car-delivery became necessary. See Tom Vanderbilt <http://www.howwedrive.com/2011/02/04/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-americanpaperboy/#> comments Photo courtesy Tom Vanderbilt.

Henry's activity was a throwback to earlier days when street kids routinely did business with adults, whether selling papers or scrap or interceding with a landlord on behalf of parents who spoke no English. Henry's job entailed negotiating with circulation managers to secure the more lucrative routes, keeping track of sales, and going door-to-door to collect what was owed. What he loved most, however, was the camaraderie of paperboys. At one point in high school Henry quit—he was getting a bit old for the job— but he quickly returned after realizing that delivering papers was “a refuge of rationality and stability” in the confused and unfocused world of teenagers. In the end, he estimated that from the ages of twelve to sixteen he had folded and delivered around 100,000 papers.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Petroski, 348.

Was Henry a true suburbanite? Most Brooklyn kids would have thought he was because with its single family houses and driveways, Cambria Heights certainly looked suburban compared to Park Slope. Then, too, Henry's new house was so far away, five miles from the nearest subway, that his dad, like so many suburban fathers, drove to work. Notably Henry's mother did not drive; she was able to walk over to Linden Boulevard to do the marketing.<sup>61</sup> Henry relied on his trusty Schwinn to deliver the papers and get around. Otherwise he took city buses and only occasionally hitched a ride. Although he dreamed of owning a car, it was not essential and so in that sense, Cambria Heights was not quite a full-fledged suburb.

It is in *An American Girl* (1971), Patricia Dizenzo's artful, fictionalized memoir of suburbia in the early fifties, that the car becomes central to the suburban coming-of-age story. Here the anonymous teen narrator lives in a modest single-family house near the Bergen Mall in Paramus, that iconic New Jersey suburb which could later boast of having the greatest concentration of shopping malls in the nation.<sup>62</sup>

This episodic story, told in the teenager's voice, covers her last year of junior high and the first two at Hackensack High School. Like many teens, she is trying to break free from the confines of family and school. If she had been living in the city she might have found her friends hanging out in the neighborhood street, park or corner store. In the suburbs, socializing takes place mostly in homes, one-to-one rather than in groups hanging out on streetcorners. Suburban kids did socialize at the mall, but they needed a lift to get there.

What this girl really wants is to the ability to move beyond familiar geographical boundaries just as Latoya did when she risked walking home from church or as Henry did when he took a job delivering papers. In the suburbs, where freedom and adulthood mean being able to drive, the teen without a license finds herself alone on the sidewalk, feeling out of step. Where can she go? How can she get there?<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Petroski, 246.

<sup>62</sup> Patricia Dizenzo, *An American Girl* (New York: Avon Books, [1971], 1976).

<sup>63</sup> On the child's yearning for suburban adventure see D.J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 40. On girls playing in empty lots in the Inwood section of Manhattan: Sanford Gaster, "Public Places of Childhood, 1915-30," *Oral History Review* vol. 22, no 2, (Winter 1995), 1-31.



Being able to drive means that you can shop, socialize and look for work. *Staten Island 2* (1999). Courtesy of the photographer, Jerry Vezuso.

In several vivid scenes, our protagonist is drawn to the wildness of the suburb's few remaining empty lots. At one moment, she dashes madly across multiple lanes of fast moving traffic on Route 17 to pick strawberries and blackberries in an overgrown field adjacent to an abandoned house. Another time she gets up in the middle of the night and heads over to the "sandpit" (probably a construction site) where in a moment of exuberant rebellion, she flings her pocket change into a clump of tiger lilies. Her nocturnal reverie is dashed when she is spotted by the police and unceremoniously dropped at her doorstep. Inevitably, the story concludes at the mall, a structure so massively out of scale with neighborhood houses that even those living nearby feel more comfortable driving than walking there. After half-heartedly perusing the shops with a friend, she decides to walk home alone, threading her way through an interminable parking lot only to face local streets jammed with exiting cars. "Once I got home I went up to my room and went right to bed but I couldn't fall asleep," she concludes.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Dizenzo, 156.



Bergen Mall c. 1957. Photo courtesy, *Malls of America Blogspot*.



*I went over to the Bergen Mall on Saturday. It was only walking distance from my house although most of the people came by car from all around. There were big parking lots spread out around the stores, full of cars.* Patricia Dizenzo, *An American Girl*.<sup>65</sup> Bergen Mall, (Now called the Bergen Town Center), Paramus (1966) Photo by John Duprey, courtesy of *The New York Daily News*.

*An American Girl* is ultimately about the burden of dependency. How is a girl without a license to get around when she depends on her mother to drive? And what if her mother is an alcoholic? In a series of harrowing scenes, we see her mother at the wheel attempting to escape a maze of suburban cul-de-sacs as the kids she is dropping off from a birthday party laugh at her confusion. Then

<sup>65</sup> Dizenzo, 156.

there is her drunken but utterly carefree attempt to merge at high speed into multi-lane Route 4, as her daughter reaches for the wheel to prevent a crash into a guardrail.

When parents prove incompetent, the child-centered suburb is turned upside down. The chaotic home cannot serve as the intended refuge, nor can an empty suburban street serve as a retreat. Yet kids find ways to cope. To deal with the desolation of The Bronx, Latoya finds consolation in the daytime soaps. To deal with the boredom of Cambria Heights, Henry discovers the community of paperboys. Seeing her household in disarray, the American girl begins tidying up, scrubbing the floors, and cleaning out the closets. In doing so, she is seeking the predictability and order that suburban life seemingly promised. Even without a driver's license, she is growing up.

### **Conclusion: Where is A Good Place to Grow Up?**

After beginning our story on the lively streets of the Lower East Side, we have concluded with a young teen being chauffeured by her mother around a lifeless suburb. From this we might conclude that it would be better to raise a child in a busy city neighborhood with shops within easy walking distance than in a suburb where a car is needed to get around.

Yet we should be cautious in dismissing the decision of tens of thousands of those like the parents of Henry and Latoya who each year, over the course of a century, settled further and further away from the city. Kids may have loved those overcrowded streets, but their parents could hardly wait to escape. Between 1910 and 1940 the city's population soared from 4.7 to 7.4 million, but the number living on the Lower East Side declined by two-thirds as families settled in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island.<sup>66</sup> During the fifties, sixties and seventies the migration continued from those "outer boroughs" to the suburbs.

Parents often said they were moving "for the sake of the kids." Was it better to have them playing in the backyard than hanging out on the street? This paper suggests that more than a backyard, kids might have benefitted from public places such as streets and playgrounds where, with shops nearby, they could, without an appointment or being driven by their mother, meet and play with others. But where could such a place be found in an increasingly dangerous city or in a suburb where everyone was so spread out that appointments were needed to bring children together? Children saw *Sesame Street* as such a place, but no one knew how to get there.

Even before their children outgrew the backyard, parents felt obliged (like an Upper East Side governess) to provide the kids with safe and edifying activities along with tutoring sessions and play dates. That approach remains pretty much

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<sup>66</sup> During the same period Williamsburg lost a quarter of its population while Brooklyn as whole gained more than a million. Peter Derrick, *Tunneling to The Future: The Story of the Great Subway Expansion That Saved New York* (New York: New York University Press, 20010) 247.

the norm, but today's mental health professionals, journalists, and social critics suggest that kids raised in that way (in city or suburb) are so over-scheduled that they have been denied the opportunity to enjoy what the streets once offered—unsupervised play, idleness, and risk-taking. In "The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents," psychologist Peter Gray attributes an alarming increase in childhood anxiety, depression and suicide to the loss of free play.<sup>67</sup> In a recent talk, Professor Gray remarked that as a child he enjoyed a good deal of free play, which provided a far sturdier foundation for emotional development than the tense, over-scheduled world of today's child.<sup>68</sup>

Parents alarmed by Professor Gray's findings may take comfort in the fact that each generation seems to find the next generation deficient when it comes to child rearing. So while Gray is troubled by over-protective parents, an earlier generation was concerned by those who allowed their kids to hang out on the street corners. In his 1931 report for *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, sociologist Will R. Reeves noted that "... undirected street play tends to develop disrespect for law and cunningness in social relationships; these developments are fostered when crowded streets permit only disorganized fooling in the line of play." Reeves looked back to an earlier, more carefree time (perhaps his own childhood) when children romped in the "...woods, the fields, and the crystal stream..."<sup>69</sup>

In trying to put the troubles of today's child into historical perspective, we might also recall that until the enforcement of child labor and compulsory education laws in the nineteen twenties, most children did not enjoy the opportunity for much play at all. At an early age the girls were cleaning, cooking, caring for younger siblings or the elderly; boys and girls worked on farms or in factories. The New York State Commissioner of Labor, after surveying dwellings on seven streets on the Lower East Side in 1907, reported 193 children ages five to 13 confined to tenements where they were engaged in making clothing or artificial flowers.<sup>70</sup> Apparently, no one inquired as to their emotional well-being possibly because when parents are worried about being able to pay the rent, they are less likely to be concerned about the feelings of their children.

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<sup>67</sup> Peter Gray, "The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents," *American Journal of Play*, 3:4 (Spring, 2011) 443-62. See also, Paul J. Tranter and John W. Doyle, "Reclaiming the Residential Street for Play," *International Play Journal* (1996) 4: 91-97 and Hannah Rosin, "The Overprotected Kid," *The Atlantic* (March 19, 2014).

<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/> retrieved, July 24, 2014. On how parental interference wrecks the joy of play see: Robin Roberts, "Strike Out the Little League", *Newsweek*, July 11, 1975 at <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1734&dat=19750724&id=B3lcAAAAIBAJ&sjid=eFEAAAAIBAJ&pg=6885,1985610> retrieved, August 25, 2014 and Andre Aciman, "Time Out: Loving the Sport. Hating the Scene. Confessions of a Reluctant Soccer Dad," in *New York Stories: The Best of the City Section of The New York Times*, Constance Rosenblum, ed., (New York: New York University Press), 171-75.

<sup>68</sup> Gray, 442; "The Decline of Play" talk, TedXNavesink, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg-GEzM7iTKP> 4:33, downloaded July 24, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Reeves, 609, 610.

<sup>70</sup> Bliss, 172.

In that light, suburban children do not seem so badly off. While the rise of overprotective parenting may have coincided with an increase in childhood depression, Professor Gray concedes that he cannot, in any scientific sense, demonstrate the direct cause and effect between children denied sufficient free play and their emotional difficulties.<sup>71</sup> Further, no social scientist has ever demonstrated that those raised in dull neighborhoods are, as adults, any more or less happy or productive than those raised in livelier places. Where you grow up may be important, but in determining how you turn out, such factors as wealth, temperament, talent, education and family life would seem to be more significant.

What does seem clear is that growing up in a lively city is more likely to inspire the writing of memoirs, stories and novels about childhood than growing up in the suburbs. Even though many more children over the course of several generations have now come of age in suburbs than in New York itself, we have scant record of what it was like to grow up outside the city. Dizenzo's *An American Girl* is a brilliant exception. To be sure, since the twenties, the suburbs around New York City have served as the backdrop for the remarkable fiction of Ring Lardner (Long Island), John Cheever, (Westchester), Richard Yates (Connecticut) and Richard Ford (New Jersey.) While these writers provide an extraordinary view of adult domestic relationships, they hardly consider coming of age in quiet residential communities. Perhaps we shall yet see an outpouring of memoirs of suburban childhood, but that seems unlikely. After all, what gave rise to the rich and varied literature of childhood in the twentieth century city was the remembrance of working, playing and socializing in dirty, dangerous and overcrowded streets. With the passing of the street life of children, it would appear that the deep-seated sense of place that so moved city writers to summon up the geography of childhood has now all but disappeared.

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<sup>71</sup> Professor Gray writes that "correlation, of course, does not prove causation. The observation that anxiety, depression, sense of helplessness and narcissism have all increased as play has decreased does not prove that the decline of play caused these psychological changes. However, on grounds of logic, a strong case can be made for such a causal role." Gray, 452. Invoking "logic" to demonstrate cause and effect is a risky business. For example, during the nineteen fifties, it seemed logical to conclude that the dissemination of violent comic books contributed to soaring rates of juvenile delinquency, a claim which is no longer taken seriously. Or consider that since the precipitous decline in homicide coincides with the tremendous expansion of the playing violent video games, we might logically conclude that encouraging youngsters to play such games would further help pacify American youth.

### **A Note on the Sources**

*Readers may question whether novels and memoirs are reliable historical sources. After all, novelists not only fabricate plot and characters, but they can also dream up the settings, which we have relied on here to tell the story of the rise and fall of the street life of children. Memoirs may appear to be more reliable than novels, but when it comes to accurate recollections of time and place, memory may be no more credible than fiction. What distinguishes memoir and fiction and what draws us to this literature despite its limitations is that, as nothing else, it can bring the city to life. The endnotes referencing more conventional historical and sociological sources buttress the claim of the reliability in the descriptions offered here.*

*Novels and memoir do distort the historical narrative in one undeniable way: most kids do not end up writing books. The writers here, to an unusual extent, took refuge not just in the street, but also in the public library. Their love of reading and ultimately their ability to write brought them a living and sometimes fame. Not so most other people. What these writers were able to do was to secure for posterity a vision of the kids, parents and people of the streets who, otherwise, might have gone unnoticed.*

### **About the author**

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