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Children choose their heroes more carefully than we think. From Pokémon to the rapper Eminem, pop-culture icons are not simply commercial pied pipers who practice mass hypnosis on our youth. Indeed, argues the author of this lively and persuasive paean to the power of popular culture, even trashy or violent entertainment gives children something they need, something that can help both boys and girls develop in a healthy way. Drawing on a wealth of true stories, many gleaned from the fascinating workshops he conducts, and basing his claims on extensive research, including interviews with psychologists and educators, Gerard Jones explains why validating our children's fantasies teaches them to trust their own emotions and build stronger selves.

Killing Monsters: Our Children's Need For Fantasy, Heroism, and Make-Believe Violence Details

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From Reader Review Killing Monsters: Our Children's Need For Fantasy, Heroism, and Make-Believe Violence for online ebook

Mike (the Paladin) says

Originally reviewed in Dec. 2011. Updating to correct a couple of typos Nov. 2012.

I've read on this subject often. As noted before I grew up in the '50s and had dozens of cap guns. I sported "Fanner Fiftys" (yes I know it should be "fifties" but the "Fanner Fifty" was a trademarked product of Mattel) in the "Two-Gun" rig. I had the Buffalo Hunter set that came with a six-gun, a Winchester that shot "Shootin' Shells" and came with a plastic skinning knife, complete with stag horn grips on pistol and knife. Later I had plastic sub-machine guns and as I got older built scale models of well know firearms (try to find those today). I also played with plastic army men, cowboys and even big game hunters (another thing that would probably be virtually impossible to find now). I date back to the first action figures, G.I.Joe and the lesser known Stoney by Marx. I read and collected comic books. When I was small I read Superman and Batman then at about 12 I found Marvel. I liked many of the Marvel universe but my favorite books were The Avengers and my favorite character was Captain America....

And you know, I'm not a serial killer...really I'm not. (I mean I realize that's what a serial killer would say. But "trust me" I'm really not...honest.)

We all played with those toys back then and so did the generations before. And you know what, kids today still play violent games. Parents can forbid it they can even try to suppress it, but kids need that release.

(Under the influence of a church I was attending I once tried [hypocritically] to forbid my son from playing games where he "shot people". One day I saw him outside with friends shooting a toy gun. When I called him over he told me it was alright. They were "shooting robots". I came to my senses, remembered my own childhood and revoked my prohibition... He was allowed to shoot, "bad guys" like all the other kids he played with. Today he sells art and craft supplies.)

This is a book by a man who played the same games as a kid but then (like so many) when he came to "adulthood" he tried to forget it, down play it...and yes suppress it. Then he stopped and took a look at reality. The book is interesting and also (yes I know this is somewhat cliched but...) thought provoking. There are, in my opinion only a few down sides.

First, the book seems to me to be a bit "over thought". Once he realized that he as a child had played violent games, read comic books and that he survived he was able to take another look at reality. Gerard Jones is known (among other things) as a comic book writer and he'd made an overt attempt to "scale back" violence and make his stories "deep and meaningful". Then he spoke to a reader who liked one of his books and had found meaning, found a sort of identification in some of the violence. He started looking at play and entertainment violence and it's implications. Unfortunately I think to some extent the "act of studying" may have taken over "the study". You'll see this I believe as you read through his stories (anecdotes) and thoughts....which leads to my second quibble.

Second the book gets a bit dry and labored in a few places. It's okay, stick with it, even skim a little if you need to, there's some good stuff in among the "waffle" as Hermine said ("There's some important stuff hidden in the waffle", from Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix).

Third...well I wish he'd discussed a bit more the difference in the "types" of violent entertainment. He does point out that in most cases the "authorities" or whoever tend to ask the wrong questions. They'll ask "what are the effects of violent entertainment on children?" This in effect makes no difference in, for example: Junk Yard Dogs and Daffy Duck. He address this somewhat, but not so much the difference in the moral context. Having watched my own kids and of course having had my own history, I see a big difference in say, Gunsmoke and Nightmare on Elm Street.

All in all, a pretty good book on an interesting and maybe overworked subject. We live in a world where small kids can get suspended from elementary school for pointing a finger and saying "bang". There is a huge movement to try and subdue and even drug aggressive play out of children (yes largely boys but girls indulge in violent play to, even though people [the same ones trying to completely subdue this play probably] don't want to admit it). The conclusion here is that yes violent play is and/or can be positive (even if not always so) and that violent video games, movies and action toys don't (at least alone or normally) cause maladjusted kids.

Heck, I have to admit that even though I hate (read can't abide) slasher movies, most slasher movie fans don't become slashers...

To repeat myself, on the whole thought provoking and interesting.

Julia says

This book is a personal reading choice, recommended by an LIS professor and friend, and NOW SUPER FAMOUS COMICS RESEARCHER WHOOOOOOOOO *applause*, Carol Tilley. She said on Twitter that she wished everyone would read this book and stop freaking out over kids running around playing "pretend we're the good guys and you're the bad guys and we kill you" games. So I read it.

Killing Monsters: Why Kids Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence, is ten years old, but perhaps even more relevant today. Gerard Jones goes through clinical evidence, mass longitudinal studies, conversations with psychologists and researchers and other experts, and personal testimony from parents and ex-children, and shows how pretend violence (in make-believe games, video games, television, pop culture, music, toys, etc.) actually helps foster healthy psychological development by allowing children to act out (in a way they understand) and can gain power over their fears, anxieties, demons, and worries.

Controversy, yes. But it's also a well-reasoned argument that got me, an ex-repressed child who became a goody-goody and never went through a "rebellion" phase, to reconsider my opinions on toy squirt guns, Power Rangers, first-person shooters, Britney Spears, and basically all the things in my childhood that I wasn't allowed to see or play with.

The book is a bit dated (published in 2003, it basically documents 90s pop culture and doesn't really look at later issues like the widespread Internet and social media explosion and only touches on 9-11 and not later instances of real-world violence reaching kids through the news) and oriented towards parents, but it still is helpful for educators, librarians, and the public in general. It definitely acknowledges criticisms against its argument but puts forth that kids understand the difference between real and pretend better than we think, and that adult anxieties about play that resembles real violence makes kids more anxious about their play and don't actually help. Additionally, this play allows them to feel powerful, in control, and invincible against issues in their life that they cannot control, and helps them find reassurance and calm in the face of more and

more violence and adult anxiety about our world and our children.

And then Carol and I contacted Jones on Twitter and learned that although he's currently working on a project about cultural censorship, he hopes to one day update this book, which will be awesome. The more people read this, the more sensible in the brain we can become as a society. Approach this book with an open mind and be ready to re-think your own assumptions about how to help our kids grow into healthy, well-adjusted adults.

TL;DR – 4/5. Read it. Everyone should read this. Instead of panicking about pretend violence that kids have been playing since the beginning of civilization, we can understand that playing Avengers or Power Rangers or Call of Duty doesn't translate to psychopathic actual violence-perpetrator, and maybe we'll have more faith in our kids.

Ashanti Miller says

The book has a good premise and setup, but I am getting bored as the author reiterates the same information and over and over. I am reading this book to understand my industry better. I work as an animator and since the early 2000's the stories have focused on themes that concern boys. I am perplexed with the attraction to violence--especially explosions and wimpy heroes. This book is a window into young male psyche.

According to the author, boys need a fantasy monsters to conquer because they can't handle the real life monsters on the playground---especially the omega-bookish little boy. Therefore that's why we have all these loser protagonists in animated films. I'm sick of it. Charlies Brown was fine, but #1 am biased for my childhood cartoons, and #2 Charlie was much better written and likeable than Fry Farnsworth, Peter Griffin, Bender, and that wuss in Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs. I mean, really, how predictable can the latter film be?

Hopefully, when and if I reach the end of this book, I'll better understand the decisions TV and film executives make when they green-light stories with these kind of protagonists.

-Ashanti

Ben says

While the intention of this book is to explain and explore the value of different types of violent entertainment for kids, I ended up gaining insight into myself. As Jones discusses the ways kids use violent entertainment to safely explore their own violent feelings, to find a sense of control in a chaotic and out of control world, to relieve stress in a risk free environment, I found myself realizing why I had been (and still am) drawn to this type of entertainment. Like almost everyone, there are times in my life where I've struggled with feeling powerless or helpless or full of anger. And I used this make-believe violence as a mechanism to cope with these struggles.

Scott Robins says

Started out interesting but felt it was saying the same things over and over again. Moved beyond what I had expected the book to be.

Andrea says

I highly recommend this book for parents, psychology students, and teachers. I'm not even going to try to sum this book up in a few lines, because it is just that good. Suffice to say that it really put my mind at ease about my son's fascination with GI Joes and "war stuff" like military aircraft books. It is even applicable to those interested in sociology in that our fascination with these things as children continues into adulthood. It is a part of our society. I did a report on this book for a college psychology class that was well-received and it sparked a very interesting discussion. I really enjoyed the fact that the author doesn't get bogged down in technical shop-talk. It really is written in plain English, and explains the concepts very clearly. I found the clinical examples intriguing. This is easily one of my favorite psychology books.

Guilherme Smee says

Quando eu estava na faculdade, esse era um dos livros mais comentados e discutidos por aqueles que pesquisavam cultura pop. Quando ainda se achava que cultura pop era pra crianças... Pera... Ainda se acha! Bem, já havia comprado o livro há muito tempo, mas só agora me dignei a lê-lo. A teoria de que videogames, fantasia e faz de conta, servem para ajudar as crianças em seu desenvolvimento é bastante interessante, mas um livro de 300 páginas sobre isso e só isso fica muito cansativo. Quando eu era criança não me deixavam nem consumir nada violento, nem fazer coisas arriscadas e nem mesmo me sujar, claro, que fui um pré-adolescente bem rebelde e difícil em casa, porque não canalizava minha raiva. Ainda hoje tem muitos reflexos em mim. Por acaso, descobri os super-heróis e comecei a mudar um pouco isso, até um certo momento em que me anulei completamente por sentir raiva demais. E bem, olha hoje quem está de volta? The very anger my old friend! Trabalhar a raiva não é uma coisa fácil, muito menos equilibrá-la, o que não dá, entretanto é para contê-la porque se você não botar ela pra fora, vai botar ela pra dentro e vai se odiar pela vida inteira. Então, não, não é feio sentir raiva nem expressá-la em RPG, videogames, e outras brincadeiras. Afinal, artes marciais estão aí pra isso, né? A única coisa que tem que ser trabalhada é o limite de onde a sua raiva e as suas frustrações afetam aos outros. Não que seja fácil. Eu, até hoje, não aprendi. E creio que vai continuar sendo uma grande incógnita para mim.

Nikolay Manchev says

This is a good book, and the author did his homework. However, he constantly mixes results from proper studies with anecdotal evidence, thus undermining his own claims. He also often cites academic papers, but then jumps to conclusions which the papers do not support. It would have been much better if this was written as a systematic review. Unfortunately, it is evident that the author lacks the proper background/skills to do so. Nevertheless, the book is valuable as a very high level overview of the subjects and for its detailed references.

Karen Brooks says

This is a terrific book that puts in sensible perspective irrational adult fears around kids and their play. Jones asks the question, why do so many healthy (psychologically and physically) 'normal' kids like fantasy violence and imaginary rough play so much? It's a great question which he then explores examining a range of pop culture forms from films, TV shows, video games and toys - from Star Wars to Harry Potter. Fantasy is about escaping the strictures and controls of everyday life and capturing a sense of power in a world that often leaves children especially, feeling powerless. Fantasy violence, whether it's waving a wand (a gun by any other name), a plastic gun, bows and arrows or a light sabre, reassures young kids and allows them to be the 'master' in a universe they've created or emulated and where they set the rules and boundaries. Drawing on experts from around the globe, Gerard Jones presents a persuasive argument in easy to read prose that should reassure parents and teachers that children wanting to pretend to blow up and kill things is normal. It should also put in perspective the recent 'panic' (moral and otherwise) around superhero play.

Jared says

Jones put together quite the thought provoking study about attitudes towards children's playstyles and how it affects them later in life. It made me question my attitudes towards how I engage with youth and I believe I've gained some insights into better interactions

Margaret Robbins says

Wow, what a fascinating work of research, nonfiction, and experience about comics and fantasy stories! Gerard Jones definitely did his homework, and his past experiences as a comic writer, teacher/workshop presenter, parent, and fan give him a lot of credibility. I appreciate the book's distinction between exposing children to weapons and allowing children to play with toy weapons, such as water guns, toy swords, and action figures. Play, along with the reading of fantasy and comics, allows children to enact some of their real life frustrations in a safe context. So long as adults help children distinguish between fantasy and reality, play can be a healthy way of expressing emotions. This book really helped me to see some of these issues differently, which shows that the author did his job. It'll help me with my research/literature question of my comprehensive exams, too. Additionally, I love how there's a whole chapter devoted to Vampire Slayers, particularly the Buffy movie of my late elementary years and the TV show of my high school years that I am now watching as a thirtysomething. Whedon's hit TV show Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a true icon of teen television show, and Buffy set the tone for female superheroes. While I think we need more female superheroes who do not look like Buffy :), this show truly paved the way, and I'm glad this book and other scholarship is helping people appreciate Whedon's work. That chapter made me want to keep watching the television series. I loved this book!

Claudia says

This book is an absolute must-read for anyone with kids, especially for those of us who have loudly

proclaimed that they will never let toy guns in the house. The author shows how pretend violence is a vital tool for children to work out their fears, and that repressing all violent thoughts and urges is likely to do more harm than good.

Tina says

This was an interesting read. I don't have kids, but it sounded like a good book nonetheless and I'm glad I read it. It actually gave me a unique perspective on why I liked the things I liked when I was a child and I can appreciate them in a different light.

Good discussion on how media is an outlet and how we need fantasy, even into adulthood. I especially liked his discussion of video games since I find gaming a perfect outlet for negative emotions. An artificial environment where one can shoot things, beat things up and vent anger and aggression is a healthy outlet. I know I feel more calm after venting my anger in a place where no real living beings can be harmed. Gaming is also a fantastic method of interactive storytelling and allows the gamer to feel powerful as they get to be someone else for a while and actively take part in the world of the game. I liked that Jones focused on these positive aspects of gaming since so many condemn gaming for the fantasy violence therein.

Erik says

"I did feel that Killing Monsters became repetitive after a while (there's that phrasing again); the book could probably have lost 50 to 100 pages and been just as effective. Another factor for my lack of interest of rereading the same conclusions could be because I read this shortly after the Las Vegas mass shooting; knowing I was going home to read about more violence and mass shootings that took place in schools didn't make this a book I was particularly itching to continue. The point of view of the book made it feel callous in the wake of what had happened, but I recognize that this was purely circumstantial." - <https://thepastduebookreview.com/2017...>

Gina Valdez says

I wish I would have read this book when my kids were little and not 17 and 21. However, it gave me a perspective on just how important play is to kids, including toys guns, monsters, and video games. Mr. Jones is in such a good position to give his opinion through his interactive art workshops with young people. His back ground as a comic book writer also provides the reader with a great starting point. When adults make wipe sweeping declarations about violence and entertainment, they never stop to ask the kids why. Nobody bothers to ask kids why they like violent video games, or why they shoot their brother with their finger used as a "gun". But Mr. Jones has done that. And he helps you understand what this crazy world that us "adults" have created looks like through the eyes of a very young person.
