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In Commercializing Childhood Paul B. Ringel skillfully differentiates and interprets the distinct ethos of nineteenth-century children's periodicals while teasing out their underlying ideologies and editorial strategies. Ringel examines how particular publications bridged familial and commercial spheres and gradually integrated young readers into an escalating consumer culture. Proceeding through three sections that cover establishing, commercializing, and sustaining children's magazines, Ringel vividly portrays the era's most influential juvenile periodicals through a savvy mix of content analysis and close reading. The eight chapters of Commercializing Childhood reveal how children's magazines balanced stable ideological approaches with the shifting demands of increasingly consumer-oriented readerships.
Ringel locates in the major periodicals two dominant schools of thought that shaped children's periodicals for nearly a century: the orthodox Protestant stance, which “presented childhood as an inherently sinful and thus physically and spiritually dangerous stage of life,” and the liberal Protestant orientation, which “emphasized individuals’ capacity for self-improvement” (pp. 17, 20). Isolating recurring tropes, conventions, and genres that enabled these publications to negotiate between the editors’ values and the expectations and desires of their genteel audiences, his analysis exposes ongoing tensions between magazines and markets. Thus, the *Youth’s Companion* publisher Nathaniel Willis enlisted sentimental ideals to reinforce conservative religious values, while his successor, Daniel Sharp Ford, embraced “genteel sensationalism,” a paradoxical blend of orthodox Protestant morality and dime-novel plot elements that transformed aggressively masculine adventure stories into cautionary tales (p. 74). In contrast, Lydia Maria Child's *Juvenile Miscellany*, the progressive competitor of the *Youth's Companion*, inaugurated an enduring editorial formula “that balanced confidence about children and their future against the audience's need to avoid destabilizing extensions of that optimistic faith” (p. 48).

Ringel's comparative analysis unfolds in the context of a chronological study spanning nearly a century. One chapter provides an in-depth analysis of how selected periodicals responded differently to the Civil War and the ensuing erosion of the boundaries between public life and private life; others chart the rise of nostalgic, literary Gilded Age periodicals such as *Our Young Folks* and *Riverside Magazine* and trace their eventual absorption into *St. Nicholas*: “a glossy, corporate children's magazine that produced industrial-era fantasy tales and welcomed young readers into the nation's growing consumer milieu” (p. 133). Broader developments that play into Ringel's account include the segmentation of the publishing market by age, gender, and class; changing attitudes toward cities as places of danger and opportunity; and a shift in focus from male to female protagonists, as activities outside the home opened up to young women and the target audience expanded to encompass girls as well as the long-sought-after boy readers.

At times, Ringel's unwavering pursuit of texts that exemplify a particular editorial agenda at a specific historical moment threatens to become formulaic and flatten his analysis by sifting out unusual artistic elements and ideological outliers. Nevertheless, the lucidity of his argument, supported by abundant archival evidence drawn from editorial correspondence, fictional texts, marketing pieces, circulation figures, and diaries, results in an illuminating, highly readable study that richly rewards attention.