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**Book review**

Book review: *Play in a Covid Frame: Everyday pandemic creativity in a time of isolation*, edited by Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop

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**Book review: *Play in a Covid Frame: Everyday pandemic creativity in a time of isolation*, edited by Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop**

Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023, 522 pp.; ISBNs: 978-18006-4892-0 (hbk), 978-18006-4891-3 (pbk), 978-18006-4894-4 (ebk)

*Play in a Covid Frame* is an account of how play panned out internationally during the pandemic, and the creative ways in which play was used by children and young people at the time. The book focuses on how Covid-19 is referred to and incorporated in play by children and young people. However, while the book mainly explores children and young people's play, adult play is also referenced.

This is a text of play, creativity and variability, highlighting how children, youth, families and communities navigated play during the pandemic, alongside very reduced and restricted social networks and social spaces. However, in spite of the rich variety of play experiences documented, there are also clear commonalities which include, and are not limited to, the development of international games with different names but the same rules and principles, such as games of chase with the person chasing representing the coronavirus and transmitting it to those being chased. There are also clear cross-cultural themes of isolation and loss.

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The themes of diversity and variability also extend to the authors, who are researchers and practitioners from Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Ireland, Japan, Scotland, Serbia, Sudan, South Korea, the United States and Wales. Similarly, the stories relate to families from different and varied social classes and backgrounds, which continues the theme of inclusivity.

Covid affected the entire world, with people reporting different and varied experiences. These experiences ranged from multiple and unexpected deaths, financial instability, unemployment, trauma and poor mental health. *Play in a Covid Frame* is one of the first books to solely explore play during Covid, which makes it a seminal text for educators, play researchers and practitioners. It explores the ways in which play themes transpired during the lockdown period of 2020–2. Like the stories that are shared, the outcomes are different for all. For some, restricted play led to isolation, while for others it created new and unique opportunities for creativity.

What makes the book unique is that with all the research carried out and disseminated about Covid and its impact, to date, there has been very little focus on:

- the very creative ways that children, young people and their families coped
- the various ways that Covid manifested in children's play, internationally
- how play was used as a coping mechanism.

This is, however, explored fully within the book. The title is reflective of the fact that play, like all knowledge, is always rooted in a frame of specific moments of time. The authors use Erving Goffman's (1974) work as a metaphor, with the book as a series of snapshots of social life marked by the pandemic frame. The focus is specifically on play within a Covid framework, which is important, because, as the authors note, the pandemic universally affected social interactions. For children in particular, the loss of social interactions, and thus reduced play experiences, were not given as much weighting, or documented in as much depth in the media, as other aspects of the Covid experience, with a lot of focus on the impact of Covid on children's social, emotional and mental health, their behaviour or their learning. However, statistics from the World Health Organization highlight the fact that an estimated 1.5 million children lost a parent, custodial grandparent or other caregiver due to Covid between March 2020 and April 2021 (Hillis et al., 2021), indicating significant loss and trauma. Given the significance of children's play, and its instrumental role in development (which includes processing and making sense of life experiences), any reflections about how Covid affected play, and how children responded and adapted, will be important for the parents and educators supporting the mental health needs of those children as they grow up into adolescence and adulthood.

One of the book's strengths, and something which also makes it an important text, is that it highlights global experiences of play, with authors, practitioners and researchers from a range of continents, including Europe, Australia, Asia and America, with a focus on varied play practices from solo play to technical Zoom dates, across continents. The rich tapestry of stories includes those from street artists The Velvet Bandit (Northern California) and SudaLove (working in Khartoum, Sudan), who use street art as a means of addressing political issues in a playful and accessible manner. The book also encapsulates stories from the Republic of Ireland, Finland and South Korea, and therefore there is the real sense that the authors not only have an international lens, but also one that is not solely Western in nature, valuing global perspectives and values.

Another strength is the focus on celebrating and amplifying marginalised and under-represented voices. The authors highlight the fact that while play had the potential to mitigate the impact of pandemic-related stress for children, there have always been, and continued to be, differing opportunities to access play for children and young people from minority backgrounds, children with special educational needs and disabilities, and a range of other categories. These differences would be classed as falling into John Burnham's (2012) social graces. Chapter 10, 'Digital heroes of the imagination: An exploration for disabled-led play' makes an important contribution to a limited knowledge base about the experiences of disabled people during the pandemic, by sharing the work of agencies working to reduce barriers to meaningful inclusive play opportunities for disabled young people. The book also acknowledges the race-based stressors that were present during the pandemic, and looks at play and intersectionality, with a focus on the conceptualisation of adultification of specific groups of children, and how this can be perpetuated in play (this is addressed succinctly in Chapter 3). This social justice element is an important and well-developed thread that runs throughout the text.

The presentation and use of imagery is equally rich, creative and playful. The variety of writing styles is one of the unique and wonderful parts of this book, for example, nothing could have better captured

the real-life experience of online interactions than the transcript in Chapter 17, 'Techno-mischief: Negotiating exaggeration online in quarantine'. The chapter highlights the fun, humorous connections made online, but it also demonstrates how play can lead to shared technological learning, such as screen sharing, assigning break-out rooms, using chat functions and muting one another, alongside opportunities for children to share culture and the arts with one another by reciting song lyrics from the musical *Hamilton*.

Following the metaphor of the 'frame', the book is divided into three sections: Landscapes, Portraits and Shifting Frames. Landscape chapters focus on larger projects, with a particular emphasis on, for example, parents' perspectives on play from England, taken from a large pilot study on children's friendships, a resident-driven play-based agenda in New York, and playworkers and children's experiences in Japan. The Portraits section contains smaller-scale case studies, sometimes as small as a single toy or as large as play in a specific town. The third section, Shifting Frames, looks at playfulness in different forms, including carnival, creative mask usage and street art. The use of a folkloristic approach also symbolises the authors' intent and commitment to share and advocate a range of play forms and expressions, from across society and a range of cultures (and especially those forms that are typically marginalised or viewed as being insignificant).

The book includes beautiful photographs, drawings and images that allow readers to immerse themselves in the pandemic play experience. This is important, as when you read the book, it is possible to see how the world appears to have forgotten the pandemic and has gone back to 'normal'. While the world needs to move on in some senses, there is also the need to learn and document; thus, the book is also a historical reference point that people can look back at to understand what truly went on during that time. Favourite images include different generations of families reading together (Figure 2.6), world-building (Figure 8.1), play packages (Figure 13.1), children's play with paper cups (Figure 13.3), children doing cosmic yoga (Figure 14.2) and house floats (Figures 15.2, 15.3 and 15.4).

For those readers who have previously thought of play as being trivial and fun, this book highlights the important folklore aspect of play, and how it has been used over time by children to repeat things they have seen and heard, representing meanings of times, thus developing coping mechanisms through play. The book is also for people who would consider themselves to be experts, as there is so much to learn and absorb about different cultural approaches to pandemic play, including the range of play and games in which children engaged, such as 'corona rules mushroom tag' developed by children in Australia, but also different practices employed by practitioners, for example, the use of journal recording by playworkers at Yume Park in Japan, which can be used beyond the pandemic. Visually, the book also highlights the range of different play spaces and provisions across the world through photographs and images, sharing good international practice.

The book speaks to people from different theoretical perspectives. Alongside folklore, diverse perspectives are explored, ranging from psychology, play therapy and anthropology, to history and views from artists, educators and project managers.

One key message from the book is that it is imperative that practitioners understand that not all children benefit equally from play (both before, during and after Covid), and to start to think about redressing the balance.

The text also shifts negative perspectives on the social use of media and technology in children's pandemic play. This is an important take-home message beyond the pandemic, and can be used to support children who continue to have limited opportunities for interaction. This would include children who present with emotional-based school non-attendance (EBSNA), or with chronic illnesses that require them to be hospitalised or need to shield.

A limitation which is brought to the attention of the reader in the introduction is that the main contributions within the book are from English-speaking countries, and that there are other play stories to be shared from around the world from a range of marginalised and under-represented people. The editors recognise that the lack of other stories within this text is due to networking availability, rather than to the paucity of play stories internationally, which is an honest reflection that does not detract from the findings, as the editors signpost the reader to a range of international studies, and call to action the need for further diverse stories and studies.

This text moves beyond play experiences during the pandemic. It clearly outlines the ongoing value and importance of play throughout life, and the need to help families, schools and other programmes safeguard time for play to maintain the mental health of children and young people (and adults). The increases in domestic violence and adult suicide rates referenced in relation to Japan (and internationally

within the media) during the pandemic, as a result of reduced play opportunities and increased pressure, are a serious feature of the book that need to be considered among all the play and fun that abound here. This book will be an important reference point for many, for years to come.

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