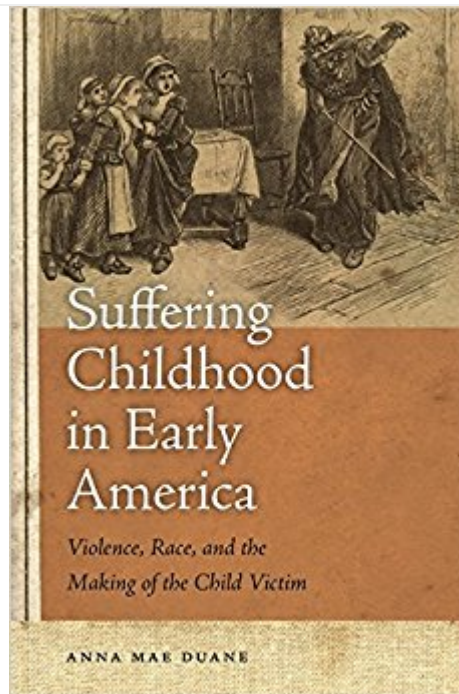


# {essays in history}

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## Suffering Childhood in Early America: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*Suffering Childhood in Early America: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim.* By Anna Mae Duane (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2010). Pp. 224. Cloth, \$44.95.

The study of childhood and its place in historical inquiry have acquired new interest over the course of the past few years. Though scholars traditionally have viewed childhood as a subcategory of women's studies and the social history of the family, recent works—such as those by Holly Brewer, Bianca Premo, and Steven Mintz—have argued that childhood is central to understanding past societies and ought to be studied in its own right.<sup>[1]</sup> Anna Mae Duane's first book, *Suffering Childhood in Early America: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim*, is a welcome addition to this small but growing body of scholarship. Duane's monograph is a much-needed examination of the rhetorical use of childhood as a metaphor in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America. Childhood, Duane argues, provoked changing and nuanced social, emotional, and political responses during this era and is key to understanding how Africans, Indians, and Europeans influenced each other throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Duane begins by posing a puzzling question: why does Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the 1852 novel famous for condemning the evils of slavery, feature the death of Eva—a young white child—as the emotional apex of the story? Duane argues that Eva's ability to “channel the pain of slavery” is due to a long process in colonial and republican America during which children emerged as “symbolic shorthand for the toll of racial and cultural conflict” (3). The study of children in early American culture and literature, then, reveals the tensions and “messy processes” of the period (3). Duane posits that the mix of European, Native American, and African cultures in early America shaped each other, often through the way children were treated and childhood was conceptualized. Children represented the only demographic who were completely dependent and vulnerable to victimization: even slaves could revolt or runaway. According to Duane, then, colonists relied on the traditional understanding of children as complete dependants to create metaphors of infantilization that the colonization process required.

Duane's first chapter explores children as malleable beings who could serve as conduits of power and as the means of cultural exchange. She examines witchcraft trials and captivity narratives in order to elucidate the real and symbolic power children could sometimes have because of their perceived innocence and victimhood. In witch trials—most

famously in Salem—children served as integral witnesses against the accused, largely because it was believed that they were too young to dissemble and because children were thought to sometimes have a particular connection with the divine. Duane’s suggestion that the latter belief was based on the influence of Native American conceptions of childhood, and that the Salem trials “resembled an Indian powwow as much as they did a European witch trial,” is less convincing than her argument that children being exchanged (often forcibly) between colonists and Indians led to anxieties about colonial European identity (50). After all, if a child who was raised by Indians until reaching adulthood then refused to return to colonial English society, what did that choice say about what it meant to be English?

Duane then explores infanticide in captivity narratives, arguing that violence against children committed by the Indians assisted eighteenth-century American writers to “forge new conceptual bridges to help them engage evolving colonial conflicts” (59). These new conceptions allowed Americans to redefine “savagery” and what the correct response to it ought to be. The trope of the “Indian stoic” who could dispassionately dispatch the “all-feeling child” left the white adults in the narratives (and presumably the readers) to decide how much reason or grief ought to dictate their actions. Duane relates this quandary to the political theorists in the new republic who would have to navigate between “unbridled liberty and abject slavery” (72-3).

The third chapter focuses on pregnancy in two eighteenth-century American seduction novels, Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797) and Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791). This chapter is arguably more about motherhood and the female body than about childhood, and thus, though she connects this chapter to the others by asking questions about consent, victimization, and the wider rhetoric surrounding the creation of the new American nation, this section of the book at times seems somewhat out of place. It may also prove more interesting to literary scholars than to historians as its focus is primarily on the two novels rather than lived experiences.

Duane ends her book with a chapter on childhood and slavery.

[2] Though it is commonplace for scholars to note that infantilization was used in the antebellum South to make black people seem incapable of reason and therefore of autonomy, Duane complicates this traditional

reading of childhood and slavery by demonstrating that equating slaves to children could be a double-edged sword. Because of John Locke's commonly accepted understanding of childhood—that children were without reason but would grow to possess reason—calling a black person a “child” could actually suggest that he or she would come to possess reason, thereby challenging the justification for perpetual enslavement. Duane therefore explores how pro- and anti-slavery writers, including former slaves, used the metaphor of childhood in different ways to conceptualize and elucidate their point of view for their readers.

Surprisingly, Duane does not spend time grappling with the definition of “child” during this period, a question of much debate for scholars. The book should have included a reflection on this point, especially given her argument that the meaning of childhood was in a state of flux throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Further, it would have been helpful for her to have spent more time discussing views of childhood in Europe, particularly in England, prior to Europeans' encounters with the New World. Such a discussion would be essential in order for her reader to understand how, as she suggests, interactions with Native Americans and Africans altered this previous understanding.

Even still, *Suffering Childhood* is a fascinating exploration of how concepts surrounding childhood have been anything but static, uncomplicated, or inconsequential. Duane's astute and compelling study demonstrates that the history of childhood is a subject that requires further exploration and is important beyond social histories of the family. Not only is *Suffering Childhood* important for historians of childhood, but it also offers fresh insight into our understanding of colonization, early America, slavery, and European encounters with Native Americans.

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[1] Holly Brewer, *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority* (Chapel Hill: The University of North

Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2007); Bianca Premo, *Children of the Father King: Youth, Authority, and Legal Minority in Colonial Lima* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006). There is also the new *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, produced by the Johns Hopkins University Press, which is dedicated to understanding children and youth in historical contexts.

[2] See also *Slavery & Abolition* 27.2 (2006), the entire issue of which is devoted to children and slavery and Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, eds., *Children in Slavery through the Ages* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006).



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