

# Superkid

Hank Malone

a review of

*The Assault on Childhood*, Ron Goulart, Sherbourne Press, Los Angeles, 1969, \$6.50

*The Assault on Childhood* is a book about the newest species of American human/animal: Superkid, and his manufacturers.

Superkid is a real product of mass culture, a person who is not a kid anymore, but who is not really an adolescent nor an adult either. Superkid is the new American person.

Superkid is a Consumer. He is not particularly human, nor creative, and he produces little but garbage. Superkid grows up in the American suburbs. Superkid is 10 to 20 pounds overweight. Superkid is anonymous. Superkid spends 20 billion dollars annually on lingerie, surfboards, motorcycles, deodorants, hamburgers, skis, mouthwash, eye make up, record albums, used cars, and movies.

Superkid is 100 billion dollars in debt through installment buying.

One of the aims of Mr. Goulart's book is to slow down the production of superkids.

Superkids are programmed and processed to become Consumers, compulsively hungry repositories of the American economy. Superkid does not choose or elect to become a Consumer. Superkid is made into a Consumer, from the moment of birth.

The world of the Barbie doll is a good example. Barbie is produced by Mattel, Inc. To buy all the clothes and props Mattel offers to go along with Barbie would cost several hundred dollars. Barbie actually lives better than a good 60% of the real children in this country. Barbie was conceived as part of a vast collective effort involving advertising people, public relations men, Mattel executives, psychiatrists, and researchers.

Mattel, Inc. in order to sell Barbie, dominates all three TV networks all year long with the biggest Saturday morning schedule of any advertiser in any industry. Their commercials are mixed hard sell, broad flattery, and polite plastic sexuality.

1,300,000 children have become members since 1967 of the "official Barbie fan club", more than 10% of the little-girl population of the U.S. The joy of acquisition and consumership is the explicit cornerstones of the Barbie fan magazine's philosophy. The "Barbie philosophy" hopes to give birth, it seems, to a nation full of narcissistic matrons who live only to dress, and (presumably) never undress.

War toys. Dangerous toys. Disneyland Inc., fad manufacturers, Santa's factories, kid advertising, kid TV, comic books, and kid food. All these subjects are pursued with an obvious iconoclastic zeal reminiscent of Ralph Nader.

Backed up with plenty of evidence and statistics (perhaps too many at times for the casual reader) Mr. Goulart has torn the hide off the people-manufacturing industry in the U.S., and has laid bare the vicious process that programs monopoly capitalism into the very psyches of infants and children.

For example, the chapter called "Delicious and Nutritious." Randall Jarrell, the American poet, once said, "if a man has all his life been fed a combination of marzipan and ethyl alcohol—if eating, to him, is a matter of being knocked unconscious by an ice cream soda—can he, by taking thought, come to prefer a diet of bread and wine, apples and well-water?"

As Mr. Goulart says, “strange things blossom in the artificial air of the supermarket, not foods, but food products. Items. Over seven thousand new food items have been born in the Sixties.”

Statistics indicate that in America the older a child gets, the poorer his diet becomes. He is increasingly overfed and undernourished. Children are being fed, by huge multi-billion dollar industries, with false information and “empty calories.”

Empty calories are goods made up chiefly of fat, sugar, and starches, having small amounts of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients in proportion to the calories. A diet heavy in sugars and starches is not only bad for the child when he is growing up, it can also determine what his adult life will be like. For instance, *Consumer Bulletin* cites that “heart disease is highest in countries where fatty and starchy and sugary foods are cheap and plentiful.”

Mr. Goulart’s indictment of the food industry is far-reaching, not only condemning it for its “spiritualizing” of cheap carbohydrates (“someone wonderful just baked Toll House cookies”), but also for its dangerous misrepresentation of the function of proteins, as well as its patently harmful meat-packing practices, its use of highly questionable “food additives” (like calcium cyclamate, the artificial sweetener in low-cal pop) and its shucking about vitamins as substitutes for food.

The Superkid industry must be overthrown. There are obviously alternatives to becoming the eternal consumer, yet they are difficult alternatives. The best alternative is for a child to become himself, and the attainment of individuality is a long and painful process, a process requiring help from concerned parents and a concerned civilization.

In America it is easier to become an empty life-long Superkid, easier for both parents and society. Superkid is simpler, involves less “strain,” and has “more fun.”

To become a human individual is normally painful, and clearly it becomes something short of a miracle in a monopoly capital society which is constantly eroding human awareness, spontaneity, and intimacy.

The tragedy in all this is that most of us, despite occasional exposes, are probably doomed to becoming Superkids, victims of the assault on our childhoods, simply because that’s what the American economy has programmed us for, and has not equipped us to adequately reject.

In contrast to a haunting and well-documented text, Mr. Goulart’s conclusions are noticeably trivial. He vaguely suggests, in the light of this monstrous oppression of children, that parents and consumers do something about all this, that we somehow register adequate protest.

Not a revolutionary himself, Mr. Goulart takes refuge, finally, in his own capacity (as an “individual resurgent”) to fight off the mass media’s effect on his own child, and finds himself, despite all, on the island that John Donne said no man was on.

Few can blame him for the limitations of his conclusions, for more and more the question of revolution seems vague, and each of us seem to be more and more stranded in the midst of literal pollution, nuclear-fallout, and unbelievable corruption of every sort, with no let-up in sight.

Good insight, and then tepid revisionist conclusions about the vast American Plague seem like keys to the tragedy of our condition: undaunted people like Mr. Goulart (good Americans all) spend their lives generously and good-heartedly detailing the symptoms of the cancers that are destroying them, and their children.

Yet, as “good concerned Americans” they obviously choose to remain (not even as revolutionaries) in the land that is slowly taking them kicking and shrieking into disaster. Largely a very readable and important account, *The Assault on Childhood* ends not with a bang but a whimper. Yet our own options (to remain, to get out, to meaningfully revolt) seem clarified.

# fifth Estate

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