

INVENTING THE DISCIPLINE WHILE YOU BREAK IT ALL DOWN: AN ESSAY IN MEMORY OF BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH

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After I stumbled across his 1986 book, *Toys as Culture*, in a bookstore in Boston, I moved to Philadelphia to study with Brian Sutton-Smith. Jointly appointed in the Department of Folklore and at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, he ran the Interdisciplinary Study of Human Development program with a giddy seriousness that kept students at the edge of their seats. His reading lists there were the most varied I ever encountered, and this essay offers a miniature reading list in order to share the breadth of his genius.

Psychology, particularly Freudian psychology and cognitive psychology, was the base discipline in my independent studies with him. As admirers of D.W. Winnicott, Erik Erikson, and Jean Piaget, he had all of his students challenge psychology's assumptions by reading ethnographies of Mead, Benedict, LeVine, and Whiting. For our children's culture bible, we had Schwartzman's *Transformations: The Anthropology of Children's Play*, and with it, the folkloristic historical collections of Iona and Peter Opie, along with William Wells Newell's paradoxes. Folklore and anthropology were his answers to the erroneous, wide brush strokes of psychology, the neatened, expurgated versions of actual childhoods, the boredom of the textbook approach to child development. We would share fart jokes. As important as reading widely was to him, so were his reminiscences of his own childhood. His favorite New Zealand recipe for guaranteed farting: fish and chips and raisins.

Trickery itself, to be found in the study of the festival, from Bakhtin to Falassi to Stallybrass and Whyte, emphasized to Brian that the core of play is dialogic, paradoxical, a "world turned upside down" (Stallybrass and White 1986). Bateson was our guide to meta-communication, Foucault our mirror to meta-historical analysis. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) introduced the very idea of the invention of tradition, Huizinga (1949) the magic frame of play, and Goffman (1959), the idea that as one plays within a frame, one plays the frame as well. The message: challenge assumptions, study real children and their folklore for counter narratives, ask who is being served by the adult perceptions of reality. Play with the form of research. Study animals; examine evolution. Keep an eye on the playground and on video games. They keep us honest.

One of Sutton-Smith's own essays that deserves more attention than it has been given is the seminal "Games of Order and Disorder" (1972). He had described games as "models of power," yet games were no simple copies of adult culture. Through his eyes we see play emerge as a methodology of inversion. And so he began to use inversion and dialogism as a way to break down the very field he was crafting. The game of academia was not just increased knowledge, but disordering the lot as you build it.

Challenging Huizinga, Sutton-Smith noted play is not always voluntary. Sometimes you play the game everyone else is playing, because you must, in

order to play at all. Answering Caillois, he demonstrated that game text in one culture could be in a totally different genre in another.

Dueling Piaget, he cautioned against pitting assimilation over accommodation. Piaget's model did not account for destruction; it was too focused on a limited concept of progress. Hollering at educational catch phrases, he observed that the opposite of play is not work. He hated the line, "Play is the child's work." It is far more complicated than work, or not work. It is what children do. A child who does not play is a child who is ill. Play is more like dreaming, than work. Play is more like art or religion, a symbolic field of communication that makes life worthwhile and mysterious. He noted that play's opposite is not work; it is depression. Examining the idea of play as progress, he stated that children are not "the future." They are in their own time, and their time here and now deserves to be playful. We can say he built a discipline of play while challenging his own and everyone else's assumptions. Play was "ambiguous" as was the very enterprise of knowledge building. To be human is to live in ambiguity, and adapt to new contexts.

Brian loved bad jokes, old songs, fast footwork, and children's stories. There were worlds within worlds in children's folk arts, and he wrote about things that others found trivial with the zeal of the art collector. His mission was to protect children's right to be surreal, incorrect, and off-center, and to honor error as a path to thought, art, and vitality. For his best writing, see his 1961 novel, *Smitty Does a Bunk*, and learn more about his childhood adventures with his very real, very loved brother. The novel centers around the adventures of brothers Brin and Smitty; Brian was clearly the younger Brin, his brother, the elder Smitty. Brin continuously sang and most of all wanted to be included, an observer of childhood within a children's story.

Brian often recited excerpts of his *Folkstories of Children* (1981), rapturously quoting the children's words when he wanted to demonstrate the skill children offer within their folklore. It seems fitting to take us here, words he collected from a four-year-old:

Once upon a time the once upon a time ate the once upon a time
 Which ate the once upon a time
 And then the once upon a time which ate the once upon a time
 Ate the princess once upon a time with the king
 And then the once upon a times died
 Then the end ate the end
 the end
 the end
 then the end died
 then the end died
 then the end died
 then the end died
 then the end died
 and then the end the end the end died
 the end with a the end
 the end
 the end (Sutton-Smith 1981:114)

Yet the end of a life is not the end of a life's work. Brian particularly loved Rabelais, that 500 year-old writer of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, or as I like to think of Rabelais, as the precursor of Jonathan Swift and the inventor of Cookie Monster. Although these words were written by French scholar Denis Saurat as an introduction to Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; every word rings true for Brian (note the present tense):

As for his mind, there is none better: he can argue with the subtlest ... On education, we still go to him; and his criticism of the education of his day still largely holds good against ours today. Against useless erudition he is splendid ... His enthusiasm for science is still an inspiration ... Look at the absurdity of things and of men: and do not take it seriously: laugh. (Saurat 1945:iv)

What Rabelais is for the adult carnival, Brian is for the festival of children's folklore in all its complexity, in all its grotesquery, in all its variation. A privilege to have studied with him, to have dueled with his brain, I have come to think of Brian as the most intelligent, most well-read 11 year-old that ever lived. Like Rabelais, "As for his mind, there is none better."

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