



## Fantasies of Neglect

Imagining the Urban Child in American Film and Fiction

by Pamela Robertson Wojcik

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### DESCRIPTION

In our current era of helicopter parenting and stranger danger, an unaccompanied child wandering through the city might commonly be viewed as a victim of abuse and neglect. However, from the early twentieth century to the present day, countless books and films have portrayed the solitary exploration of urban spaces as a source of empowerment and delight for children.

*Fantasies of Neglect* explains how this trope of the self-sufficient, mobile urban child originated and considers why it persists, even as it goes against the grain of social reality. Drawing from a wide range of films, children's books, adult novels, and sociological texts, Pamela Robertson Wojcik investigates how cities have simultaneously been demonized as dangerous spaces unfit for children and romanticized as wondrous playgrounds that foster a kid's independence and imagination. Charting the development of free-range urban child characters from Little Orphan Annie to Harriet the Spy to Hugo Cabret, and from Shirley Temple to the Dead End Kids, she considers the ongoing dialogue between these fictional representations and shifting discourses on the freedom and neglect of children.

While tracking the general concerns Americans have expressed regarding the abstract figure of the child, the book also examines the varied attitudes toward specific types of urban children—girls and boys, blacks and whites, rich kids and poor ones, loners and neighborhood gangs. Through this diverse selection of sources, *Fantasies of Neglect* presents a nuanced chronicle of how notions of American urbanism and American childhood have grown up together.

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PAMELA ROBERTSON WOJCIK is a professor of film, television, and theater at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. She is the author of several books, including *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*; *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975*; and is the editor of *New Constellations: Movie Stars of the 1960s* (Rutgers University Press).

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