Janet Banet-Weiser’s book *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* analyzes the cable network Nickelodeon as a case study to rethink the relationships among children, media, consumerism, and citizenship. Nickelodeon is the first and most successful commercial children’s network to date, with original programming successes like *Blue’s Clues* for the toddler audience and *SpongeBob SquarePants* for, well, supposedly everyone who is “young at heart.” Scholars may be wondering whether a second book on Nickelodeon following fairly soon in the wake of *Nickelodeon Nation* (2004) is needed. (This title was edited by Heather Hendershot and reviewed in the *CJC* by Natalie H. Coulter in 2006.) The author was a contributor to *Nickelodeon Nation* and borrows heavily from the resources and ideas in that edited collection. Yet overall *Kids Rule!* is a different book and has a different purpose than any edited collection could: it develops a continuous thesis through its six chapters about the meteoric rise of the Nickelodeon network through its construction of an imagined commercial community that situates child viewers as consumer-citizens. The book draws strongly on industry interviews and textual analysis for its conclusions.

Banet-Weiser’s (2004) earlier publications in children’s popular culture, contemporary feminism, and the cable industry provide a solid base for her interrogation of Nickelodeon’s successful rise and its marketing/programming strategies for constructing the child audience. This historical chapter is particularly strong, bringing to bear the rhetoric of the cable “revolution” and the ideals of the early educational television movement on the development of Nickelodeon as network and brand. The industry interviews used in this section bring to life how some in the television industry espoused idealistic visions that children’s television, and then cable, would equalize gaps among rich and poor children through education (think: *Sesame Street*) and among minority groups through channel/program choice. At times the chapter reads like a tribute to Geraldine Laybourne, president

---

**Want to review a book or media presentation for the CJC?**

The *CJC* needs reviewers, both faculty and graduate students. Dale Bradley can provide you with a list of publications received and available for review. Or, if you are keen to review a particular title, he can request a copy from the publisher for you to review. Dale also wants to hear from authors. If you have a publication that you think the *CJC* should review, please contact him. Email: review_editor@cjc-online.ca.
of Nickelodeon during its rise, perhaps as it should but without an acknowledg-
ment as such. Overall, however, the history documents the tensions and contra-
dictions of “agency” and the structural limitations of working within a
commercial media system.

The argument about children’s consumer-citizenship that runs through the
book is the theoretical kernel that attempts to solve not just one but two problem-
atic binaries. The first binary is children’s empowerment through the “right kind”
of television versus children’s “brainwashing” by commercial advertisers. As
Banet-Weiser rightly points out, both positions rely on a simplistic theory of
direct media effects and the passive child. How can we offer children a more
complicated, active relationship with the networks and programming they con-
sume? The folks at Nickelodeon seem to have figured this out, and their strate-
gies are articulated with great insight in the book’s third chapter, on
Nickelodeon’s beginnings and rise to success. By blurring the lines between the
second problematic binary—consumption as private versus citizenship as pub-
ic—Nickelodeon creates a commercial “imagined community” that addresses
children as citizens of that community with certain rights bestowed by the net-
work. Children vote on U.S. presidential candidates, are involved in real news
shows, are portrayed as smarter than adult authority figures in programming, and
demonstrate other forms of agency within that network space. Banet-Weiser’s
statement that “political identities, rights and ideologies are often formulated
within the consumer marketplace rather than in opposition to it” is particularly
persuasive and insightful (p. 26). She notes with concern, moreover, that not all
children can belong to “Nickelodeon Nation” due to its monthly subscription
fees. Unfortunately, the author never fully explores the implications of this
bounded consumer-citizenship for children and for the future, and she purpose-
fully brackets concerns about whether or not the consequences of this exclusion
are benign.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6 Banet-Weiser looks at gender, race and ethnicity, and
camp respectively in Nickelodeon’s original programming, which we are told is
creator-driven rather than toy-driven—one of Nickelodeon’s strategic differences
from other children’s channels. These chapters are textual analyses of the charac-
ters, roles, and typical storylines involved in the shows. The chapter on gender
situates Nickelodeon’s version of “girl power” in shows such as Clarissa Tells All
within the context of postfeminism and contemporary feminist arguments over
the role of commodities in the construction of identity—a useful expository pub-
lished before in Critical Studies in Media Communication (June 2004 issue). The
chapter on race and ethnicity usefully points out the ways race is constructed as
part of an “urban” aesthetic and racism as conveniently over (in programming
anyway). In this way race-as-style becomes a commodity to be exploited for
audience share. And lastly, the chapter on camp draws heavily on essays in
Nickelodeon Nation to explore the dual address to adults and children of shows
like Ren and Stimpy and SpongeBob SquarePants. These chapters clearly articu-
late the contradictions and tensions of a network aware of its own mission to
empower all children and yet conscious of not alienating market share through
radical political statements. By granting all children (who can afford the cable
fee) a place within Nickelodeon Nation, Nickelodeon’s politics offers diverse and often non-stereotypical representation but no active challenge to the structural inequalities governing children’s lives.

The question left for me after reading this book is, What do the children say? Not because I want one book to be all things—industry, text, and audience analysis—but because Duke University Press advertises the fact that 50 children were interviewed by the author for this book. Banet-Weiser also advises the reader of this in her first chapter. So the book seems to require a place for the children to speak to us through an ethnographer about their experience with “Nickelodeon nation.” Do some children actually feel part of a “media family” or community? Do some children reject Nickelodeon’s messages about gender or race? The comments of a few children are cited in support of the author’s argument rather than to lead or illuminate the author’s argument. More use was made of already existing interview transcripts with industry professionals than of new interview transcripts with children. Perhaps a more apt title for the book would have been “Nick Rules!”

In sum, this is a well-researched and important book for a wide range of research topics, including children’s popular culture, media industries, identity politics, and postmodern citizenship. Individual chapters can also stand alone for use in various university courses. The construct of the consumer-citizen as it relates to both children and adults and its implications are a fruitful area for future debate and discussion.

References

Larissa Faulkner, McMaster University