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This book is the product of having grown up in a particular time and a particular place. Although I have memories of my early childhood in Houston, my strongest recollections really begin in 1969, when I was six, and my family moved to the suburbs of Denver. I would roam (more or less freely) through my neighborhood until 1981 when I left home to go to college. It was a good era and a good place in which to be a kid. Parents told their children to “never talk to strangers,” but there was very little fear of child snatching and molestation by unknown others. Adults were comfortable allowing children almost unfettered access to the streets, the playgrounds and the suburban wild places that still abounded. Sometimes children had to stay within calling distance of a mother’s voice; sometimes mothers and fathers allowed them to go where and when they wanted, as long as they were home for dinner, or at bedtime. Playing unsupervised in the dark was also within the realm of possibility, as long as my friends and I promised to stay out of the street. In a lot of ways, my brother and I were “free range” kids, allowed to come and go as we pleased, as long as we knew the rules (like never talking to strangers) and exercised a modicum of good sense (which might include not telling our parents about the stupid stunts we tried or the things that scared us).

My childhood was particularly blessed by location. I grew up directly across the street from the High Line Canal, an irrigation ditch that runs from the foothills through Denver’s suburbs to the farms of the eastern plains. In 1969, my parents bought a house on the south side of South Marion Way, a street that curved along the canal. While there were houses on the south side of the street, there were none immediately across, along the canal. There was only a strip of weedy land between the street and the ditch. Later, some of the neighbors would buy up that land to guarantee that nothing would be built there.

The canal was part of a complex of “wild places” near our house. At the end of the block was an open field, as yet undeveloped. Across the canal were two very small farms, and just to the east was DeKoevend Park, which until 1973 remained undeveloped. There was even an old silo at its edge, a remnant of the not-so-distant agricultural past. The silo came down in the 1980s. The rumor was that “big kids” used the structure for various clandestine activities, such as smoking pot and making out. It always just looked dirty and littered to me. One by one, the wild places disappeared,
with the little farms and open field gradually succumbing to development. Soccer fields, picnic shelters, and baseball diamonds eventually consumed the park. But the canal and its adjacent walking path remained.

The canal was always a magical place for me. My parents allowed almost completely free access. I had to stay away from the water when the canal was running full, but I could still play along the banks at those times. My father demonstrated the danger of the fast running water by sending our large golden retriever, Beau, into the water to fetch a retrieving dummy. Powerful, eighty-pound Beau struggled against the current, reinforcing the message that the water was too swift for us. When the canal was empty, which was most of the time, I could play anywhere I wanted, including climbing down into its depths to root around in the mud. There really weren’t a lot of rules, other than to exercise good sense. Mostly I played down there with a friend or my brother.

The canal was a great place to play “pioneers going west.” My inspiration must have been Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *By the Banks of Plum Creek*. I don’t remember the details, but lots of imagination was involved. We had to fight our way through the brush, prairie fires and blizzards. Sometimes I just walked and talked with friends, enjoying being out of the house. At other times, it was a place for adventure. Once, on the last day of school, my friend Rachel and I went walking in the undeveloped part of DeKoevend Park, below the canal. It was a dangerous thing to do, since on the last day of school, teenagers preyed on littler kids, doing things like grabbing them and “scrubbing” their faces with lipstick, or ruining their hair with Nair. A big kid followed us, hoping for a successful scrubbing. Little did he know that he’d chosen the wrong duo. We hit him, scratched him, knocked him down and sat on him. We never did succumb to a scrubbing.

Most of my visits to the canal were less dramatic. In late summer, various plants growing along the canal’s banks yielded edible treats. The wild plums could be eaten out of hand, and were actually pretty good. My brother, mother and I picked them and took them home for mother to make into jam. The jam was good for a while, but got mighty old by winter’s end. There were also chokecherry bushes in places, and again, my brother, mother and I picked them. These my mother made into jam—which refused to jell—yielding gallons of chokecherry syrup. It had a nice, deep, reddy-purple color, but the taste became tediously cloying with time.

I learned to skate on the canal. The boy next door got too big for his hockey skates, and they ended up at our house. One winter there was sufficient ice for an attempt at skating. The patch of ice wasn’t big enough to be really
satisfactory, but it was big enough for me to learn that this was something I’d like to pursue in more congenial environs. Another time, playing on less than solid ice, I fell and sent my arm through the surface, cutting my right wrist. I still have the scars. But not to worry, the water was not terribly deep. The Denver Water Board never left more than a foot in the canal over the winter. In most places, it was simply sandy or muddy.

My brother occupied himself with the canal more than I did. He and his friend Stacy spent days on end digging around in the mud, hunting crawdads and other forms of life. The crawdads they brought home to boil and eat. I was never tempted to try them. The frog that they found was awesome in size. From the tip of his nose to the tips of his toes, he had to have been more than a foot long. No one had ever seen such a creature in Colorado. He was so powerful that he pushed his way out from under the rock and board my brother was using to try to keep him in a bucket. I’d never seen a bigger frog before, and I’ve never seen one since.

Other types of wildlife lived along the canal too. There were ducks, of course, and I eagerly awaited the ducklings in the spring. There were raccoons. A den of foxes lived down in DeKoevend Park (I think they still live there today). An occasional coyote made its way down the trail. In the 1990s, people started thinking that they were seeing mountain lions, although I’m not sure anyone ever had definitive evidence of a sighting in our neighborhood. But by then, I was no longer a regular visitor.

What I think I valued most about the canal was the walking and talking. It was a place where you could build up a good head of steam, walk for miles, and pour out your heart to whomever your walking companion might be. I walked there with friends, boyfriends, my brother, and both my parents, but mostly my father. When he was out of the house and walking, he relaxed a bit and was easier to talk to. We had some of our best father-daughter moments walking along the canal.

I also had one of my less happy moments along the canal, one that cured me forever of walking there, or any other secluded place, alone. Sometimes I went down to the canal when I was blue and sat and watched the water. It was a tranquil place, good for thinking and dreaming. I was having one of those blue moments in the summer I was fifteen, and was sitting on the stump of a cottonwood tree, watching the green-brown water flow past. I have forgotten what it was that bothered me that afternoon, although I have forgotten few of the other details. As I sat there, I noticed a young man, probably in his late teens or early twenties, wearing only a pair of shorts and riding by slowly on his bicycle. I was a little disturbed to see him riding by.
a second time, even more slowly yet. The third time he rode by, his shorts were gone. Scared and furious, I stomped up out of the canal’s banks onto the path, and stormed my way home. Nobody was there when I arrived, so I closed all the windows and doors and locked myself inside. I should have called the police, but I was too shocked and embarrassed. I didn’t tell my parents. I don’t think I told anyone until many years later. But for me, the canal as a place of refuge and solitary contemplation was gone. It disappeared with a naked man on a bike. When I went walking along the canal again, it would be with a big dog or a companion.

And that is why, in good measure, this topic of environments and children interests me. In my lifetime, a historical transformation I deeply regret has taken place. In the last thirty years, American children have lost the opportunity to explore their neighborhoods independently. The United States is no longer populated by children who are free to enjoy the out-of-doors in an unsupervised manner. Instead, they spend their leisure time at soccer matches, watching television, or looking at their computers, cell phones and video games. If they spend time in parks and playgrounds, it is generally within the confines of a parent’s gaze, on a plastic play structure, designed with their protection in mind. Even though I live in a fairly safe small city, I very rarely see an unsupervised child in an outdoor public place. It would not be fair to begin this book without telling you this—that I regret the passing of a certain kind of childhood. I grew up with an abundance of wild space, and I was able to use it largely without supervision. That experience gave me time to think, developed my creativity and nurtured my independence.

But I understand the flip side of the coin as well: parents want to protect their children from dangers that—real or not—seem so much more pressing than they did thirty and forty years ago. My own independent experience of the High Line Canal ended abruptly and unpleasantly. Thankfully, the damage was minimal. I understand the qualifications parents place on their children’s freedom, even if they disturb me. My own son’s autism precludes independent play in public places, so my regret does not have to be tested against the reality of what I will allow my child to experience. Independent, unsupervised play in the out-of-doors has never been on his personal radar screen, so I do not have to feel any angst about what I do and do not allow my son to do with his free time. I come to this topic as an interested observer, who feels great nostalgia for a kind of childhood that seems to have vanished.

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg
Ames, Iowa
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I doubt it would have occurred to me to be interested in this topic were it not for the way in which my parents raised me. My father was a fisherman and hunter, and my mother was a longtime Girl Scout and camp counselor. They regularly enforced the idea of getting children out of the house to entertain themselves. One of the reasons my parents bought the house I grew up in was because of its proximity to urban wild places. In addition to letting my brother and me roam relatively freely and taking us to the mountains, they got me involved in the Girl Scouts, the organization I credit for most of my camping experiences. They also created a lifelong friendship with our next-door neighbors, Marilyn and Marvin Shrout. I wish Marvin Shrout was still with us, so I could thank him (a Boy Scout leader and camp administrator) for the many times he led us on fishing and camping expeditions. The friends of my childhood were my companions in exploring the world. Whenever I think about summer evenings spent out-of-doors, or winter afternoons spent building snow forts and sledding, I cannot help but think about time spent with the Norton children, Debbie, Stacy, Parker and Susan. I also think of my brother, Scott Riney, and my oldest friend, Rachel Myron. Those two were my companions in many, many adventures over the years, and it is to them I dedicate this book.
INTRODUCTION

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHILD

It is more than a little trite, but entirely true, to say that the world we live in today is not the world that existed 150 years ago. It looks different, sounds different and definitely smells different. The way in which we experience our world is different, mediated by layers of technology that either did not exist, or were in their infancy, in the years immediately following the Civil War. In the United States, the late years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were marked by a dramatic increase in industrialization and urbanization, changes that would completely alter the human experience of the world. The nation that had been born in the country was moving to the city, with the result that its citizens were living at an ever-increasing distance from the rhythms, wonders and perils of the natural world. Ever larger numbers of people, young and old, worked long hours in factories, greatly diminishing their contact with the out-of-doors. The housing in which the poor lived stretched upward into tenements, and many families lived in rooms essentially without windows, and without access to natural light or fresh air. Inner-city children played in an urban jungle, surrounded by brick, concrete and grime, rather than grass, trees and earth. Middle- and upper-class families became less aware of winter’s discomforts as central heating and indoor plumbing became more common. Motorized transportation further diminished the degree to which families suffered with the cold. One of the consequences of urbanization and industrialization, at some level, was a growing distance from the elements, in all of their forms.

Children did not simply experience these changes, they played an active part in this national transformation. They, like their parents, had to accustom themselves to new places and new circumstances and adapt themselves to a changing landscape. Children, as much as any other Americans, lived immersed in their physical settings. Perhaps, I could argue, children lived in their environments even more than adults did, since they generally had more free time to explore their surroundings and even to wallow in them. The world was their workplace, their school, and their playground. In 1900, many Americans believed that children had more at stake in their surround-
ings than their elders. The environment shaped the child, for good or for ill, and, in turn, the child would shape the nation. If the environment within which the nation reared its young changed significantly, then perhaps those children would be shaped in new and significant ways as well. Thinkers and reformers agreed that this was a precarious moment in the nation’s history.

Children, like all people, live in interaction with the environment around them. It is important, however, to understand what is meant by terms such as environment and nature. Environment, as a term, encompasses the physical features and characteristics of a particular place. Is it urban, rural or suburban? Is it developed or undeveloped? The features may be predominantly naturally occurring, such as trees, grasses and rivers, or they may be predominantly human-made, such as sidewalks, buildings and playgrounds. Of course, some “naturally occurring” environments appear to be more natural than others. An open field may seem to be completely natural, but be filled with invasive plant species, not native to its location, transported there by humans and domestic animals. A cultivated wheat field may seem less-than-completely natural, but may at the same time be home to many native plants, insects, rodents and other forms of animal life. And either one seems more natural than an asphalt-paved schoolyard, in spite of the weeds and anthills making their way up through the cracks.¹

Nature is a more loaded term, generally applied to naturally occurring environments, preferably untouched or minimally touched by human hands. The way the term is used often implies the superiority of such environments over any other. The term nature reveals a real tension between the opinions and experiences of adults and children. While adults often drew fine distinctions about the superiority of one type of environment over another and generally preferred the “naturally occurring,” children made the best of whatever environment presented itself, naturally occurring or otherwise. Some even preferred constructed environments to those derived from nature. Historian Bernard Mergen captured this reality beautifully, as he explained the way in which children evaluated the environments in which they lived:

Some places are valued because of the uses children put them to in play, such as ball fields, homemade forts and houses, climbing trees, sliding places, brooks and woods. Other places are valued because of some person who works or lives there. Some places are valued for what can be bought there, such as supermarkets, ice cream shops, and service stations. Still others are valued because of how they look or feel, such as
intersections where the traffic light changes colors. And finally, some places are valued because they are dangerous—streets, quarries, rivers, abandoned buildings and graveyards.²

What a child made of a place was often quite different than what adults made of it, based on an entirely different set of criteria. While adults often believed that children should prefer open fields and trees to urban environments, and playgrounds to city streets, children had their own priorities.

Children’s experiences of the places in their lives were mediated by a number of factors—geography, class, gender, race and ethnicity, to name a few. The influence of geography is perhaps the most obvious. In the simplest sense, farm children in Minnesota would have had a far different experience of winter than children in Texas, Mississippi or Alabama. Working outside in January would have been a much more uncomfortable experience for the child living in the upper Midwest, whereas working outside in June would have been less comfortable for children in the South. Class shaped children’s experiences, too. It had a direct effect on the amount of space in which families lived. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the conditions in small, crowded homes encouraged poor and working-class children to go outside and explore their surroundings, while middle-class children, who lived in larger homes, may have had more places and opportunities to play indoors. In the late years of the twentieth century, the situation was somewhat reversed. Deteriorating conditions in America’s inner cities encouraged poor parents to keep their children indoors, while children living in higher-income neighborhoods were able to spend more time outside, because their parents perceived their environments as relatively safe. The influence of gender most clearly manifested itself in limitations on the activities of girls; parents were reluctant to allow their daughters the same access to the outdoors as their sons, for fear of whom and what they might encounter while unsupervised. Ethnicity complicated this further, with some groups, such as Italian immigrants, placing even greater restrictions on daughters than others. Ethnicity and race also served to delineate the boundaries of children’s explorations, making some environments less safe for certain groups. Children did not experience their worlds on a level playing field.

Before going further, this is the place to explain what this book is and is not about. My geographic focus is largely the Midwest and Great Plains, with some attention to the major cities of the east. The South, which gets a very limited treatment, certainly deserves a book of its own. I have not spent
introduction

a great deal of time with the Mountain West, given Elliott West’s excellent
treatment of this region in *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far
Western Frontier*. The Far West (not to mention Hawaii and Alaska) deserves
separate treatment. I also will not be spending much time on environ-
mental health. Other historians have ably tackled the larger topic of children’s
health, and smaller topics under this umbrella, such as the perils of lead
paint, and threats to health and safety in remote western communities. In
some areas, I have provided limited coverage of topics that I believe merit
far greater discussion. I hope that readers find a number of subjects for fur-
ther research. The outdoor education activities of settlement houses would
seem to be one of these topics, as would Smokey Bear, Woodsy Owl and
other mid- to late twentieth-century attempts at environmental education.

In this book, I have several goals. The first is to construct a narrative fol-
lowing the environmental history of American childhood from the end of
the Civil War through the opening years of the twenty-first century. In order
to do this, I bring together analysis of primary source materials, as well as
synthesis of important secondary materials on this topic. For the most part,
historians have not set out to write environmental histories of American
childhood. One early exception was West’s *Growing Up with the Country*. In
this book, West examined the relationship of children’s lives to the place in
which they lived and made important observations that have shaped the way
in which I view children and environment. In his analysis, West empha-
sized that children made the new places and circumstances they encoun-
tered on the frontier their own. They did not see that world through the
same eyes as their parents and other adults. The grown-ups around them
often saw the deficiencies of the western environment as a place to raise
children; the children, on the other hand, saw the possibilities in that world.
It was their home, and it was not strange to them. As West commented in
the introduction to his book,

*The westering experience meant one thing to older pioneers and quite
another to the younger. The youngest emigrants had little of the East to
remember, and those born in the new country had none whatsoever. For
the young, in a sense, this was not a frontier at all—not, that is, a line
between the familiar and the new. Rather, it was the original measure for
the rest of their lives, and that measure was not the one their parents had
known.*

I believe that historians can more broadly apply West’s analysis to child-life
beyond the frontier. When the way in which children interacted with the
world around them changed over time, or the world with which they inter-
acted changed, adults often reacted with dismay, concern or even horror.
The children were generally less concerned by the situation.

Most treatments of children’s relationship with the world in which they
lived are less overtly concerned with environment. There are recent excep-
tions, such as Susan A. Miller’s *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls’
Organizations in America*, Leslie Paris’s *Children’s Nature: The Rise of the
American Summer Camp*, and Kevin Armitage’s *The Nature Study Movement:
The Forgotten Popularizer of America’s Conservation Ethic*. On the whole, the
environmental history of childhood has been written in bits and pieces, and
is embedded in social, policy and cultural histories, such as David Nasaw’s
fine 1985 work, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play*. Nasaw’s work, as
well as Viviana Zelizer’s 1985 study *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing
Social Value of Children*, and several more recent books, such as Jeff Wil-
tse’s *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, and
Howard Chudacoff’s *Children at Play: An American History*, are full of the
environmental history of American children. At the center of each of these
analyses is a fascinating story of conflict over who would control children’s
access to their preferred environments, with the adults more often than not
winning.

My second goal in this book is to follow this conflict across the decades
and to help to explain why and how we have reached a point in this country
where children have to be cajoled to go outside and play by parents, panicky
about their children’s seeming lack of interest in the world immediately out-
side of their doors. These same parents, too, are panicky about the state of
the outdoors, worried that their children will encounter unacceptable perils
outside the home, often in the shape of dangerous adults who wish them
ill. Slowly but surely, children’s focus has, for the most part, moved indoors,
and away from the naturally occurring and constructed landscapes beyond
their homes. As such, this book is also an attempt to explain how and why
children were “islanded” in the United States, progressively separated from
adult space, and moved into their own spaces, designed specifically for chil-
dren. As historian John R. Gillis has written:

Children have been systematically excluded from the former mainlands
of urban and suburban existence, especially the streets and other pub-
lic spaces. What has been described as a ‘sanitized childhood, without
skinned knees or the occasional C in history’ is evident both in the
United States and Western Europe. . . . Parks and playgrounds, once the
free space of childhood, are increasingly supervised. Even the suburban neighborhood, once a territory of spontaneous encounter, is now a series of oases, connected by caravans of SUVs.\(^5\)

Unlike the seemingly “free range” children of earlier generations, today’s children have considerably less freedom than their grandparents to roam and less opportunities to make themselves comfortable in the public spaces of their communities.

This is not as it always was. In the middle of the nineteenth century, most children in the United States were residents of rural locations, living with a combination of human-made (homes, barns and schools) and naturally occurring (open fields, trees, streams) environments. As more and more families moved to urban, and later suburban, locations, the preponderance of children’s interactions with environments would be with human-made, or strongly human-influenced environments, such as houses, streets, yards and parks. In the transition, their surroundings changed considerably.

At the time, observers argued that children had lost something significant in this transition. Children, they argued, had lost contact with nature. They were not simply arguing that children had lost contact with trees, grass and rocks, however: they were arguing that children had lost contact with a better, more valuable environment. But they were also arguing for a domesticated and gentle nature, not the natural world that farm youngsters might face in the form of brutal cold, rabid animals and prairie fires. As the nation industrialized, urbanized and moved progressively farther from its agricultural roots, reformers came to promote an idealized nature as the most important environment within which to nurture children’s characters. Children, however, did not always have the same preferences as adults, and could find much to admire and enjoy in environments that had little of the natural left in them.\(^6\)

But this story is not entirely about change. This book will begin with an examination of children in farming communities. At the close of the Civil War, many Americans continued to live on farms and raise their families in rural settings. Millions of farm children lived in very close proximity to the joys and perils of natural landscapes. Those landscapes and their features influenced every aspect of a child’s life, be it work, play or school, and many children faced environmental dangers largely unknown in the twenty-first century. In a letter written to the children’s page of the *Nebraska Farmer*, young Helena Karella, of Madison County, Nebraska, reflected on the beauties and pleasures of child life on the farm. “The spring has said goodbye
and beautiful summer is here. The birds, bees, and ants are always busy. So are the happy boys and girls that live on a farm. They always have plenty to do and always have plenty of time for play. I would lots rather live on a farm than in a city, for on a farm you can skate in winter and pick flowers in summer and always have a good time.” Focusing her attention on the positive aspects of her relationship to the surrounding world, the young farm girl’s words reinforced a common perception in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America: that farms were the best possible place to raise children. Chapter One explores the world of the rural child, and the degree to which the natural world shaped all aspects of child life, for good or for ill, in this essentially premodern environment. It also treats the ways in which organizations for rural youth attempted to help youngsters to see their environment in the “right” way. Even 4-H, that quintessentially rural organization for farm youth, reoriented itself to provide greater conservation programming for its members.

Increasingly, however, cities attracted residents from the countryside and abroad, and growing numbers of children would find their place in urban America. Covering the years from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, Chapter Two follows America’s children to the cities and examines the different ways in which children related to this novel environment. Many children, but particularly the children of the poor and the working classes, would make the city streets and empty lots their own, of necessity redefining what could have been hostile space into an environment for play and other activities. Inevitably, this created some tension, as children competed with adults for space and used and remade spaces in ways that did not please adult observers. The move to the cities subjected children to new environmental perils, a concern that will also be treated in this chapter. Among the middle classes, however, there was a retreat from the city and its real and perceived dangers. Although the middle class continued to make their homes in urban and suburban environments, parents focused upon creating a haven for their children within a potentially hostile landscape. Parents made use of larger homes, sculpted back yards, and purpose-built playgrounds to direct their children’s play away from the dangers of the street to the comfort and safety of the home.

Chapter Three explores the dilemmas adults faced when contemplating the economic and social transformations taking place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their implications for the lives of children. These transformations posed serious intellectual problems for a nation long wedded to agrarianism and challenged adult notions about the importance
and value of nature. Thomas Jefferson’s oft-quoted commentary on the value of agriculture and agriculturalists emphasized repeatedly the importance of laboring in the earth, and a relationship with the land, to genuine human virtue. It was not just producing the most basic of human needs that made farmers virtuous, but their contact with the splendors of nature and God’s creation that made them more honest, more moral and generally of more use to a young nation. Even as urbanization overtook the United States, and maybe because of it, these notions persisted, with the result that parents and educators would develop substitute measures to provide urban children adequate experiences with nature. These experiences, however, would not be the raw, unmediated experiences of farm children on their parents’ land. Summer camps, scouting and nature education would take the place of unstructured experiences with natural and constructed environments.

Not only did children require experiences in nature, they needed new ways to think about nature as well. Chapter Four examines the midcentury tug-of-war between the lure of the indoors and adult desires to get children outdoors. Radio and television were helping to create a more sedentary experience of youth, but the society as a whole continued to value the relationship between children and the wider world. Youth organizations continued to take children into the wild, and parents loaded their children into station wagons to introduce them to Yellowstone. Popular culture also introduced the nation’s children to a whole range of animal characters created to cultivate environmental awareness, such as Smokey Bear, Ranger Rick, Woodsy Owl and Bambi. While Walt Disney Studios appropriated Bambi to sell movie tickets, other familiar characters such as Smokey Bear existed to sell a particular environmental message to the nation’s youth. From Smokey Bear’s “Only YOU can prevent forest fires” to Woodsy Owl’s “Give a hoot, don’t pollute,” the U.S. Forest Service developed a whole curriculum intended to promote environmental consciousness in the young. Additionally, private organizations, such as the National Wildlife Federation, often used characters such as Ranger Rick, a conservation-minded raccoon, to market their messages. This chapter will examine how images of nature, and particularly images of animals, have been used to create a love of the wild and environmental consciousness in children who may never have seen a deer, bear, owl or even a raccoon outside of the confines of a zoo.

Not all urban and suburban children, however, formed their dominant perceptions of nature in relation to movies, television and the printed word. Throughout America, wild spaces persisted in spite of the urban and suburban development. Chapter Five focuses on one of these urban wild spaces,
metropolitan Denver’s High Line Canal. This seventy-one-mile-long canal, constructed in the late nineteenth century as an irrigation ditch for farmers on Colorado’s eastern plains, also became a playground for generations of children and youth. For youngsters who lived out of range of open farm and ranch land, the canal and its adjacent access road offered a welcome location for bicycle riding, crawdad hunting, tubing and all manner of outdoor activities. It was also a welcome place in which to escape the gaze of prying adults. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, before worries about “stranger danger” overwhelmed suburban and urban parents, the High Line’s children wandered freely, largely without supervision, and in relative safety. The High Line Canal was one of many places nationwide where postwar youngsters sought out and found their own spot in the “natural world,” even though its nature had been created and heavily modified by human action.

The days of such open and unfettered use of the outdoor world, however, were numbered. Chapter Six examines the late twentieth-century child, who had more or less completely moved indoors in response to technological and social change, as well as parental fears. As the twentieth century progressed, children increasingly abandoned the out-of-doors in favor of the family room and the shopping mall. For most middle-class children, this movement reflected changes in technology and perceived, rather than real, dangers. Increasingly, playtime outside meant either supervised play on a plastic playground or organized team sports on a carefully delineated field. In impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, on the other hand, this movement reflected rising crime and the increasing degradation of the urban environment, so ably documented by writers such as Alex Kotlowitz, author of There Are No Children Here. In the case of both the middle-class and the inner-city child, a sea-change had transpired. The day of the free-roaming child, exploring urban, suburban or wild space seemed to be over, the result of a complex mixture of social and cultural forces.

The final chapter will consider the reaction, beginning in the 1990s and becoming ever more vocal in the new century, against the migration of children indoors. In the 1990s, naturalists such as Robert M. Pyle lamented the dramatic reduction in the number of children independently and intimately experiencing wild spaces, as he had done as a child along the Denver metropolitan area’s High Line Canal. In the twenty-first century, these concerns have blossomed into an organized call for action. The “No Child Left Inside,” or “Leave No Child Inside,” movement has popularized the idea of reintroducing children to nature and curing their “nature deficit disorder” through various forms of familiarization with the wild. A national
movement is building to change the way in which children play and interact with the world around them. Whether twenty-first century children (and parents) will respond positively to this movement, however, remains to be seen. The complex interaction among parental fears, children’s preferences and pervasive cultural change make it highly unlikely that children will ever again interact as freely with the outdoor environment as their parents and grandparents once did.

Who has won the battle over children’s interactions with the world surrounding them? While children might have once chafed at the restrictions imposed by cautious parents and urban and suburban development, the parents of today seem more distressed about the current situation than their children. Had the indoor environment of the 1950s and 1960s persisted, featuring relatively limited personal space, poor climate control and only three television channels, the youngsters might be in rebellion. Given the revolution in home amenities and electronic devices, the children seem to have won the battle. They are exactly where they want to be.