



How Play Works: Finding Paths to Self-Discovery

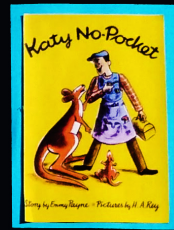
Haley Goldberg
Elizabeth Goodenough, Ph.D.

Kay Redfield Jamison
Kay Redfield Jamison (1946-), psychologist, author, and leading authority on manic depression, animates her writing with the enthusiastic engagement and deep attentiveness of a child at play. Her parents supplied scientific instruments — dissecting tools and a microscope — as well as *Gray's Anatomy* (1858) to encourage her interests (Jamison, 1996). In her autobiography *An Unquiet Mind* (1995), Jamison describes how “the Ping Pong table in our basement was my laboratory, and I spent endless late afternoons dissecting frogs, fish, worms, and turtles” (p. 21). Such exploratory play sparked Jamison’s interest in the complex compartments of the human mind, first identified in her reading of the children’s book *Katy No-Pocket* (1973). In this book written by Emmy Payne and illustrated by H.A. Roy, Jamison found in a kangaroo mother’s many-pocketed apron an analog for her own sense of possessing a multi-faceted consciousness. Shortly after her graduation from UCLA with a Ph.D. in Psychology, Jamison, diagnosed with manic-depression, guided her medical studies to become the specialist on mental illness and health care she is today (Downer, 1997). Jamison also discusses play as a vital source of creativity and innovation across many fields in *Eulubance* (2004). Jamison’s life serves as an example: “It is possible for some, but not most, to hold on to the heat of life and, although they take their pleasures differently from when they were young, they continue to take them with a full measure of joy” (Jamison, 2004, p. 90). Jamison still works to understand herself, her patients, the ambiguities of manic depression and the needs of society. Her contribution to bipolar research offers many perspectives. They validate the energy, acute observations, and tenacity of Jamison’s playfulness as a child, when she engaged in pioneering experiments that fostered her extraordinary career as a psychiatrist today.

Abstract
“I want to be a firefighter.” “I want to be a doctor.” When adults ask children what they want to be when they grow up, they expect such answers to their question. In fact, their very question raises many others about how children gain passion for subjects and innovative activities later in life. Exploring play histories in the United States as a way to understand individual vision is the main objective of this research project. By studying the early development of distinguished Americans like psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison and author Christopher Paul Curtis, we look for pivotal moments in childhood that influenced their path to revising the world today. Our methodologies include research on theories and histories of play; analysis of children’s literature, personal essays, and other forms of art; preparing and recording film interviews of our subjects, all the while looking for clues to the flourishing of creative talents. We seek to learn how different types of play in youth affect development and inspire the trajectory of an unprecedented career. This project also aims to investigate the kinds of environments and adventures that enable children to discover their genius in the outside world. Our research will guide and support a film production in the making, Elizabeth Goodenough’s *Half A Chance*, a documentary that looks closely at the power of play.



Results
As these vignettes illustrate, children’s free play continues to inspire achievements in later life. If these visionary people had not had the freedom and encouragement to make up their own play as children, they may never have found the agency, vibrancy, and imaginative wholeness to pursue their unique gifts in pioneering fields. Early joy carried them to insights, achievements, discoveries and careers of forceful leadership.



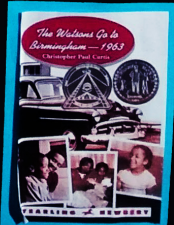
Benjamin West
Benjamin West (1738-1820), renowned American painter, illustrated histories for George III and founded a society of artists in London called the Royal Academy of Arts (“Benjamin West,” 2011). West’s love for painting developed in a Quaker community of rural Pennsylvania where art was not prevalent. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Biographical Stories for Children* (1842) includes West’s childhood discovery of the camera obscura. The book also describes the moment West first practiced the medium of drawing. At age six, he looked down upon a baby, and realized he wanted to capture the beautiful image before him forever. Hawthorne speaks for West: “What a pity it is that such a pretty smile should not last forever” (Hawthorne, 1842, p. 16). West began to draw the baby, and when his mother found the picture his talent was revealed. At her encouragement and that of the community, West even invented his own paintbrush from the trimmings of a cat’s tail. West loved to explore the woods and streams of Springfield where Native Americans gave him his first colors of his palette (Goodenough, 2010, p. 15). West painted many images as a child, including a piece later exhibited in the Royal Academy. Through engaging in object and visual play in his childhood, West developed a staggering talent and appreciation for art that distinguished his career.

Objective and Hypothesis
The objective for this research project is to study the correlation between the childhood play of remarkable people and their successful careers as adults. We hypothesize that active forms of play in youth engaged them in activities that helped them discover passions for which they excel as adults.

Methods
Research for this project took four paths. First, I read modern studies of play including *The Playwork Primer* by British playworker Penny Wilson and sections of Elizabeth Goodenough’s edited anthology, *A Place for Play* (2008), including essays by fairytale specialist Jack Zipes and play theorist Bob Hughes. I analyzed representations of learning by play in such children’s books as Mordcai Gersten’s *The Wild Boy* (2002) and *What Charlie Heard* (2002). Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Biographical Stories for Children* (1842) provided insight into the play histories of six famous men and women. Second, to acquire knowledge about playscapes of the past, I helped compile a vintage photo album entitled “Farming: A Community Remembers” to document the rural roots of childhood chores and outdoor play. Third, I learned about the process of promoting play internationally through a collaborative project with Phil Waters, a playworker from the Eden Project in Cornwall, UK. Together we developed a promotional documentary for the upcoming film *Half A Chance* to be directed by five-time Oscar winning documentary filmmaker Mark Jonathan Harris. Filmmaker Adrienne Finelli, lecturer at the University of Michigan School of Art and Design, partnered with LSA junior Will Leaf in producing footage. Finally, I helped create a PowerPoint lecture with embedded videos for an audience of 200 children at St. Anne’s Belfield in Charlottesville, VA. This presentation features classic and contemporary children’s books such as *Charlotte’s Web* (1952) and *The Secret Garden* (1911), the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) and the *Magic Tree House* series (1992-2011). All selections illustrate the universal and evolutionary significance of finding a “secret space.” Using knowledge gained from these activities, my project culminated with the examination of biographies and autobiographies of adults whose early play shaped their future success. I condensed and compiled these findings into four vignettes that categorize these individuals’ early play in contemporary terminology.



Theodore Roosevelt
Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) was the 26th president of the United States, winner of the 1906 Nobel Peace Prize, and an avid environmentalist, evidenced by his many achievements in preserving the American landscape (“Theodore Roosevelt,” 2011). The second of four children, Roosevelt’s childhood shaped much of who he became as an adult. As a child, he collected and stuffed animals, which was regarded as an acceptable way to observe nature at the time. Roosevelt then recorded his findings and detailed descriptions of the animals in multiple notebooks, revealing his passion for the natural world around him (Ward & Grubin, 1996). Roosevelt also spent the much of his youth in Hyde Park, New York where he acquired “a love of the Hudson Valley, farming, and rural people” (The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, 2003). Experiential learning sparked his care for all living things, a passion carried over to his presidential campaign. As president, Roosevelt “doubled the number of national parks, created 150 national forests... set up more than 50 federal wildlife preserves, initiated thirty major irrigation programs, and established sixteen national monuments” (Jamison, 2004, p. 12). Roosevelt’s interest in the natural elements also shaped New Deal policies and programs, particularly the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) (The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, 2003). The CCC offered work ranging from “planting trees, building flood barriers, fighting forest fires, and maintaining forest roads and trails” (“Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC),” 2011). Not only did this project promote conservation of the environment, it also provided 3,000,000 jobs. If Roosevelt had not had the opportunity and encouragement to explore semi-wild landscapes as a boy, his great American conservation project might not have existed. Consequently many of our country’s nationally protected land resources would be present today.



Christopher Paul Curtis
Christopher Paul Curtis (1954-), Newbery Medal winning author of six books for young readers, was born and raised in Flint, Michigan. His first novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (1997) chronicles two African American brothers growing up in Flint, Michigan. Curtis shared his own experience there in an interview on Michigan Television’s *Childhood Places, Secret Spaces*. Calling his childhood in Flint “an adventure,” the author recounted how freely in youth he had explored the city on foot (McElroy, 2007). At home, behind the couch, he had also discovered a secret space. He was playing there when his parents suddenly witnessed the Birmingham bombing on television. Hidden from sight, he heard his parents collapse into tears. Curtis’s memory of this secret space carried into *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* as two brothers found sanctuary for healing and reconciliation around the back of the couch as well. Curtis called this magical space “The World Famous Watsons Pet Hospital,” a private hideaway that allowed pets to recover from trauma (Curtis, 1997). This hideout has a quirkiness that makes children believe anything is possible (Wilson, 2010, p. 26). The child play that carries over into the novels Curtis writes today illustrate how moments of risk taking, story telling and peer negotiation still shape his creative life now.

Conclusion
These case studies and the interviews to follow can now be used to help develop the documentary *Half A Chance*. The film will illustrate the importance of free play in childhood to develop resourceful, tenacious and inspired adults. This research will also be utilized to compare childhoods of the past to the present. Today outdoor play is disappearing. What impact will this demise have on the next generation? Using models of past childhood, this research can be used as a model for why children need to continue to actively play in order to create a society of visionary, collaborative and passionate adults.

References
Benjamin West. (2011). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/eb/encyclopedia/101/1010101/1010101/Benjamin-West>
Curtis, C. P. (1997). *The Watsons go to Birmingham — 1963*. New York: Yearling.
Downer, J. (1995, Oct 13). *Psychology*. *Night Shift*. Time. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com>
Christopher Paul Curtis. (2011). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/eb/encyclopedia/101/1010101/1010101/Christopher-Paul-Curtis>
Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). (2011). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/eb/encyclopedia/101/1010101/1010101/Civilian-Conservation-Corps>
The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers. (2003). Franklin D. Roosevelt. Hyde Park, New York: Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site. Retrieved from <http://www.eleanorroosevelt.org/encyclopedia/frp/frp.html>
Goodenough, L. (2010). The beginnings of play: Scenes of self-determination in Hawthorne’s *Biographical Stories for Children*. *Natural Hawthorne Review*. Upper Merionide, New Jersey: Montclair State University.
Jamison, K.R. (1996). *An Unquiet Mind*. New York: Vintage.
Jamison, K. R. (2004). *Eulubance: The Passion for Life*. New York: A.A. Knopf.
McElroy, C. (2007). Childhood places, secret spaces. Flint, Michigan: Michigan Television.
Theodore Roosevelt. (2011). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/eb/encyclopedia/101/1010101/1010101/Theodore-Roosevelt>
Ward, C.C., (Wheeler, & Grubin, D. (Directors). (1996). *TR: The Story of Theodore Roosevelt* (Documentary). The American Experience. United States: PBS/Broadcasting Service.
Wilson, P. (2010). *The Playwork Primer*. United States: Alliance for Childhood.