



## **Teen Bedrooms as Sites of Self-Actualization and Containment**

—Mary-Ann Shantz

Reid, Jason. *Get Out of My Room! A History of Teen Bedrooms in America*. U of Chicago P, 2017. 320 pages. \$45.00 hc/e-book. ISBN 9780226409214.

In this clearly written and well-argued book, Jason Reid traces the rise in popularity of private bedrooms for American youth. He argues that autonomous teen bedrooms emerged first among urban, middle-class families of the Northeast and Midwestern United States during the second half of the nineteenth century. Seen as especially valuable for adolescent girls, who were expected to spend more time than their male peers in the domestic setting, the private bedroom was promoted as a space facilitating spiritual and emotional development. By the early twentieth century, private bedrooms for teens were being widely promoted by child development experts, but it was not until after the Second World War that they became the norm among middle- and working-class American families. Reid points to a number of variables that facilitated this change:

reduced family size and a decline in the practice of taking in boarders and live-in servants; a rising standard of living; greater home ownership; larger homes; and a post-war culture in which “the autonomous teen bedroom became an enshrined part of the postwar suburban consensus” (5). Reid addresses how teens used their bedrooms and what this space meant to them, but much of the book considers how adults envisioned the merits and functions of teen bedrooms. Arguments in favour of giving teens rooms of their own shifted away from “the feminized, God-infused” (39) rationales of the nineteenth century and toward scientific endorsements of “the teen bedroom as a developmental tool” (39) for encouraging academic achievement, peaceful family relationships, domesticity, pride in personal property, and the expression of personal identity. As Reid rightly

notes, “In many respects . . . child development experts were simply offering old wine in new bottles, as the religious arguments of the nineteenth century were replaced by scientific claims—very few of which were actually based on any amount of concrete evidence” (40). Another important theme of the book is the relationship between public and private space: proponents of the private teen bedroom viewed it as “offering teens a safe alternative to urban street culture and commercial amusements” and a means of discouraging teenage delinquency; spending more time in their rooms generally meant teens spent less time in public (9).

In eight loosely chronological chapters, Reid explores the roles of teenagers, child development experts, advice columnists, home decor experts, and furniture and electronics manufacturers, as well as that of popular culture, in establishing the autonomous teen bedroom as the new norm. Chapter 1 explores the nineteenth-century arguments young people made in favour of private bedrooms, drawing on the early writings of prominent Americans such as Mary Gove Nichols, Louisa May Alcott, and Theodore Roosevelt, among others. In chapter 2, Reid identifies an emergent consensus among physicians and social scientists in the early twentieth century in favour of private bedrooms for teens, citing child psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall and Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Chapter 3 examines the contribution in the interwar years of home decor experts, who often claimed teens should be permitted to play a role in decorating their own rooms.

Chapter 4 moves into the post-Second World War period, and here Reid discusses important economic and social developments that put home ownership and private bedrooms for individual family members within reach of many Americans for the first time. At the same time, the advice columnists such as Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren (“Dear Abby”) popularized the views of academic child psychologists and advocated that parents respect teenagers’ privacy and autonomy. In this context, Reid suggests that the teen bedroom was cast as “a key contributor to the [necessary] emancipation process” of maturing adolescents (86). Returning to the subject of room decor in chapter 5, Reid argues that the trend of including teens in the design process in the interwar years led to the displacement of parents entirely in the post-war period, as a strong connection was drawn between teen identity and room decor. Pin-ups and posters of movie stars, popular athletes, and musicians became widely available and affordable. This led to a do-it-yourself approach to decor that “allowed teenagers from even the poorest of backgrounds to take an active part in the decoration process” (132), though Reid cautions that the power of the entertainment industry and its deliberate efforts to establish a powerful market presence in teen culture counteracted the autonomy and agency of individual teens. In chapter 6, Reid details the proliferation of home electronics such as personal telephones, radios, televisions, and computers in teen bedrooms during the 1970s and 1980s. As Reid astutely observes,



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just as the domestic containment of women during the early years of the Cold War was aided by a bevy of so-called time-saving appliances, the containment of youth was similarly encouraged by an array of inexpensive gadgets that offered teens a wide range of entertainment options in the comfort of their own rooms. (7)

These technologies had dramatic consequences. First, they shifted home entertainment from the communal spaces of the home to the private space of the bedroom, “challeng[ing] parental authority and family togetherness” (165). Second, they eroded the boundary between public and private space: “The distance between home and street . . . thus shrunk considerably, in both a physical and psychological sense, as the Internet [and other technologies] . . . rendered the walls of the teen bedroom much more porous” (234).

Early on, Reid affirms that “[t]he history of teen bedrooms is riddled with culture-wide expressions of fear and anxiety, as Americans came to recognize that giving teenagers rooms of their own could create just as many problems as it supposedly solved” (7). Chapter 7 turns to a discussion of these potential problems, outlining a “counter-narrative” in the 1970s and 1980s that disputed the value of the private bedroom for teenagers. Earlier fears that private rooms provided a cover for masturbation grew into a broader concern about sexual activity and the use of drugs, alcohol, and technology by teens behind closed doors. Advice columnists offered parents competing messages about the need to respect teens’ privacy and the importance of ensuring that adolescents were not getting into trouble. Reid concludes that

[t]his counter-narrative—which was complemented by the emergence of working mothers and latchkey kids during the 1970s and 1980s—ultimately proved ineffectual in terms of diminishing the popularity of the autonomous teen bedroom, as even its most virulent critics were reluctant to turn back the clock to the days of shared bedrooms and heavy-handed acts of parental surveillance. Nonetheless, it does serve as a powerful reminder that teen bedroom culture had a dark side that attracted public attention during times of crisis and moral panic. (168)

The final chapter of the book deals with representations of teen bedrooms in popular culture. Reid analyzes a variety of media, including The Beach Boys' 1963 hit song "In My Room," movie portrayals of teen bedrooms including those of *Saturday Night Fever* and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, as well as literary depictions, including the role of the title character's bedroom in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Reid also considers the role and function of teen bedrooms in television shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch*. He characterizes these portrayals of teen bedrooms as "a bundle of contradictions, acting as a safe haven or a muse for some, a prison for others" (199).

Using the teen bedroom as his focal point, Reid offers new insight into significant social and cultural changes in modern American history, including the

identification of adolescence as a distinct phase of life and the emergence of teen culture, changing preoccupations and values in child-rearing advice, shifting relationships between parents and teens, changes in home design and domestic space, and young people's displacement from public to private space. Reid's primary source material is rich and diverse. In addition to sources mentioned above, he references publications such as the *New York Times*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Ebony*, and *Boys' Life*; child development experts such as Arnold Gesell, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and Dr. Joyce Brothers; and religious perspectives from conservative Christian psychologist Dr. James Dobson and the Jehovah's Witnesses' magazine, *The Watchtower*. Reid's nuanced analysis of this material and the clarity of his writing make his book a valuable addition to the history of children and youth, as well as the social and cultural history of the twentieth-century United States.

Reid's story is an American one, though with clear application to Canada. Less clear is what role the private bedroom has played in the lives and culture of teenagers elsewhere, particularly in urban settings where single-family housing is not the norm. Reid has demonstrated the fruitfulness of this topic, and it is to be hoped that others will contribute further to the history of teen culture, family relationships, and domestic space outside North America.

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