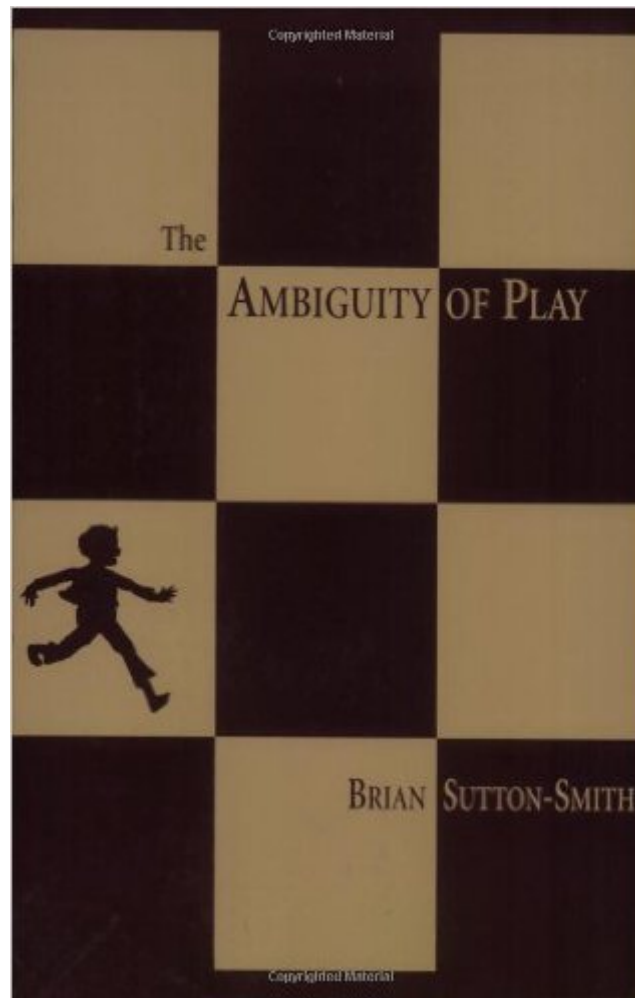


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The Ambiguity Of Play



Synopsis

Every child knows what it means to play, but the rest of us can merely speculate. Is it a kind of adaptation, teaching us skills, inducting us into certain communities? Is it power, pursued in games of prowess? Fate, deployed in games of chance? Daydreaming, enacted in art? Or is it just frivolity? Brian Sutton-Smith, a leading proponent of play theory, considers each possibility as it has been proposed, elaborated, and debated in disciplines from biology, psychology, and education to metaphysics, mathematics, and sociology. Sutton-Smith focuses on play theories rooted in seven distinct rhetorics—the ancient discourses of Fate, Power, Communal Identity, and Frivolity and the modern discourses of Progress, the Imaginary, and the Self. In a sweeping analysis that moves from the question of play in child development to the implications of play for the Western work ethic, he explores the values, historical sources, and interests that have dictated the terms and forms of play put forth in each discourse's "objective" theory. This work reveals more distinctions and disjunctions than affinities, with one striking exception: however different their descriptions and interpretations of play, each rhetoric reveals a quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility. In light of this, Sutton-Smith suggests that play might provide a model of the variability that allows for "natural" selection. As a form of mental feedback, play might nullify the rigidity that sets in after successful adaption, thus reinforcing animal and human variability. Further, he shows how these discourses, despite their differences, might offer the components for a new social science of play.

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Customer Reviews

There are books on play, then are books on play studies, then there is this. Stuart Brown has an excellent book on the science of play, Huizinga wrote a pioneering work on play theory, but Sutton-Smith (SS) has outplayed them all. Let me be Frank. This is a textbook. It reads like a textbook. It contains technical terminology, schema and classifications, definitions, references and all the usual academic tools. Some parts require serious brainpower to appreciate. The list of primary and secondary sources is massive and most impressive. But it's more than a mere textbook, much more. Here's what it does for you. It gathers together all previous theories, theorists and key works by contributors to the field of play studies. It gathers them from the widest range of disciplines possible. Then it categorises them according to seven major meta-themes or 'rhetorics' that nicely bundle together all these disparate elements in such a way as to expose their core meanings and spread them over a timeline from ancient to modern. And then, for each of the seven, it picks out the main adherents, interacts with them in a lively and insightful discussion, and summarises the rest. The work does have a weakness, but it is not the fault of SS. The Index is inadequate to the task of serving such a key text. It only picks out major interactions with a particular author and excludes all minor mentions. This infuriates me. For example, in the chapter on 'the rhetoric of self' I was excited that SS focuses attention on the 'flow' theory of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi but there are several places where he (ps. 200, 207) and his theory (67, 81, 174, 188, 192, 195, 207) are mentioned in the text but not in the Index. Same with Nietzsche (57, 60, 132, 151, 190-1, 220).

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