Study Questions for David Nasaw, *Children of the City* – Chapters 1-7

The questions below highlight the book’s main points and will help guide your reading. The number in parentheses is the chapter to which the question corresponds.

1. Describe some of the things you might see in a city at the turn of the 20th century. In what ways had the city come to embody the new consumer culture? (1)

2. What attractions brought people into the city? Why did they stay in the city even after the work day was over? (1)

3. How did life in the city for “the other half” differ from the experiences of the wealthy and the middle class who frequented the downtown areas? Did these two groups have any common experiences? (1)

4. Describe the living conditions for the city’s poorer residents. Why is the phrase “poverty in the midst of plenty” an apt characterization for the American city of 1900? (1)

5. Why did the streets play such an important role in the city children’s lives? Why did they fight to maintain their “control” of the streets? (2)

6. What life lessons did the children learn on the streets? Why did they consider these lessons more valuable than lessons learned in school? Were they right? (2)

7. What were some of the “rules” of the street? How did the children’s “code of ethics” work? How was the children’s neighborhood “community” organized? (2)

8. Why did the “child savers” fail to recognize that the city children had their own rules and “code of ethics”? Why were the reformers unable to make much progress “saving” the street children? (2)

9. How were the children of the city different than the child laborers of an earlier time? Why does Nasaw believe they were a “privileged group of youngsters”? (3)

10. What kinds of jobs did the children get? Why did they prefer doing some jobs rather than others? What were their favorite jobs? (4)

11. In what ways were the street traders also “performers” and “entrepreneurs”? What skills did the children need to master to become successful performers and entrepreneurs? (4)

12. How did life on the streets shape the children’s world view? How did their worldview differ from their parents’? (4)
13. Why was there such a demand for “newsies at the turn of the twentieth century?” How did the children “leverage” the circulation managers to get the best deal they could? (5)

14. Why was the reformers’ contention that street trading led to juvenile delinquency so difficult to prove? (5)

15. Why did the city children like being “newsies”? (5)

16. What did you have to do (and what skills did you need to learn) if you wanted to become a successful newsie? What were some of the more shady “hustles” and “tricks of the trade?” (5)

17. Why did people complain about the newsies? Why did reformers express concern about the newsies' behavior and the “lessons” they were learning on the street? (5)

18. In speaking of the relationship between the street traders and their customers, Nasaw observes, “Each gave the other what was needed.” What does he mean by this? (5)

19. Why did children enjoy being “junkers?” What did one have to learn and do to become a successful junker? (6)

20. How did little “junkers” help contribute to family survival? (6)

21. How did the junkers redefine terms like “private property” and differentiate “stealing” from “rescuing”? How did the children’s attitude about junking differ from that of the reformers? (6)

22. How did the “double standard” and the presence of “strictly defined gender roles” work against girls who wanted to be street traders like their brothers? Why were the “lessons of the street” ok for boys to learn but not for girls? (7)

23. How did girls’ work differ from boys’ work? How did their rewards for working differ? (7)