

"Where the Girls Are":

Resource and Research

For more than a year now, there has been a rash of bad publicity surrounding texts for teenage girls because of Naomi Wolf's public attack on Alloy Entertainment's series books like *Gossip Girls* and the *A-List*. Some argue that these books break faith with what they believe makes Young Adult Literature valuable, and in many ways they are correct, as these books clearly fall more into the romance novel category than the YAL category. However, as those who study YAL know, these texts constitute just one example of the books available to young women. Reasons for supporting their continued publication are more complex than they at first appear and have as much to do with encouraging reading as allowing girls to vicariously work through issues and situations that in many ways do apply to them. I suggest a deeper investigation of these texts is cause to aggressively question the material values and male-centric images of teen girls represented in the larger society, as opposed to questioning the value of YAL, something I wish Ms. Wolf had spent more time examining in

her statements in the *NYT* book section and on the Oprah Winfrey Show. Ms. Wolf's criticisms aside, it is not news that socio-cultural context influences literature written for girls. Recall that *Little Women* and *Elsie Dinsmore* came out the same year, despite having very different perspectives on who girls are and who others think they should be. Both have been in continuous publication while serving the reading interests of quite diverse groups. The struggle for the minds, bodies, souls, and, I might add, pocketbooks, of girls is a long one; in part, Ms. Wolf's comments make it clear the fight continues.

Of more critical interest to those who study girls or who just generally care about their well-being, should be the questions and issues that Ms. Wolf's critique raises that move beyond the texts: What is the influence of culture and society on girls? How are myths of what it means to be a girl perpetuated through texts? What power does the imposed positioning of girls actually have on them? How do girls fare in a social environment that is so clearly in competition for

their attention? How do portrayals of girls ultimately influence their choices? Where are the divides between girls' lived experiences and the fictional representations of them? Missing in Wolf's conversation is a balanced consideration of the texts in which young female protagonists courageously work through complicated life experiences rather than simply enacting superficial social norms in a limited context. Had she shown she was aware of more than just the stories that sensationalize the lives of some girls in some environments, she would have better served everyone concerned, including the girls themselves. To define and condemn the reading habits of girls through such limited examples is to determine a very narrow view of who they are and who they may be.

Although our interest in how "realistically" girls are represented and treated in the books teens read is important, we should also take care to note the social realities that, like it or not, form those impressions. From girls' relationships to themselves, to how they attend to others, to public and private perceptions, it is critical that those

of us who teach, study, work, and live with girls understand the varying and complicated structures that have held and continue to hold them in place. It is also imperative that we note the oppressive forces from which they have managed to break free. Many images we have of girls that we tend to think of as a thing of the past continue to impact their young lives today, and more social constructs than we realize still determine to a large degree what constitutes an appropriate girlhood experience. In a sense, Ms. Wolf's argument against the aforementioned texts is undermined by her reference to the more traditional "girls" texts (Austin, Alcott) that she considers edifying. Other readers may not see her recommendations quite the way she does. On the one hand, her ideal of texts that uphold a particularly pleasing image of girlhood, while admirable at some levels, might be found limiting and stifling at others. Just as the *Gossip Girls* represents a cultural niche that is somewhat alien to me (not totally, I might add, since I participate in the consumer culture referenced throughout), so might the texts Ms. Wolf applauds feel equally alien to a wide host of girl readers for any number of reasons. The point here is that no one book will satisfy the reading needs, desires, and pleasures of all.

Most of us interact with girls on a daily basis, but Wolf's concerns make me wonder how much we actively think about those girls as both pawns and agents in evolving perceptions of adolescence and gender in American culture. How DOES the presence of girls in unsanctioned roles and situations

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continue to impact socio-cultural thinking and popular culture trends? To make gains in our understandings of how to best allow girls to thrive, we must have a clear picture of how they have been continuously envisioned and manipulated by any variety of forces, as well as how they have imagined and enacted their own sense of personhood despite these forces. A review of some contemporary resources that locate images of girls in text, media, and a material culture context will greatly expand our insight as to why girls choose texts as varied as those from the *Clique* series to *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging* to *Stargirl*. This investigation should prove fruitful in filling out our thinking of how girls are portrayed in the literature that is written for them and how they respond to those portrayals.

Numerous books exist that provide a foundational understanding of the history of adolescence in America, including the popular *A Tribe Apart*, by Patricia Hersch, and Thomas Hines' *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. The one,

however, that I find accessible for a quick overview of what charts the most comprehensive story of adolescence is *Teenagers: An American History*, by Grace Palladino. This well researched and readable text introduces useful concepts for further study that frequently have been applied to gender specific trends by various scholars and writers. It is a must read for anyone trying to get at the breadth and depth of teen culture. A few of the issues Palladino covers that apply specifically to the lives of girls include: the economics of girlhood; the commercial sexualization of girls; girls as proponents of popular culture, as mass media consumers, as juvenile delinquents, and as individuals determined to define a culture of their own. It is my intent to explore briefly texts that connect to these concepts and suggest what they might contribute to our work as teachers, scholars, parents, friends, and advocates of girls.

Recently, a graduate student of mine was transcribing some notes for me from Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. He told me that as he began the work, he thought he would simply skim through my notes and type them up. However, as he started to read about what girls give up and must negotiate in the name of their bodies, he became interested enough to read Brumberg's book cover to cover. The end result, he said, was mind-boggling. What he had in the past attributed to "hormones and phases" was quickly replaced with concrete evidence of what consumerism, social pressure, and the era changes

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from a repressive society to an obsessive one has actually cost girls. Brumberg’s work deepens the issues attended to in many YA texts, but especially those that concern themselves with body image. Characters in *Perfect*, *Life in the Fat Lane*, and *Fix* take on added dimensions as we begin to understand how girls once concerned with mere pimples and “baby fat” are now faced with dermabrasion and even plastic surgery. From breasts to thighs, from smoking to dieting, from sexual pressure to sexual freedom, Brumberg directs readers toward the battleground that girls’ bodies are and have been for a long time. Because their bodies are always at the forefront of how others perceive them, it is critical that we consider what this means to girls in more than a merely speculative way. Certainly, this kind of awareness about girls and their bodies can help us have conversations about situations in books like *Gossip Girls* that allow us to meaningfully question how some girls view their bodies and what they represent, rather than simply dismissing the characters in the books as poor role models with unhealthy ideals of femininity.

Double standards have a long and documented history, but I fear we may have become so comfort-

able in accepting they exist, that we truly forget the harm they continue to cause. *Slut!: Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation* by Leora Tanenbaum explores important ground in broadening the scope of what labels mean to girls. Once “named” a slut herself, Tanenbaum looks at the stories of how good girls are stereotyped in this destructive manner for any number of reasons, some more vicious than others (*Story of a Girl*). After sharing her own story, Tanenbaum exposes the socio-historical roots of what will later come to define girls as tramps, loose, and outsiders. She further explores how the crime of rape is often turned against girls to become a “she asked for it” mentality that has the capacity to both silence (*Speak*) and destroy (*Inexcusable*). Tanenbaum forces readers to consider the on-going war waged against girls in a never ending attempt to possess and name them. Other texts in this genre worth exploring include *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and The Myth of the Slut* by Emily White and *The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do—Sex Play, Aggression, and Their Guilt* by Sharon Lamb. All of these books can open our eyes to how to better help girls deal with imposed labels and the restrictive norms of female sexuality. They also help readers come to better understandings of the emotions and feelings girls experience around these issues. A book in this category that takes a more academic approach is Deborah Tolman’s *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality*. Tolman strongly advocates teaching girls to own their desires to prevent others from colonizing and labeling

them for their own purposes. Her text is as scholarly as it is engaging, and it takes a stand that enables girls rather than simply analyzing their dilemma.

Other groundbreaking texts that take a close look at girls and work to deconstruct popular cultural images include *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in 20th Century Popular Culture* by Ilana Nash; *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* by Susan J. Douglas; and *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls’ Culture, 1920-1945* by Kelly Schrum. All three of these books provide insightful analysis of how pop culture has been a continuing influence in both exploiting and defining girls since the earliest inceptions of postwar adolescence. These texts consider everything from literary images of girls (think *Nancy Drew*) to pop stars (dare I say Britney) to movie, music, and television icons. The authors look closely at how girls have been (mis)represented and controlled by the media since the era of silent films to the more recent advent of “girl movies.” They make a strong case for how public mediums have blurred the lines of girlhood and personhood and made it extremely difficult, if not impossible in some cases, for girls to know who they are outside of the culture that grabs them before they are out of the cradle. Schrum’s book is slightly different in that it focuses a bit more on fashion, beauty, and eras, all important pieces to a good understanding of how girls respond to and create trends. The author also recognizes more fully how girls themselves drive popular culture.

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Further, the emphasis on consumer culture and its impact on girls is historically fascinating and crucial to any study of this particular aspect of girlhood. No surprises here as to why Serena and Blair of the *Gossip Girls* have learned to prefer Tiffany's to Wal-Mart and Victoria's Secret to Hanes.

Three texts that take a cultural studies and theory approach to their investigation of girlhood include Catherine Driscoll's *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*; Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell's (ed.) *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits*; and Anita Harris' (ed.) *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*. All of these texts are for the serious researcher wanting to explore both national and international girl culture scholarship on everything from racism to classism, power and violence, to the expanding theories of girlhood as seen in

disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and history. Driscoll approaches the study of girls through a Foucauldian lens, arguing that the idea of girlhood is much bigger and broader than the narrow definitions traditionally attached to it. Jiwani, et. al., provide a variety of essays that complicate lingering notions of girls as simply "sugar and spice" and that find new meanings in the multitude of ways 21st Century girls have come to define themselves. The essays Harris includes cover everything from analytical interpretations of post-feminisms to research actually conducted with and by girls. These sources are not for those looking for a quick read, but are worth the time spent for the comprehensive and comparative analysis they provide. Between the three of them, the authors have provided a broad spectrum of concerns and considerations for girlhood studies.

As is too often the case in thinking about human groups in a monolithic manner, we tend to lump all members of them together and ignore the fact that race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, and even spirituality greatly impact the individual and unique lives they know. Some texts that provide invaluable insights into growing up under the gaze of the white, heterosexual, middle-class "norm" while standing clearly outside of it are Iris Jacob's *My Sisters' Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*; *Under Her Skin: How Girls Experience Race in America* by Pooja Makhijani (ed.); *Sugar in the Raw: Voices of Young Black Girls in America* by Rebecca Carroll; and *Without a Net: The Female Experi-*

ence of Growing Up Working Class by Michelle Tea (ed.). All of these books listen to the voices of girls and women who reflect on what life is like for those who are not white, not always middle class, not necessarily Christian, and not a part of the mainstream culture. If, as teachers, we ever needed more conclusive evidence as to why we should be familiar with texts like *Born Confused*, *Who Am I Without Him*, *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe*, or *Keeping you a Secret*, these books provide that rationale. They remind us loudly and clearly that every day we interact with girls who do not fit the socio-cultural notion of All-American Girl. More than we imagine, girls of sub-groups are left out and their particular experiences and understandings are mostly ignored. As people who care about girls, we must and can do better to encourage and listen to the stories of the lives of all girls, not just those most familiar to us.

A fun but nonetheless eye-opening text for those who appreciate the importance of visual representations of culture is *Teenage Confidential: An Illustrated History of the American Teen* by Michael Barson and Steven Miller. This graphic text contains numerous illustrations that are an excellent supplement to some of the more weighty academic texts already discussed. It proves the point that a picture really IS worth a thousand words as it takes readers from media sweethearts to B-rated thrill seekers gone wild. The emphasis here is on the media representation of teens as rebels and delinquents, but only after juxtaposing that position with the equally dangerous one of

"Kleenteens". In movies, books, and advertising, girls are depicted as erroneously as wide-eyed innocents as much as they are come-hither sex kittens. From Shirley Temple to lipstick stealing mobsters to man crazed girls of the night and back again to prom perfect romantics, *Teenage Confidential* provides readers with a visual panoramic of bad girls on the loose, as well as going-steady hipsters who know exactly how to act on a date. While on the surface these images seem to serve as mere artifacts, the historical implications of the girls represented are of a more serious nature. When coupled with texts like Mary Odem's *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* or Sherrie Inness' (ed.) *Delinquents & Debutantes: 20th Century American Girls' Cultures*, the on-going contesting, commodification, and commercialization of girls independence, "liberation," and sexuality becomes starkly defined. *Teenage Confidential* brings to life the dense textual interpretations of a number of the other books.

Because many readers really do enjoy seeing historical perspectives through pictures, I would also suggest a look at two of Trina Robbins' texts. The first, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women Comics from Teens to Zines*, is a wonderful compendium that covers more than 50 years of comics for girls. The first interesting fact that Robbins points to is that girls actually once read more comic books than did boys. Given the messages embedded in the comics she presents, this is not the light-hearted read it might appear. While

delightfully entertaining, Robbins' text is enlightening, as well, as it parallels the socio-cultural history detailed in books like Palladino's. Readers find a blown-up concept of girl culture as seen by consumers of comic media. From "Betty and Veronica" to graphic novels like *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, readers follow the trajectory of issues for girls and how they are positioned over time. All readers will learn something of importance here.

Another look at comics that Robbins takes is through the lens of super women. *The Great Women Super Heroes* is a fascinating history of how "powerful" girls have been envisioned by others and what that vision has meant to girls. Beginning, of course, with Wonder Woman who we know is "Beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, stronger than Hercules and swifter than Mercury," Robbins invites readers to join her on a lively romp through the female super heroes that girls have turned to over time. Black Cat, Miss Victory, Ultra Violet and, of course, Supergirl are just a few of the many women heroes that girls have known in their reading. These are strong, brave women

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who are never afraid to use their power, be it for good or evil, in order to achieve a larger end. Robbins' books are well researched and will surely provide hours of important reading for anyone interested in the way girls might respond to comic heroines who move beyond the current pornographic comic representations of women with super strength and power.

For those with a serious interest in girls and their comics, I would suggest starting with *Wonder Woman: The Complete History* by Les Daniels. This is a beautiful text that traces the birth of this controversial character as she grew from the ideas of Harvard-educated William Marston (inventor of the lie detector) in 1941 to become an iconic figure still replicated and recognized around the world. With her face and image attached to everything from dolls to lunch boxes to a special edition of macaroni and cheese touted by Kraft industries in 1998, this comic book Amazon has even had a US commemorative postal stamp in her honor. Since her creation almost 70 years ago, generation after generation of young women have identified and claimed *Wonder Woman* for their own. The story of why is one that should be of interest to many readers, but is mandatory for anyone doing a serious study of graphic novel portrayals of girls.

A final important text that is the first of its kind is a two-volume encyclopedia entitled *Girl Culture*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. This text is unique in that it includes long and short essays about girls and their culture, as well as shorter entries

about girl specific topics. Covering everything from abstinence bracelets to zines, girl related topics of the past as well as the present are referenced through a variety of artifacts, including books, toys, film, concepts, and subcultures. This is a gem of a find for anyone wanting to orient to the vast array of issues and identities which girls have aligned themselves with and been aligned with over time. If you think you know everything there is to know about the lives of girls, check out a copy of *Girl Culture*. I can promise you that there are numerous entries that will surprise and educate you.

Because girls are present regularly in most of our lives, it is easy to assume we know a good deal about them simply through observation. While this may in part be true, it does not tell us the whole truth of what girls know that we do not, and what they assimilate to as well as rebel against in larger arenas. Delving more seriously into their world helps us decode troubling cultural messages that we might otherwise shrug off as mere youth, allowing us an opportunity to act more aggressively on their behalf and to encourage them to become their own agents of change. As our society has expanded, so too have some of the issues girls face; others have been exacerbated or simply renegotiated into different problems. Research continues to support Bronwyn Davies (1991 2003) and Peggy Rice's (2000 2002) work that concludes texts alone do not change the way girls see themselves in the world. Adults are needed to help girls appropriate some of the

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texts they read, and to do that we must understand the more extended meanings that the socio-cultural practices presented in those texts have for girls. We can only do that if we are willing to read beyond the fiction we recommend to texts that provide greater depth of understanding. If we do this, perhaps we can help girls creatively reinvent the world they inhabit in healthy and meaningful ways.

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