

Review of Girls' series fiction and American popular culture

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Girls' Series Fiction and American Popular Culture. Edited by LuElla D'Amico. London: Lexington Books, 2016. 352 pp. £70.00 (hbk). ISBN 978-1-4985-1762-1

Review by Dr Amy Burge, Lecturer in Popular Fiction, Department of English Literature, University of Birmingham

It is easy to dismiss girls' fiction, the subject of this comprehensive book, as something to be left behind in childhood. Yet from the outset, LuElla D'Amico positions this collection squarely within contemporary discourses of gender, power, and culture in modern America. Published in 2016, the year that Hillary Clinton's run for the Presidency exposed the rampant misogyny of American culture, these essays forcefully argue that the literature that informed the early development of many American women, including those at the top, remains important.

The fourteen essays are organised chronologically from the postbellum nineteenth century to the 21st century. There is a good range across the time span with four essays on nineteenth-century fiction, five on mid-twentieth-century series, and five covering fiction post-1980. The first two chapters cover the earliest nineteenth-century girls' fiction. Marlowe Daly-Galeano explores time and aging in *Little Women* (1868) through the metaphor of the theatre as a structuring device. Eva Lupold's chapter is a welcome addition to a small but growing body of scholarship on disability in girls' series fiction. Lupold presents a bold reading of the 'dialogic tensions' at work in the Katy series (1872-), countering existing arguments that see the series as regressive in arguing that 'disability... open[s] up opportunities for queer spaces to emerge' (p. 39).

Nancy Drew sits at the heart of approaches to girls' series fiction and it is in dealing with series synonymous with Drew that the collection gets into its stride. As Michael G. Cornelius states in his chapter on girl detective Trixie Belden, '[a]ll girl sleuths are redactions of, or reactions to, Nancy Drew' (p. 91). Carolyn Cocca traces changes in representations of gender, class, and race in the Trixie Belden series from 1948-1986, concluding that while the series presents a spectrum of gender identities, it is more monolithic in its persistent heteronormativity and almost exclusive whiteness. Nichole Bogarosh moves away from the texts themselves to present interviews with twelve women who consider the girl detectives to be role models, positing that this may have developed the women's identification as feminist.

Several essays deal with labour and the ways girls' series fiction presents new ways of thinking about women and work. Christiane E. Farnan points out how the *Five Little Peppers* books (1881-1916) endorse and value girl labour as vital to family life and a key way to desire and be desired when choosing a husband. Paige Gray argues that L. Frank Baum –author of numerous girls' series books including the Aunt Jane's Nieces books (1906-) – draws on the 'history of women in journalism' (p. 71) to 'probe[...] societal gender conventions' (p. 81) and 'capitalize[...] on the 'spectacle' of girls at work, particularly those in newspapers' (p. 72). Linda Simon argues that the 1940s series *Cherry Ames, Student Nurse* presents an alternative to marriage, instead modelling a 'true career woman' (p. 152) at a time of significant social change for women during and after World War II.

In the later twentieth century girls fiction continues to engage with work. Mary Bronstein's chapter on the Baby-Sitters Club series (1986-) acknowledges its paradox - 'between a positive example of young female business owners and the indoctrination of young girls into traditional female roles' (p. 206). Bronstein argues that the series regressively values feminised labour and hegemonic femininity. Mariko Turk's chapter on the American Girls toys and accompanying historical fiction books takes as its focus '[t]he moral 'disjuncture' between the symbolic meaning of children's toys and the realities of global industry' (p. 188) that often involves the labour of women and girls. Drawing on Barthes' idea of 'inoculation', Turk ultimately argues that in its treatment of early

twentieth-century industrial labour the series encourages girls to consume the brand and accept the global consumer culture that produces it.

A cluster of chapters focus on the feminist legacy of girls' series fiction, drawing connections between older and newer forms. Lori Johnson and Lisa Laurier's chapter is the only one to focus on fiction for younger readers, specifically Jane O'Connor's *Fancy Nancy* series (2005-). Johnson and Laurier are critical of the series' gender stereotyping which they read as 'regressing to an earlier, highly feminized and domesticated version of female-hood that dominated fiction in the early 1900s and beginning of the twentieth century' (p. 229). Janine Darragh, on the other hand, argues that Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* series (2007-2010) offers a messier, less perfect way to be a girl, embracing the values of third-wave feminism in contrast to previous girls' series fiction. Megan E. Friddle traces the narrative structures of girls' series fiction, drawing a direct line between the Victorian diary-keeping of early fiction and contemporary confessional modes, including blogging. Grace Halden's chapter on the *Pretty Little Liars* series (2006-), the final essay in the collection, analyses the role of communication technology and its modernisation of the 'established educational narrative' (p. 270) of older girls' series fiction.

The purpose of an edited collection is rarely to delve deeply into a subject, but rather to function as a series of introductions, showcasing breadth and variety. This is a key strength of *Girls' Series Fiction and American Popular Culture* that promises to deliver 'as comprehensive a historical and critical approach as possible' (p. xvi). Edited collections can struggle with cohesion, but the essays in this collection helpfully outline connections between the essays, creating a homogeneity that is often absent from such work. Given the newness of the topic and the stated commitment to comprehensiveness it would have been helpful to have had a more developed definition of girls' series fiction in the introduction and a more robust rationale for the exclusion of certain texts from the collection's canon. However, for folkloristics invested in the intersection of culture and identity this book, which pays close attention to questions of genre, motif, and change over time, is a welcome addition to the field.