

VIEWING GIRLHOOD IN MEDIA'S MIRROR

by Amy Pattee

Frances Gateward & Murray Pomerance, eds., *SUGAR, SPICE, AND EVERYTHING NICE: CINEMAS OF GIRLHOOD*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002. 387p. bibl. index. \$49.95, ISBN 0-8143-2917-9; pap., \$29.95, ISBN 0-8143-2918-7.

Sarah Hentges, *PICTURES OF GIRLHOOD: MODERN FEMALE ADOLESCENCE ON FILM*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006. 258p. filmography. bibl. index. \$32.00, ISBN 978-0-7864-2402-3.

Ilana Nash, *AMERICAN SWEETHEARTS: TEENAGE GIRLS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY POPULAR CULTURE*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. 280p. bibl. index. \$21.95, ISBN 0-253-21802-0.

Caren J. Town, *THE NEW SOUTHERN GIRL: FEMALE ADOLESCENCE IN THE WORKS OF 12 WOMEN AUTHORS*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004. 199p. bibl. index. \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-7864-1893-0.

A recent article in the *New York Times*, focusing on the collegiate preparation of several talented and achieving young women from the upper middle-class Boston suburb of Newton, Massachusetts, emphasized the paradox of the contemporary privileged female life. In the article, entitled "For Girls, It's Be Yourself, and Be Perfect, Too," author Sarah Rimer described the unique pressures associated with feminine life on the edge of the "girl power" era: "If you are free to be everything, you are also expected to be everything."¹ The girls Rimer interviewed related two of the loudest messages with which they had been struggling: "Bring home A's. Do everything. Get into a top college," and "Be yourself. Have fun. Don't work too hard." The girls' own interpretation of these messages included the time-worn maxim to be "pretty, thin, and... effortlessly hot."² In Newton, at least, young women still contend with that popularized catch-22: Can a girl be smart and sexy at the same time?

The books discussed here — Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance's collection of essays, *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*;

Sarah Hentges' *Pictures of Girlhood: Modern Female Adolescence on Film*; Ilana Nash's *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture*; and Caren J. Town's *The New Southern Girl: Female Adolescence in the Works of Twelve Women Authors* — reflect a distinct scholarly interest in the conflicting images of girlhood confronted by girls like the Newton overachievers. While these monographs and one essay collection may all seek to interrogate images of girls in various media, the authors' critical methodologies, interpretations, and assessments of the implications of such research vary.

Both *Sugar...* and *Pictures of Girlhood* discuss the image of the adolescent girl in motion pictures, each taking a somewhat historical look at the ways in which girls have been portrayed in media. Whereas Hentges' *Pictures of Girlhood* is a single-authored publication, however, Gateward and Pomerance have collected nineteen essays from diverse scholars including bell hooks and Mary Celeste Kearney. Both books acknowledge that cin-

ematic images exert a certain degree of influence on their viewers. Hentges, in her introduction, claims that "popular culture absolutely acts as a set of myths and markers for adolescence [and] that film...is, at least potentially, a powerful determinant of social, cultural and economic realities" (p.10). The effect of what they call "so many famous, explicit, and wildly successful films" about girlhood inspired Gateward and Pomerance to "right the balance" of cinema scholarship and "turn a critical eye on the character of filmic girls, films intended for girl audiences, and the issues of girlhood" (p.16). Although both texts discuss a significant number of the same films (for example, both address *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Clueless* (1995), and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995)), Gateward and Pomerance's collection devotes itself to the close analysis of more mainstream films, while Hentges' book examines ninety-one popular and independent movies with varying degrees of depth.

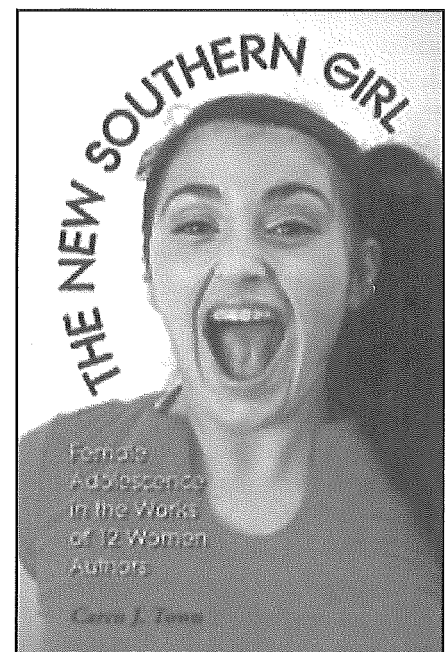
The issue of selecting films for analysis is touched on in both works, as the authors' conceptions of what qualifies as "girls' film" differ. Hentges identifies films according to their "focus on a lead female character and her coming of age" (p.3) and examines them in terms of the following themes: "sex and romance, sexuality, race and class, power and empowerment, [and] coming of age" (p.3). Unlike the films discussed in Gateward and Pomerance's collection, which include titles in which a young female figure shares the narrative spotlight with older or male characters, all of the films Hentges discusses feature girls or groups of girls as central figures. Hentges observes that "mainstream films offer roles [for girls] that are based upon stereotypes and polarizations, even if the characters challenge these conceptualizations" (p. 11), while independent films give the feminine character more latitude and can include more complicated portrayals of girlhood. While a certain tension exists between the typologies of girlhood "allowed" in mainstream and independent movies, Hentges notes that both categories of production address consistent themes relevant to girlhood.

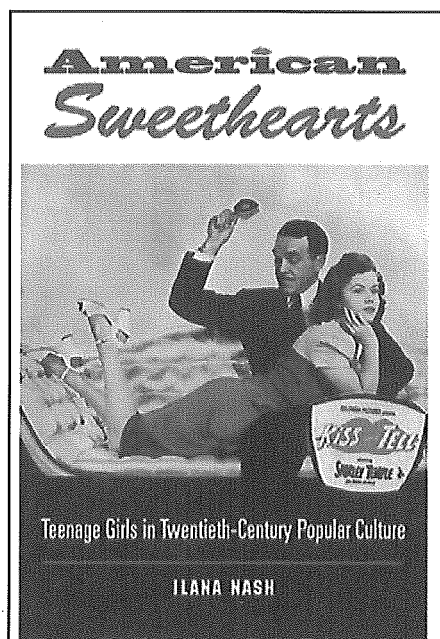
The figures of the "good girl" and the "bad girl" are contrasted in many girls' films and are sometimes negotiated by way of the narrative incorporation of the "Cinderella story" of transformation or success. Hentges observes that while these character and plot conventions are present in both mainstream and independent films, the details of the transformation story or the story of "making it big" vary from the conventional (mainstream films) to the oppositional (independent films). Hentges' acknowledgement of the fairy-tale and mythological influ-

ences on film narrative is notable for its nod to intertextuality; however, when girls' movies that have been adapted from novels and short stories are discussed (*The Princess Diaries* and *Smooth Talk* are two examples), an acknowledgement of the print incarnations of these stories is the extent of what has the potential to become an intriguing critique. Some of the movies Hentges discusses in depth are drawn from popular young adult novels (the aforementioned *The Princess Diaries*, *Ella Enchanted*, and *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen*). Hentges misses the opportunity, however, to discuss the similarities and differences between the print and filmic rendering of the girl characters and the likely narrative manipulations that occurred during the translation of novel to film. As the young adult novels, in particular, are written to address a youthful and often gendered audience not unlike the one envisioned by teen movie creators, a discussion of the book-to-movie phenomenon would be especially enlightening.

The analyses of girls' films in *Sugar...* are organized according to what the editors identify as "three broad aspects of girls and girl culture — the maturation process; the struggle to either adhere to or revolt against archetypes; and issues of power, both real and fantasized" (p.17). Some of the titles discussed in depth in the collected essays include *The Wizard of Oz*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Clueless*, and *Spice World*. Other contributions, like Ann De Vaney's essay about the eighties-era films of John Hughes and Timothy Shary's piece about the filmic type, the "nerdly girl," discuss a handful of titles. DeVaney's focus includes *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club*, while Shary examines *She's Out of Control*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, *She's All That*,

and *Never Been Kissed*. In contrast to Hentges' analyses, a number of the essays in *Sugar...* refer to related media representations of girls as a means of questioning what might at first seem like unique filmic representations of girlhood. Gateward and Pomerance argue that "for the most part in contemporary films about girls, the female subject is an exemplification — often through exaggeration — of hegemonic attitudes and values about girlhood, and the films are instructive texts rather than documents of revolution" (p.14). The authors' examinations of the female subject in film and, where applicable, in related media, are ways of addressing this observation. What seems at first to be a collection of essays describing diverse representations of young femininity becomes, in total, an argument that confirms the limitations of filmic femininity. Once recognized as "types," the "angry girl" and the "nerdly girl," for example, become less exceptional and, as each is described in detail, more prescriptive. Ina Rae Hark's examination of the theme of "home-leaving" in *The Wizard of Oz* compares the ways this theme was al-





tered in the transformation of book to movie. Cynthia Fuchs, too, addresses the discourse of print media relative to filmic discourse in an examination of the Spice Girls' vehicle, *Spice World*. The editors acknowledge the presence of gaps in the scope of the collection; however, the frank admission of what Gateward and Pomerance would call omissions serves to underscore the newness of this academic pursuit and inspire related paths of investigation. Ultimately, the related essays offer a complex and satisfying introduction to the cinematic girl, past and present.

Caren J. Town looks to a different medium — women's novels and life writing — to expose and offer alternatives to traditional images of adolescent girlhood. In response to the glut of pessimistic literature related to girls' difference that offer what Town calls a "bleak picture of female adolescence," the author looks to "recent representations of young women, fictional and autobiographical, which show adolescent girls who are proud, stubborn and focused...who also use their brains and good humor to work toward satisfying adult lives" (p.1). Like Hentges and Gateward and Pomerance, Town

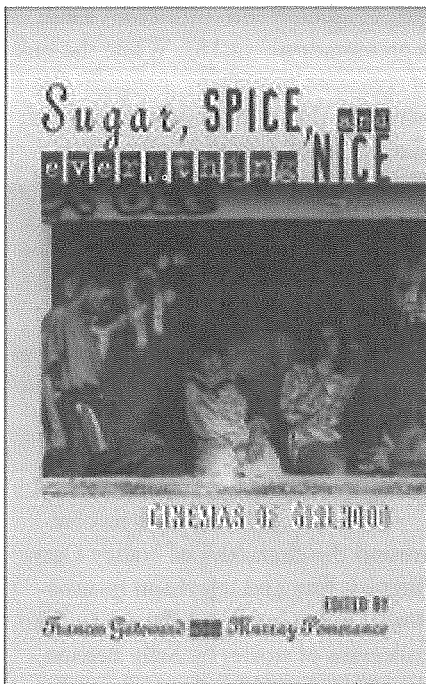
acknowledges the influences of media images of girls. Unlike Gateward and Pomerance, though, Town focuses on the portrayals of girls she deems positive and predicts that narratives like those she discusses "will provide 'the script to follow' for girls — and critics — in the twenty-first century" (p.17). Town's work focuses on novels by Lee Smith, Anne Tyler, Sam Hughes, Josephine Humphreys, Bobbie Ann Mason, Dorothy Allison, Kaye Gibbons, Trina McElroy Ansa, Janisse Ray, Jill McCorkle, Katherine Paterson, Mildred Taylor, and Cynthia Voigt, who, she claims, "represent part of a new wave of Southern female writers who, while building on an existing tradition of self-determined heroines, are striving to portray contemporary young Southern women as confident, resilient, and independent" (p.18). Town only loosely compares these authors' portrayals of girls to other contemporary fictional portrayals of the same, but offers them as activist responses to generalizations about the "crisis of contemporary girlhood" captured in popular nonfiction like Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*. This sort of critique appears only in the first chapter; the chapter-length readings of novels serve more to highlight the strength and resilience of the fictional girl subjects crafted by the writers than to offer an active critique. Whereas *Sugar...* and *Pictures of Girlhood* seem committed to such a critique, Town's work is less about criticizing images of girls and more about demonstrating the ways in which the adolescent female characters in the novels she discusses fit her criteria for emancipation. While Town means to argue a point that *Sugar...* makes well — that "the popular conception of female adolescence...has been shaped by recent essentialist and deterministic sociological and psychological theories" (Town, p. 8) — her summaries and descriptions of literature that constructs

girls against the popular grain only make half the point. Town offers brief portraits of female characters created by Southern women writers that she claims offer "alternative" narrative possibilities for young women; however, absent a strong description of the "old southern girl" as a basis of comparison, it is difficult to determine how "alternative" these characters really are.

Ilana Nash's *American Sweethearts* is an exploration of portrayals of girlhood in multiple media, an examination of a series of characters as they are depicted in film, television, radio, and print. Nash's focus is on what she calls comic "narrative cycles" of girlhood between 1930 and 1965 ("narrative cycles" are defined as "a collection of stories about a single character across several media" [p.4]). The end date of 1965 was chosen because, Nash argues, "in the late 1960s and beyond, changes in women's and girls' roles in American culture caused images of girls to splinter into numerous kinds of representations" (p.18). While the bulk of *American Sweethearts* concerns itself with that thirty-five year period, Nash makes a brief pass at contemporary media, drawing from films like *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Blue Crush* to argue in the epilogue that in spite of the seeming diversity of feminine representation in the media, "the dignity and true agency of teenage girls...are just as unthinkable in popular entertainment today as they were seventy years ago" (p.226).

Nash's cycles of focus revolve around the characters of Nancy Drew (literary, film and television incarnations); Judy Graves (of the *Junior Miss* collection of stories by Sally Benson, the play inspired by the same, and the radio series and film based on the

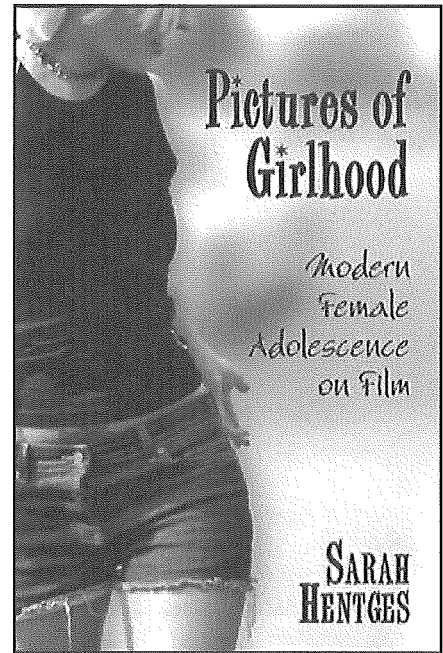
play); Corliss Archer (of the short story, play, film, comic book and TV show); and Gidget (of film, novel and television). In an examination of the prominent themes that emerge in these multiple media portrayals of adolescent girls, Nash concludes, "Between 1930 and 1965, the dominant portrayals of the teenage girl in popular narratives coalesced around two interrelated issues: the degree of her adherence to patriarchally approved models of youthful femininity, and her effect upon her domestic and institutional 'fathers'" (p.215). Nash follows this interpretive thread throughout her analyses of various narrative cycles to strong effect, and it is this cohesion that allows this book to stand out above the other single-authored texts discussed here. One of the best sections of the book involves Nash's critical discussion of Nancy Drew. Nash's argument against the character's positioning as a



feminist icon is refreshing, subtle, and apt: "Nancy reflects her creators' beliefs that women could be agents — an idea compatible, but not synonymous, with modern feminism" (p.42).

As the essays in *Sugar and Spice*, *Pictures of Girlhood*, and, to a lesser degree, *The New Southern Girl* imply, Nash, too, argues that young women in media "operate like allegorical figures, signifying ideal abstractions more than the interiority of a three-dimensionally rendered human...[the teenage girl] becomes a 'type' and often, indeed, a stereotype — an iconic abstraction representing dominant culture's desires or nightmares" (pp.2, 9). *American Sweethearts*, unlike the titles mentioned above, offers a strong theoretical explanation for the persistence of such female "types" in popular media. In the book's introduction — indeed, throughout the investigation — Nash observes that because "long traditions in Western culture" have eroticized both women and children to the point that both are considered Others, teenage girls, as liminal figures, have "been culturally imagined in a position of double 'lack,' which facilitates their portrayals as diminished, fetishized, and frequently sexualized" (p.19). The sexualized "daddy's girl" becomes the metaphor for this "double lack" and Nash demonstrates the ways in which Nancy Drew, Judy Graves, Corliss Archer, and Gidget vacillate from one position of otherness to the next.

Although each of the texts discussed so far in this review purports to discuss images of the American girl across a variety of media, scant attention is paid to issues of race and class and popular depictions of the same. Nash discusses the depiction of minority characters in the Nancy Drew



series and, in describing the image of the "sub-deb," the "high society girl in her early to mid-teens," notes that this white, upper- or upper-middle-class figure "was the dominant image of the teenage girl in popular culture... throughout the 1930s and early 1940s" (p.98). Thus, the lack of attention to race and class is explained by the historical setting of the narrative cycles of focus.

Race is not a significant factor in most of the essays in Gateward and Pomerance's collection, but bell hooks's contribution, "Sorrowful Black Death Is Not a Hot Ticket," which examines Spike Lee's portrayal of gender and race in *Crooklyn*, explains the absence: "The racial politics of Hollywood is such that there can be no serious representations of death and dying when the characters are African-Americans" (p.91). While this observation is specific to hooks's focus on the theme of death in a specific narrative, its address of an existing system of racial politics in Hollywood implies a lack of diverse racial images in mainstream movies.

Interestingly, although Hentges (in *Pictures of Girlhood*) continues to assert

that mainstream films “allow[] [only] a skin-deep inclusion of other races, ethnicities and nationalities” and that these “are included only as long as they are easily incorporated and exploited, bought and sold” (p.19), one of her conclusions related to audience reception of such films privileges the margins. Writing that audiences interested in more realistic portrayals of female adolescence must seek out alternative narratives “at the edge of the morass,” Hentges concludes that, because of their distance from the mainstream and the “different” readings of popular media this distance effects, “girls and women pushed farthest to the margins who have the most skillful and conscious negotiation [because] [t]hey have the most practice, the longest history of negotiation, and the most to lose” (p. 234).

While Town does examine both working-class characters and characters of color in *The New Southern Girl*, her focus on identifying and highlighting positive portrayals of adolescent females in contemporary literature obscures any critical discussions of race and class.

As the academic field of girls’ studies grows, we look for more resources related to girls’ studies and advocacy. The books reviewed above represent only a sample of the latest research that would fall under the general subject heading of “girls’ studies.” The critical and academic tones of Nash’s and Gateward and Pomerance’s books make each of these excellent scholarly resources that would complement women’s studies collections and could accompany film studies and cultural

studies collections. Furthermore, the established authority of Nash as a researcher in the field of girls’ studies and the inclusion of such noted academics as Kearney and hooks in Gateward and Pomerance’s collection confirm the academic credentials of both tomes. The authority and potential application of Town’s and Hentges’ books are less certain. The scope of each book — in Hentges’ case, the wide-angle view of girls’ cinema; in Town’s case, the close readings of selected works by selected authors — renders each a special or second purchase for libraries.

Gateward and Pomerance conclude their essay collection’s introduction with a call for viewers and readers to “see screen girls as a central and inescapable part of the global filmic construction” (p.21), an appeal that echoes a women’s studies mission to see women as “central and inescapable.” Women’s studies involves interrogating the structures — economic, cultural, political and social — implicit in the subordination of women and, as this discipline expands, involves a growing recognition of the complexity of these structural relationships. Town and Hentges offer easy answers through media analysis: Town suggests that specific types of literary images of girls will empower readers toward emancipation, while Hentges concludes that girls’ films can effect change at the audience

level if viewers “recognize[] a lack of fit between mainstream expectations and reality” (p.232). While these conclusions may be true and certainly serve to authorize potential audience activism, the observations all the authors make related to the complexity and complication of the young female image preclude such simplicity. In order to centralize the female experience, a revolution of sorts seems in order. The negotiation of popular images and the hunt for alternatives must give way to what Nash calls an “alter[ation] of the old myths” (p.228) — an activist endeavor, to be sure.

Notes

1. Sara Rimer, “For Girls, It’s Be Yourself, and Be Perfect, Too,” *New York Times* (April 1, 2007), Section 1, Column 1.
2. Ibid.

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