

**Ilana Nash.** *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006. x + 264 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-21802-5.



**Reviewed by** Elizabeth Marshall

**Published on** H-Childhood (September, 2007)

Nancy Drew, Judy Graves, Corliss Archer, and Gidget are the subjects of Ilana Nash's study of twentieth-century American popular culture. For the author, these girlhood icons and the storylines they inhabit capture American culture's ambivalence about female adolescence. Nash sets out to understand the paradoxical representations of white teenage girls as contradictory characters, who are often portrayed as sexually innocent and/or as angelic troublemakers.

*American Sweethearts* can be situated within the burgeoning field of Girls' Studies. This interdisciplinary field grew throughout the 1990s when researchers from a variety of disciplines, such as history, humanities, and social sciences, brought critical attention to girls and their cultures. Nash's study of teen girls in popular culture adds to this body of work and also draws on and contributes to scholarship in history, literature, and cultural studies.

Ilana Nash is an assistant professor of English at Western Michigan University. Interested in the history of adolescence and the development of teen girls as a social category, Nash begins her

study with the "discovery" of adolescence in the 1930s and finishes in 1965 when, she argues, "any coherent representation of the teen girl ended" (p. 18). Specifically, Nash uses a historical backdrop to analyze a range of popular narrative cycles that feature teen girls. She defines a narrative cycle as a "collection of stories about a single character across several media" (p. 5). Through an analysis of books, films, plays, popular magazines, and other texts Nash details how writers and other cultural producers consistently undermined girls' authority in popular culture by privileging reductive patriarchal ideas about adolescent girls.

The book includes an introduction, four chronologically organized chapters that cover several popular narrative cycles featuring teen girls that were created between 1930 and 1965 in the United States, and a short epilogue. In her introduction, Nash clarifies that *American Sweethearts* focuses on representations of white adolescent girlhood and is less concerned with girls' reception of materials than with cultural texts and their creators. Nash writes that she concentrates on, "narratives' content and the producers who

created them, in order to glean the composition of a particular American mythology of female adolescence" (p. 11). Her analysis focuses on white teen girl characters, arguing that "American images of teen girlhood have historically been all but barren of racial Otherness" (p. 9). Nash then proceeds to trace this mythology of the teenage girl through a detailed consideration of several popular narratives.

Chapter one focuses on girl-sleuth Nancy Drew and provides a summary of scholarship related to the production and reception of the Nancy Drew Mystery Series and its creation by the Stratemeyer Syndicate. In Chapter 2, Nash builds on this background to analyze filmic representations of Nancy Drew and the marketing of the films to young women and their parents. Like the revisions made to the Nancy Drew series in the late 1950s, Nash argues that the script-writers re-wrote Nancy Drew into a heroine with less "pluck." The remaining two chapters follow a similar formula as Nash traces the different iterations of popular teen girl figures, Judy Graves, Corliss Archer, Gidget, and Patty Duke across a range of media. Chapter 3 introduces readers to the conventions of comic teen narratives and girls as the central characters in those storylines. Chapter 4 addresses the creation of Gidget and Patty Duke as examples of outwardly assertive girls who are ultimately subordinated within storylines. To enhance her analysis, Nash includes popular cultural artifacts, such as reproductions of movie posters, publicity images, and stills from television and film.

The short epilogue makes some initial observations about contemporary girl icons such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Britney Spears. While the blurb on the back cover of *American Sweethearts* suggests that Nash will deal with these recent girlhood icons, there is only a brief overview of these figures. Regardless, Nash's historical work will provide background for those interested in current representations of girlhood in

popular narratives. Nash's analyses provide a context for current constructions of American girls and invite readers to question mainstream portrayals of "girl power" as less new than recycled, and possibly retrograde, representations of girlhood.

Interestingly, Nash's history of American girls also chronicles shifting ideas about normative masculinity--and crises of masculinity in particular. Nash concentrates on what representations of the adolescent girl also tell us about patriarchal fantasies and/or anxieties. She links her interpretations of teen girl narrative cycles to larger historical shifts in American culture, such as the Great Depression and World War II, and ensuing social struggles over gender. Nash argues that changing understandings of the teen girl and her potential threat to masculine power often played out in popular contexts. For instance, she argues that "when girls were perceived as threats to social and governmental institutions, popular culture showed them enraging their fathers" (p. 145). Across chapters, Nash sets out to demonstrate how ideas about family and nation mirror popular portrayals of daughter/father relationships. Thus, literary creators like Edward Stratemeyer and Fredrick Kohner, as well as fictional fathers such as Mr. Archer, are discussed at length. In some ways, then, *American Sweethearts* is as much about real and imaginary fathers as it is about teen girls.

*American Sweethearts* provides a good introduction to the history of adolescence and an in-depth history of popular constructions of white adolescent femininity in a range of popular narratives. Nash's study of teen girls in popular twentieth-century American narrative cycles fills in gaps in research on youth and gender and will be of interest to scholars in a variety of fields.

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**Citation:** Elizabeth Marshall. Review of Nash, Ilana. *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

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