

**Sherrie A. Inness, ed..** *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1998. x + 322 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-3764-4.



**Reviewed by** Janet Miron

**Published on** H-Women (June, 1999)

"Sugar and spice and everything nice" is definitely not what editor and contributor Sherrie A. Inness had in mind in her recent book, *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures*. Indeed, this collection of articles demonstrates that the meaning of girlhood is never straightforward; that naturalness can never be assumed or taken for granted; and that girls' cultures are diverse and complex, and cannot be reduced to any sort of concise or universal definition.

Challenging the marginal status that has been allotted to the subject of female children and adolescents, the authors in this collection examine the cultures of young females from the early twentieth century to the present as a means of illustrating "how our entire society has been structured on gender lines" (p. 2). This argument is not necessarily an original or controversial one in academia today, but very few scholars have actually documented how the socialization and experiences of female youth were influenced by historically-constructed notions of womanhood and femininity. In order to explore this theme, the

contributors examine a variety of topics, ranging from the portrayal of young females in *Sears Catalogs* to Girl Scout manuals, from dating to babysitting, and from juvenile delinquents to queer readings of girls' detective fiction. This diversity of subject matter is furthermore enriched by the multi-disciplinarian approach of the book, with the backgrounds of the contributors spanning from history to theatre studies.

Comprised of thirteen articles of approximately twenty pages each (plus an introduction), the book is divided into three parts: "Law, Discipline, and Socialization," "The Girl Consumer," and "Re-imagining Girlhood." The majority of articles, however, could have been located under the first section, as attempts to shape and mold young girls into "proper" women is a recurring theme throughout the book. Encompassing a wide spectrum of scholarship including that of gender, family, popular culture, consumerism, crime, and imperialism, the articles attest to the fact that the cultures of female youth must be addressed by those interested in historically-specific notions of

femininity, notions which are all too frequently examined only in relation to female adults.

In twentieth-century America, the topic of "girlhood" attracted much attention and social concern. As a consequence, many of the authors in *Delinquents and Debutantes* focus upon the ideologies governing, or discourses surrounding, young females. Attitudes towards and perceptions of girlhood, however, are not presented by the authors as static or biologically determined, but instead as reflective of their larger historical contexts. For example, Rachel Devlin's article, "Female Juvenile Delinquency and the Problem of Sexual Authority in America, 1945-1965," reveals the ways in which attitudes towards female juvenile delinquency were inextricably linked to greater social and political phenomena. Devlin delineates the theories that developed in the Cold War era as a means to rationalize and thus control intransigence amongst girls, and also highlights how these explanations departed from those that addressed delinquency amongst boys. Whereas the analysis of male delinquency was dominated by sociologists and criminologists, female juvenile delinquency became almost the exclusive domain of psychoanalysts. Emphasizing the threats rebellious girls posed to "the family" and, by extension, to the social order of post-war America, psychoanalysts claimed the origins of female crime could be located within the father-daughter relationship, a relationship that was often plagued by supposedly class-specific problems. Middle-class fathers of delinquents were weak and apathetic, whereas working-class fathers were invariably absent--and these psychoanalytic notions began to be reflected in mass media forms, such as films and popular magazines. Drawing on Elaine Tyler May's theory of domestic cultural containment, Devlin argues that the psychoanalytic paradigm was particularly attractive during the respective time period as it "managed simultaneously to express anxieties about the social meaning of female delinquency yet contain

the meaning of that behavior safely within the matrix of the family" (pp. 84-86).

Further examining the efforts of adults to control or influence female youth, *Seventeen* magazine is employed by Kelly Schrum as a means to uncover elements of the dominant ideologies surrounding female youth. In her article, "'Teena Means Business': Teenage Girls' Culture and *Seventeen* Magazine, 1944-1950," Schrum demonstrates how the magazine's advertisements, articles, and photographs scrutinized, criticized, and attempted to mold the behaviour, appearance, and mentality of adolescent girls, forming them into prim and proper young women whose sexuality was controlled and whose professional aspirations were suppressed. Locating her subject within the rise of post-War consumerism, Schrum reveals the ways in which cultural producers increasingly directed their attention towards female youth who represented a growing market for a range of "image-enhancing," and specifically female, teenager products. Concentrating primarily on efforts to socialize and harness the consumer potential of teenage girls, Schrum nevertheless points out that the content of the magazine was open to multiple interpretations and that it did not necessarily reflect the realities of many girls' lives.

A number of contributors to the book illuminate the ideologies governing girls' culture through a wide array of primary sources, thereby demonstrating that gendered ideals were pervasive and permeated a variety of mediums. Rhona Justice Malloy, in her article, "Little Girls Bound: Costume and Coming of Age in the *Sears Catalog* 1906-1927," examines the growing recognition of girlhood as a distinct stage of female development and documents how this separation manifested itself in visual representation. By theorizing the design of undergarments, Malloy argues that girls' bodies were bound into particular shapes or silhouettes deemed "natural" and "feminine," and shows that these idealized forms confined the

physical movements of girls and even influenced the design of the material objects around them. Moreover, Malloy briefly touches on a significant paradox: in spite of the early twentieth-century feminist movement, underwear remained restrictive and the bodies of young women and girls continued to be bound and constrained (p. 126).

Looking beyond dominant ideologies articulated by adults, a small yet significant number of articles portray girlhood as a contested terrain where social expectations and values were not always met or embraced by the girls themselves. Consequently, many of the authors explore the "voices" of female youth, documenting the ways in which mainstream cultural forms were subverted by resistant and creative girls. Providing a contrast to *Seventeen* magazine, Mary Celeste Kearney examines the phenomenon of fanzines and thereby looks at girls as cultural producers, rather than as mere consumers. Likewise, Vicki L. Ruiz focuses on Mexican-American flappers and shows how they were often able to circumvent social expectations and standards. Even babysitting, as demonstrated in the essay by Miriam Formanek-Brunell, may be perceived as a site of female agency. Baby-sitting girls exhibited overt forms of protest, as evident in their attempts to unionize, and also more covert gestures of power. Formanek-Brunell's work suggests that a subtle moral economy developed amongst babysitters and is apparent in their belief that they were entitled to certain things--such as the food in their employers' refrigerators--in order to compensate for insufficient and low wages. These articles thus illustrate the ways in which mainstream, "hegemonic" culture was not always internalized or passively accepted by girls, and that many young females endeavoured to exert autonomy in their often constrained lives.

In contrast to the minority of articles that emphasize the agency of girls, many of the articles in the book are written "from above" and study the views of female adolescence as articulated by

adults, rather than the experiences or perceptions of the girls themselves. In her introduction, Inness writes, "it is important to consider the culture that girls themselves create as active producers and shapers of their realities as well as the culture that is created and shaped by adults and then marketed to girls, who, in their turn, shape market-place commodities in ways that might or might not have been intended by their adult creators. The essays explore both types of cultures" (p. 4). Both types of cultures are apparent in *Delinquents and Debutantes*, yet the experiences of girls themselves remain either on the periphery or are completely missing in many of the articles. Instances of resistance, agency, and protest are discussed in a few of the articles, but many others will leave the reader frustrated with the lack of information that would have illuminated the views of girls themselves. For example, Rachel Devlin, while drawing on an eclectic range of sources such as films and court documents, does not explore juvenile delinquency beyond "official" discourse. The social meaning of female-youth related issues is certainly important and worthy of study; however, this dimension of youth cultures often entails in the book the marginalization or neglect of the experiences of the girls themselves.

Mary C. McComb's article, "Rate Your Date: Young Women and the Commodification of Depression Era Courtship," further illustrates the tendency amongst some of the writers in this collection to inadequately acknowledge the fact that all young females did not adhere to dominant ideologies. Through prescriptive dating literature published in the 1930s and early 1940s, McComb argues that the rise of sociological methods for gathering statistical information and their subsequent dissemination through mass-marketed manuals led to the creation of a "mass-mediated national standard of normalcy," which "increasingly framed the way in which young people made personal decisions and choices" (p. 43). Although she presents a compelling argument, McComb does not offer any tangible evidence as to

the influence and impact of dating literature, nor does she answer a number of essential questions that her claim warrants. Manuals were based on information acquired through surveys, but how were these surveys conducted? What impact, if any, did they have on young women? How widely were they read? How representative were the surveys that the authors of manuals conducted? If they focused solely on college students, as she claims, yet few attended college during the Depression years, are we not dealing with an elite whose influence over others is questionable? Are we merely to assume that those without either the resources or the desire to attend college aspired to the "norms" set by middle-class students? Furthermore, as she does not adequately deal with the impact of advice manuals, her claim that such prescriptive literature "distracted young women from pursuing academic success, female friendships and independent careers" implies that female college students were simply passive receptacles, unable to feel validated by anything other than their popularity with men (p. 58). Although the length of the articles certainly would not have provided the authors the space in which every component of their respective topics could have been examined, it is unfortunate that a greater balance was not created between the social theories and practices surrounding girlhood and girls cultures as expressed by girls themselves.

Clearly, the essays in *Delinquents and Debutantes* focus primarily upon the attempts to articulate and enforce definitions of "normal" girlhood, examining how these definitions were portrayed as "natural." Ideologies governing girlhood thus resonate throughout many of the articles, and a small number of examples are given of girls who transgressed cultural "norms." In regards to the latter theme, however, the reader is provided with very little information as to how the lives of the "non-conformists" were affected. Indeed, the book provides very little sense of the social marginalization, ostracization, and exclusion that may have marked the lives of those who failed to

adhere to what were predominantly middle-class standards and expectations. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Mary Louise Adams has argued, "As a powerful organizer of everyday life, the imperative to be normal limited possibility in people's lives" (p. 3). A few of the articles in *Delinquents and Debutantes* do provide information on those who rejected the roles expected of them, but how their lives were affected as a consequence is less apparent. Ultimately, the problem seems to lie within the book's emphasis on ideology, or "discourse," rather than on the girls who are its subjects.

Moving beyond cultural constructions of girlhood, a number of the articles in the collection derive great strength through their authors' refusal to examine only one dimension of social existence. The introduction to the book states that the "collection cannot address such important issues as ethnicity, race, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, and age that influenced how girls developed distinct cultures, although many of these issues are touched upon" (p. 5). Many of the articles consequently do not discuss such variables, but, of those that do, a layer of richness and complexity is added to their work. In particular, Melinda L. de Jesus's "Fictions of Assimilation: Nancy Drew, Cultural Imperialism, and the Filipina/American Experience" illustrates the ways in which Nancy Drew books were imbued with WASP values and represented both a form of American cultural imperialism and internal colonization. Consequently, de Jesus shows that the reading of Nancy Drew literature represented a form of ethnic transgression, "an erasure and subsuming into whiteness," for Filipinos who were compelled to conform to American cultural forms (p. 233). Ethnicity, as the author demonstrates, was clearly an influential factor in determining how literature was read and what its ramifications were upon a girl's identity. In addition, Julia D. Gardner also refuses to paint a simplistic picture of girls' cultures by examining factors other than gender in her article, "No Place for a Girl

Dick': Mabel Maney and the Queering of Girls Detective Fiction." Analyzing the work of Maney, Gardner looks at the ways in which this novelist offers a counter-reading of two girls' fiction heroines, Nancy Drew and Cherry Ames, forming them into "representatives of 1990s queer sensibilities which include racial and sexual identities erased from Nancy Drew" (p. 249). The benefits that can be derived through a more thorough examination of girls' identities and experiences thus suggest that age and gender must not be discrete categories of analysis, but must be shown to be mediated by other variables including class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Overall, *Delinquents and Debutantes* makes an important contribution to the field of cultural studies and would make an excellent teaching tool for the study of youth culture. All of the topics explored in the book demonstrate the importance of studying the history of children and teenagers, whether it be from the viewpoint of adults or of youths themselves. As discussed above, the sound of girls' voices could have been more resounding, but the material covered in the collection is nevertheless impressive, exciting, and substantial.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

**Citation:** Janet Miron. Review of Inness, Sherrie A., ed. *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3132>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.