

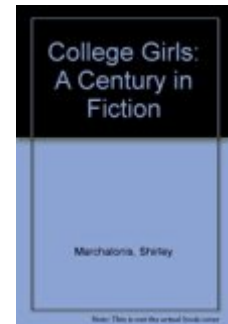
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Shirley Marchalonis. *College Girls: A Century in Fiction*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995. 209 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2175-6; \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2176-3.

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Women in College Fiction: Genre Study

“You must remember that you can’t go through life only half-educated,” says Mrs. Dean to her homesick daughter in *Marjorie Dean, College Freshman* (p. 10). The Marjorie Dean books are just a few of the many works that focus on college as the second “half” of a woman’s education. In *College Girls*, Shirley Marchalonis examines what she calls the “small but significant subgenre” of women’s college fiction that flourished between 1870 and 1930. Correctly recognizing that such fiction “is full of messages for and about women” (p. 3), Marchalonis argues that, until about 1910, these works constructed college as a “green world”: a nurturing female community that guided women toward greater self-definition and revised concepts of female power. After about 1910, this “green world,” though it remained an ideal, was challenged and ultimately became unreachable. In the course of her study, Marchalonis examines some important questions: How does college fiction define both “education” and “womanliness”? How do the stories reflect contemporary attitudes toward women’s education? What position is taken toward “men, romance, love, marriage, friendship, crushes, and lesbianism” (p. 7)? What place should (or can) graduates occupy in the world outside college?

Marchalonis is at her best when she discusses the early college stories. The “green world/loss of green world” thesis is persuasive, and to help keep the analysis from being over schematic, she points out some of the contradictions and ambiguities that mitigate against a reading that is too chronologically progressive. She also

perceptively explores such important, pervasive issues as “difference,” “prominence,” college-defined “democracy,” and later, co-education. Overall, Marchalonis supports her ideas with an impressive number of college novels, short stories, and contemporary discussions of women in higher education.

The study is weakest in the chapter on juvenile series books. Like many academics writing about popular culture, Marchalonis tends to ignore material outside mainstream scholarship and outside those few popular sources that have been acknowledged by cultural critics (such as women’s magazines and the juvenile books of the Stratemeyer Syndicate). This limitation leads to some factual errors. For instance, when writing about the Grace Harlowe college stories, by “Jessie Graham Flower,” and the Marjorie Dean books, by “Pauline Lester,” Marchalonis notes the many similarities between the two series, concluding that “probably Lester read Flower and both had read the earlier works” (p. 190). Had she dug a little deeper into some of the many non-traditional resources on juvenile series, such as *Dime Novel Roundup* and *Yellowback Library*, she would have discovered that “Lester” WAS “Flower”—both names are pseudonyms of author Josephine Chase. Such flaws are more than just minor historical inaccuracies; in this case, for example, the error undermines the chapter’s conclusions about chronology and authorial influences.

In general, *College Girls* has a solid, interesting thesis, but the book would benefit from additional research

and less textual summary. The topic—an important one—needs to be given a wider cultural context, one that would explore more thoroughly theories of cultural change, the publishing history of “college” books, the marketing of juvenile versus adult college fiction, the implications of and the differences between stories aimed at juvenile and at adult audiences, issues of social class, and so on. Still, Marchalonis’s examination of the primary texts serves

the valuable purpose of recalling these works to scholarly attention and setting the stage for further study.

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