

# Reading and Writing Girls: New Contributions to Feminist Scholarship on Children's and Young Adult Literature by Women

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*THE AFTERLIFE OF "LITTLE WOMEN,"* by Beverly Lyon Clark. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 271 pp. \$44.95 cloth; \$44.95 ebook.

*TURNING THE PAGES OF AMERICAN GIRLHOOD: THE EVOLUTION OF GIRLS' SERIES FICTION, 1865-1930,* by Emily Hamilton-Honey. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013. 254 pp. \$45.00 paper; \$45.00 ebook.

*READING LIKE A GIRL: NARRATIVE INTIMACY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE,* by Sara K. Day. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. 240 pp. \$55.00 cloth; \$30.00 paper.

*PRAISING GIRLS: THE RHETORIC OF YOUNG WOMEN, 1895-1930,* by Henrietta Rix Wood. Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. 192 pp. \$40.00 paper; \$40.00 ebook.

Feminist critics have long been concerned with the influence that literature has upon young female readers. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft, in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, suggested a remedy for the corruptions of sentimental literature:

The best method, I believe, that can be adopted to correct a fondness for novels is to ridicule them: not indiscriminately, for then it would have little effect; but, if a judicious person, with some turn for humour, would read several to a young girl, and point out both by tones, and apt comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how foolishly and ridiculously they caricatured human nature, just opinions might be substituted instead of romantic sentiments.<sup>1</sup>

It would be some time before Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; *The Second Sex*, 1952) and Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) took up Wollstonecraft's suggestion, critiquing literature for its role in perpetuating female subordination. This review essay examines the ways in which four recent works of feminist criticism of children's and young

adult literature are animated by this concern and by the interest in finding texts that offer alternative constructions of gender. The scholarship discussed here represents valuable, new contributions to existing bodies of research. Beverly Lyon Clark's fascinating *The Afterlife of "Little Women"* traces the reception of this ur-text in the field, showing the rise and fall of the novel's reputation and its revaluation by feminist critics in the 1970s—part of a broader project of reclamation of women writers as represented by the scholarship of Nina Auerbach, Mitzi Myers, and other pioneers in the field.<sup>2</sup> Emily Hamilton-Honey's *Turning the Pages of American Girlhood: The Evolution of Girls' Series Fiction, 1865-1930* also usefully adds to a rich vein of scholarship focusing on girls' series books, the analysis of which has been critically important in understanding how femininity has been represented in texts that, while they may not be highly regarded critically, have been widely read. Similarly, Sara K. Day's *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature* focuses on popular contemporary novels for girls. Her work draws on reader-response theory, which rejects New Critical insistence that static meaning inheres in the text and seeks to account for the role of the reader in interpretation. Day's innovative scholarship combines two versions of reader-response as she analyzes both the ways that the novels she reads construct ideal readers and the ways in which readers take up and resist those constructions. The final text discussed in this essay, Henrietta Rix Wood's *Praising Girls: The Rhetoric of Young Women 1895-1930*, is quite different from the others. Indeed, it might be seen as outside this review's scope, as it is not about children's literature at all but instead about the rhetoric of young women's writing; however, the field of children's literature has long been interdisciplinary. The book overlaps both with girls' and children's studies, and like these fields, it is concerned with the agency of those who are often denied it. Moreover, Wood's study extends into areas—particularly those of race and class—that the others do not and provides some meticulously researched examples of how the study of the culture of girls can be expanded into areas hitherto virtually unexplored.

A *locus classicus* for the consideration of female agency has long been Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-1869), which has been read by generations of bookish girls, many of whom, citing the influence of Jo—the unconventional protagonist with ink-stained fingers and uncombed hair—have gone on to write novels of their own for children and for adults. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1959), for example, de Beauvoir wrote that as a girl, "[I] identified myself passionately with Jo" (Clark, p. 49). Responses like de Beauvoir's, both popular and critical, are the focus of Clark's *The Afterlife of "Little Women."* Having edited *Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews* (2004) and coedited *"Little Women" and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays* (1999), Clark

has now contributed to the field a historically organized study of the ways in which *Little Women* has been received from its publication to the present by examining an extraordinary range of textual evidence including reviews, biographies, sales, library circulation figures, letters, diaries, illustrations, translations, fan fiction, and adaptations of every kind from operas to vampire novels, manga, and anime. This delightful work is of interest to both the reader just beginning to wade into the enormous volume of scholarship on *Little Women* as well as the expert. Clark sketches broad historical trends in reception as they illuminate shifts in popular interest and in scholarly fashion. She also discusses obscure and distant responses to the text, which are nevertheless significant to understanding its cultural importance.

Clark's masterful analysis of the novel's reception highlights those aspects of *Little Women* and the cultural contexts within which it has been read that have made it so astonishingly popular and beloved, even today. At the time of its publication, the novel was read widely not only by girls but also by women, men, and boys. Reviews of the novel reveal that, prior to 1893, the division between children's and adult literature "was not yet sharply segmented"; the reading public was also less dramatically "gender segregated" than it subsequently became, in part because of changes in the way masculinity was defined and in part because religious values increasingly gave way to capitalist ones (pp. 34, 35). The recent popularity of crossover books like Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008) among girls and women and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) and Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* series (2008-2010) among both male and female readers of all ages compares interestingly to that of *Little Women* and suggests some areas within which their popularity might be investigated.

Especially prior to 1875, says Clark, Alcott's novels were both popular and highly regarded by critics. After Alcott died in 1888, however, her critical reputation declined. Clark's discussion of one of the earliest biographers, family friend Ednah Cheney, identifies some of the contributing factors, such as Cheney's emphasis on the domestic and traditional qualities of Alcott and her work, attributes that did not earn inclusion in the canon of American literature during its formative stages. These factors led to different receptions depending on the audience in the first decades of the twentieth century, when the popularity of *Little Women* reached its highest levels while its critical reputation declined. Two events in 1912—the opening of Orchard House (the Alcott family home) and a Broadway production of *Little Women*—both indicate the popularity of the novel and contributed to it. Clark notes that the play and other contemporary adaptations emphasized romance and elided feminist aspects of the text, such as Marmee's preference that her girls "be happy old maids [rather] than unhappy wives" (qtd. in Clark, p. 73); the same is true of a 1931 stage version (p. 119). While interpretations and adaptations "allowed some attention to women's

independence by the 1930s”—most notably in the 1933 George Cukor film starring Katharine Hepburn—by the 1949 film remake, the heightened pressure on women to return to domesticity after World War II resulted in a renewed foregrounding of romance and consumerism (p. 102).

The women's movement of the late 1960s and the publication of Alcott's "pseudonymous and anonymous thrillers," beginning with Madeleine Stern's 1975 edited collection *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, led to a "galvanic shift in Alcott's critical reputation" (p. 145). These texts complicated the ways in which Alcott was understood, enabling attention to the darker, less conventional aspects of her work. While feminist interest in "women's traditions and their connections with other women" and a revaluation of sentimentality, spurred by Jane Tompkins's 1985 *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, has led to an explosion of scholarship on *Little Women* and adaptations exploring the lesbian erotic possibilities of the text, Clark notes what others, including me, have observed: a significant decline in knowledge of and affection for the novel in our students (p. 146). Clark speculates that recent musical versions of the text—"a more consciously artificial mode than most other dramatizations"—emerge from a sense that the manners of the novel are "dated, and hence artificial" (p. 198). As she argues, however, the emotive power of the novel continues to resonate, indicating the degree to which the central contradiction in the novel—"between an ideal of autonomy and an ideal of connectedness"—continues to be relevant (p. 147).

Alcott is a touchstone in Hamilton-Honey's *Turning the Pages of American Girlhood: The Evolution of Girls' Series Fiction, 1865-1930*. Hamilton-Honey's examination begins with her own adolescent reading of Beverly Gray, *Sophomore*, published in 1934, which appealed to her because it focuses on a group of female friends' collegiate and career experiences. As she read series books published for her own generation of girls, like *The Baby-Sitters Club* (1986-2000) and *Sweet Valley High* (1983-2003), however, she questioned why the focus on "college and careers" was replaced by "appearance, romance, and competition" (p. 1). Additional changes—paralleling the shift in girls' diaries from an emphasis on internal to external self-improvement programs as described by historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg in *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (1997)—became apparent as Hamilton-Honey expanded her reading to older series, including those by Alcott: "social activism and benevolence in the nineteenth century gave way to consumerism and careers in the twentieth" (p. 2). The first chapter examines factors that contributed to the significance of religion in postbellum series. While readers may be aware of Emily Dickinson's rebellious refusal to convert, Hamilton-Honey usefully contextualizes the pressures upon girls to do so, explaining that conversion was "one of the

major goals of female adolescence" (p. 25). Piety, one of the core components of "True Womanhood," motivated female activism in organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which published "the largest women's paper in the world," along with periodicals for children, books, and millions of leaflets (pp. 2, 48). Thus, reading and religion overlapped and much series fiction in the late nineteenth century depicts girls like the March sisters who strive to model Christian behavior, including acts of benevolence. In some fiction, like Isabella Alden's *Chautauqua Girls* series (1876-1913), characters' conversions to religious faith leads to evangelistic and political activism within specific organizations, like the WCTU. Hamilton-Honey says this "open and acknowledged interplay between the real and the fictional . . . helped promote a more active and political True Womanhood in the postbellum period" (p. 50).

Within a short period, Hamilton-Honey argues, the religious values espoused in the *Elsie Dinsmore* series (1867-1905)—to which Hamilton-Honey devotes sustained attention—and others are abruptly replaced by "secular American ideas of democracy and economic mobility" (p. 118). These values inform the *Patty Fairfield* series (1901-1919), the *Grace Harlowe* series (1910-1924), and the *Outdoor Girls* series (1913-1933) in which protagonists define selfhood and achieve cultural power through consumption. The "girl heroines" in these novels, says Hamilton-Honey, "gained a considerable amount of individual autonomy, while they lost some community influence and some of their status as spiritual leaders" (pp. 5-6). Despite this statement, Hamilton-Honey's treatment of this fiction is perhaps more descriptive than critical. When Patty wins a luxury car in a contest in the 1911 *Patty's Motor Car*, for example, and then declares herself under no obligation to the car company, Hamilton-Honey says that the novel suggests that

female customers hold all the cards. Far from being excluded from the public world of capitalism, Patty ventures into it and uses it to her own advantage, securing an expensive motor car of her very own with a few weeks of mental effort and no money at all. While this is hardly a realistic scenario, it does serve to illustrate the way that women consumers could make the most of sales and promotions, securing more goods for themselves with less money. (p. 126)

This interpretation is problematic, particularly as fantasies of female power enabled by automobiles, motorboats, and airplanes in this and other series fiction are accompanied by the disavowal of overt political empowerment in works such as *The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale* (1913), in which the girls twice insist that they are not suffragists and in fact "[deny] being political at all" (p. 129). While Nancy Romalov says that series books like this one "set about negating, disrupting, or dismissing the radical possibilities that

might have been realized,” Hamilton-Honey disputes this and argues that the girls’ independence and athleticism aligns them with the New Women of their period (qtd. p. 129). Given the overall argument that Hamilton-Honey is making here, however, and the illusory—or at least very partial—nature of the power provided by consumption within a capitalist society, this discussion should be more developed.

Hamilton-Honey argues that the *Outdoor Girls*, *Ruth Fielding*, *Grace Harlowe*, and *Khaki Girls* series (1918-1920), published and set in World War I, broke with representations of femininity typical of both earlier and later periods: “the heroines in these series do not reflect either the benevolent woman of the nineteenth century or the educated consumers of the turn of the century. They become, instead, fierce patriots devoted to serving the Allied cause” (p. 7). One such patriot is Ruth Fielding, the heroine of an unusually long-running series, beginning in 1913 and spanning twenty years in thirty volumes. Ruth’s exploits are discussed both in Hamilton-Honey’s chapter on World War I series fiction and in a chapter devoted to the *Ruth Fielding* series, which focuses on Ruth’s unique status as “perhaps” the first book series heroine with a professional career—she works in the budding film industry as an actress, screenwriter, producer, and executive (p. 8). Hamilton-Honey’s research shows that Ruth’s work for the fictional Alctrion Film Corporation paralleled the careers of women in the early film industry, which offered them opportunities as actresses, writers, and directors. Despite the opportunities for women within film, Ruth must confront sexist skeptics who doubt her abilities, and she observes in a 1926 volume that “there are good woman directors in the moving picture business . . . . But they have always had to work twice as hard to prove their ability as a man in the same position” (qtd. p. 210). Though Ruth does not marry till the twenty-fourth volume in the series, balancing work and love presents another challenge to her. With the support of her fiancé, and then husband, however, Ruth continues working after marrying and having a child. Hamilton-Honey concludes that Ruth is the “ideal heroine for the fully modern, twentieth-century girl” (p. 222).

In a brief conclusion, however, Hamilton-Honey persuasively shows that the realistic, historical conflicts experienced by heroines like Ruth disappear in the new era of series books ushered in with Nancy Drew in 1930. Nancy never makes the transition to adulthood, college, marriage, or a career, nor does she engage with the central “religious, political, and social questions” of her time as do so many previous series heroines (p. 229). Hamilton-Honey provides a good deal of useful and relevant historical context for the shifts she analyzes. However, linking these shifts to political-economic change as it impacted gender and gender relations would further illuminate them. Nevertheless, the contrasts that Hamilton-Honey high-

lights are provocative and significant, and her historical analysis of series books enables a more informed reading of contemporary fiction.

The highly personal, as opposed to social, orientation of contemporary girls' fiction is the focus of Day's *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*, which examines intimate relationships between readers and the first-person narrators, which have become *de rigueur* in books for adolescent female readers. While other critics have discussed the prevalence of the first-person narrator (and the relative advantages and disadvantages it affords), Day makes significant contributions to this scholarship by illuminating the gendered social context that has shaped the use of this formal literary convention. Day situates the trend toward first-person narrators within the increasingly public nature of intimacy in American culture, which has been discussed by Lauren Berlant and others and is exemplified by "social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook" (p. 8). While the trend toward public self-disclosure is pervasive, Day notes that emotional intimacy has historically been associated with femininity. Thus, the dangers posed to female adolescents by intimate relationships, as well as their critical importance, is a significant theme in the raft of academic and popular writing on female adolescence, which seeks to address the concerns raised by Carol Gilligan's influential assertion that loss of voice is definitive of female adolescence and by the work of Mary Pipher, the American Association of University Women, and others that have focused popular and scholarly attention on adolescence as a crisis point in female development.<sup>3</sup> Day focuses on self-help books targeted at girls and their parents in chapters organized around the themes of friendship, love and desire, and sexual assault, and she shows the ways that the fiction she analyzes takes up the concerns of these nonfictional texts; she discusses the ways in which both nonfiction and fiction employ similar formal techniques to create narrative intimacy. In fiction, says Day, these techniques blur the boundary with reality. Drawing on reader-response theorists including Susan Lanser and Wolfgang Iser, Day argues that readers' identifications with narrators allow them to experience "the realities of young adulthood vicariously through the narrators' stories" (p. 18).

One of Day's central arguments is that many of the novels that she analyzes, which thematize intimacy at the same time that they model it through the intimate relationships constructed between narrator and reader, present readers with a contradictory message. On the one hand, says Day, novels like Sarah Dessen's *Keeping the Moon* (1999) and Natasha Friends's *Perfect* (2004) instruct readers that self-disclosure is a critically important aspect of friendship. Others, however, like Siobhan Vivian's *A Little Friendly Advice* (2008) and Elizabeth Zindel's *The Secret Rites of Social Butterflies* (2008), reveal the ways that disclosure can lead to manipulation and betrayal, "simultaneously warning against disclosure while crafting a



narrator-reader relationship that depends upon the narrator's willingness to share thoughts, feelings, and—perhaps most importantly, in this case—secrets” (p. 56). Day argues that this contradiction parallels the conflicting cultural expectations of adolescent women and intimacy. One could, however, read *The Secret Rites of Social Butterflies* not as a warning against disclosure altogether but as a reminder to readers to choose their friends and those they trust carefully. Perhaps I am less perceptive than Day, but I find the dynamics she comments upon less truly contradictory and more a reflection of the complexities of intimacy.

Day sees a related contradiction in her analysis of novels by Laurie Halse Anderson, Deb Caletti, Sarah Dessen, Niki Burnham, Louisa Burnham, and Courtney Summers that focus on rape and sexual abuse. Day advances an interesting thesis that a kind of “reverse bibliotherapy” is reflected in these novels: the narrator who has experienced a violation withdraws from intimacy and regains it only through the implied reader who listens without judgement and without inflicting further injuries upon the traumatized narrator (p. 26). Day argues,

Although the process of reclaiming intimacy seems to empower the narrator and offer the reader a positive model of healing and strength, the narrators' dependence upon the reader might in fact be seen as reinforcing adolescent women's vulnerability and general lack of control over intimacy because the only truly safe space for what is figured as a *necessary* disclosure—one without which the narrator cannot begin to heal—is the impossible relationship with the reader. (p. 106)

The relationship between the narrator and reader is, of course, impossible since it is between a function of a narrative text and a human being. However, a relationship in which self-disclosure is met with support and acceptance is not. Thus, one might read the construction of such relationships as representing not only that self-disclosure is healing but also that particular responses to that self-disclosure are critically important. While her argument perhaps overreaches, asserting more theoretical significance than the texts will bear, Day provides readings of these novels that are original and frequently insightful.

Her final chapter, “Fan Fiction and the Reimagining of Narrative Intimacy,” is particularly instructive. The majority of fan fiction is written by female fans and emerges from fan communities within which authors frequently participate. These fan communities, says Day, “can also potentially mimic the ‘safe space’ of narrative intimacy modeled in the novels that adolescent women read and to which they respond” (p. 186). These safe spaces extend the narrator-reader's relationship “into the ‘real world’” (p. 187). Fan fiction is a site in which reception can be assessed but also one in which the reader is able to wrest a degree of control from the author,



as their creations frequently diverge from the original, “often as a means of privileging the reader’s desires over the intentions of the original texts,” with fascinating results (p. 191). For example, while *Twilight* is deeply heteronormative, Clark reports that in addition to fan fiction focused on the relationship between Bella and Edward, another popular variant, “femslash” (lesbian) fanfiction, develops a romance between Bella and Alice (p. 199). Day argues that the fan fiction writers’ sense of ownership over these texts and characters derives from the narrative intimacy that they have constructed.

Wood’s *Praising Girls: The Rhetoric of Young Women, 1895-1930* employs a methodology that centers on the intersections of gender with race and class to investigate the relationships that authors strive to construct with readers. Wood analyzes the rhetoric of public writing—in newspapers, yearbooks, and magazines—by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century girls from four high schools in the Kansas City area. One of these, Miss Barstow’s School, a private girls’ school founded in 1884, enrolled the white, privileged girls that are too often at the center of scholarly and popular work focusing on girls. In addition, however, Wood includes Haskell Institute, a government boarding school for Native Americans in Lawrence, Kansas; Lincoln High, “the only public secondary school for African Americans in Kansas City, Missouri” (pp. 88-89); and Central High School, the largest public secondary school in Kansas City, at which the white working and middle-class “student body was splintered into factions based on gender, academic class, literary societies, and athletic organizations” (pp. xx-xxi). Wood’s study is a necessary and critically important complement to scholarship like Hamilton-Honey’s on fiction addressed to and depicting white girls. As indicated by Rudine Sims Bishop’s *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children’s Literature* (2007)—a masterful history of African American children’s literature—series book fiction representing black children did not appear until the late twentieth-century. Thus, in order to “see” the discursive construction of gender by Native American, Latina, and black girls, we must look beyond the output of a racist publishing industry that continues to neglect the lives of children of color.

Wood “reconceptualizes epideictic rhetoric as a tool used by young women rather than a prerogative of powerful men giving speeches of praise or blame” (p. xi). Wood explains that the epideictic, as defined by Aristotle, is “persuasive speech in which ‘there is either praise [*epainos*] or blame [*psogos*]’” (p. 3). Drawing on George Kennedy and other contemporary rhetorical theorists, she expands the Aristotelean category to argue that “the persuasive discourse of young women can be interpreted as epideictic rhetoric that defined their collective identities, influenced

public perceptions of their roles and rights, and altered a social order that excluded or dismissed them" (p. 5). More than a third of all girls took rhetoric in high school, and Wood is able to establish that girls in the high schools she studies took such courses.

Girls at each of the schools that Wood studies "used epideictic rhetoric to define themselves in an era that alternately infantilized, idealized, and demonized young women," but the way in which they "forge and celebrate their collective identity" at each of the four schools is specific to the racial and class formations of the students there (pp. 2, xiii). The economically and racially privileged white girls at Miss Barstow's School represented themselves in their yearbook as "active, vocal, and opinionated," challenging the idea that such students were idle members of the ruling class destined for "marriage and motherhood" (pp. 1, 22). Their writing was influenced by the construction of the "new girl," and in celebrating athletic achievement—including in the competitive contact sports of basketball and field hockey—they challenged "gender and class codes"; in 1911, Rebecca Gray urged her classmates: "Go at your work with a vim that will make your successors wish to follow in your footsteps; and in your sports win for your class and school such honors as will inspire others to keener competition" (pp. 23, 34, 22). Wood's fascinating and insightful analysis of the rhetorical and ideological significance of this and other seemingly conventional and uninteresting passages is one of the many strengths of the book.

While Gray and her classmates rejected gender ideologies about wealthy, white femininity, the community they constructed maintained conservative ideologies related to class, nationality, and race: "they wrote short stories that mocked black and Irish figures, characterized Native Americans as noble savages, and chastised a poor boy who would rather return to his dirty hovel than remain in a sanitary charity hospital" (pp. 51-52). It was in relation to dominant ideologies like these that the less privileged girls in the Kansas City area were forced to situate their rhetoric. As Wood puts it, while Barstow girls defined themselves in contrast to "the Other," girls at Haskell Institute "had to counter the notion that they are the Other" (p. 87). Wood notes that schools like Haskell were one outcome of the imperialist national project of the United States and were established to assimilate Native Americans to hegemonic cultural and economic practices. The literary productions authored by female students in the *Indian Leader*, a national newspaper that ran between 1897-1924, and *Indian Legends* (1914), an anthology of folklore, were intended by white school officials to demonstrate the accomplishment of these goals to white readers. Wood argues, however, that the Haskell girls wrote within a complex rhetorical situation in which they addressed not only white but also Native

readers. Thus, the girls' writing was also shaped by Native proponents of the pan-Indian movement, constructing a group identity founded not upon gender, as at Barstow, but upon race. In a vivid example of the rhetorically complex situation negotiated by the Haskell girls, Wood notes that when one of the girls, Nellie Wright, did not name individual tribes in her writing, she encouraged the "group identification" that "reflected the white campaign to destroy tribal identity," but "her tactic also encourage[d] Indian solidarity" (p. 56).

The construction of racial solidarity was also a major project of girl rhetors at Lincoln High School. Lincoln opened in 1888, nineteen years after the high school for whites; by 1921, 750 students were enrolled in a building meant to accommodate 250, and Lincoln remained the only secondary school for blacks until 1936. In response to conditions like these, girls at Lincoln, influenced by the New Negro movement, promoted race pride, solidarity, and uplift in poetry and prose published in their newspaper and yearbook. Wood finds significant differences between these genres. In poetry, Wood says, girls "gloss over" historical realities. Hazel Hickum's 1917 yearbook tribute, for example, begins

In Lincoln High, with pen and ink  
Our happiest days were spent,  
The teachers trained our minds to think  
And we were all content. (qtd. p. 96)

In this and similar works, Wood argues, "by choosing to remain silent on issues that could create despair and disunity . . . these young Lincoln poets encouraged hope and unity" (p. 102). Prose writers, however, addressed racial inequality head on. Lucile Bluford, who went on to edit the *Kansas City Call*, published a 1926 editorial in the school newspaper titled "New Schools," which contrasted the six high schools serving whites with the single facility for black students, which lacked desks for seventeen teachers as well as a "library, librarian, gymnasium, study hall, or art department" and at which six to eight classes were held on the stairs (p. 110). Bluford challenged the neglect of the needs of black students by celebrating the merit of Lincoln graduates: "Has not Lincoln as large a percentage of pupils attending college as any high school of the city? Are not two of Lincoln's graduates on the University of Kansas Honor Roll?" (qtd. p. 110). Praising the achievements of her race and blaming those who deprive them of just treatment, Bluford contributed to the construction of a collective racial identity.

Girls at Central High School also sought to construct a collective identity, one that overcame the factionalism that split students in the largest public high school in the state. They did so by promoting consubstantiality, or a common identity, by "endorsing the image of a venerable

institution, the attitude of inclusivity, and the sensation of school spirit” (p. 120). Gender was a major source of division at the high school. While girls were the majority of students and surpassed boys academically, boys dominated athletics and leadership positions, including class president and editor of the school yearbook. During the 1898-1899 school year, controversy ensued when the “male winners of a debate between two literary societies refused to face representatives of an all-girl literary society that was excluded from competition” (p. 116). Seeking to discourage such strife, Gwendolen Edwards looked back to a time prior to such conflict in “Central High School” (1899):

Launched in the pride of youth and of beauty.  
Alike it was free from  
Contention and frats, the vice of all schools.  
Neither rival had it in the town nor in the country sur-  
rounding;  
Clear was its title as heaven, to the best of all high schools.  
There the youth of the city gleamed, and in gleaming gained  
knowledge. (qtd. p. 115)

By restoring what appears to be clichéd public writing to the historical context that generated it, Wood offers original and interesting readings of writing by Edwards and other girls from this era, showing the ways in which they claimed their ability and right to intervene in public debates about race, class, and gender. Rather than being passively defined, these girls actively engaged in the discourses that shaped their identities and the collective groups to which they belonged.

Each of these insightful and interesting critical studies focusing on texts by and about girls thematizes—at least to some degree—the interrelationship between texts and female subject formation. Clark’s reader reception study of *Little Women* begins with her own response to the book: “I felt empowered by [Jo] . . . *Little Women* and its sequels made it possible for a girl growing up in the 1950s to dream of having it all—family and career—even though I didn’t know many actual women who did” (pp. 2-3). Clark shows that readers during Alcott’s lifetime related similarly to her work; Alcott wrote that many of her readers found her books “helps for themselves” (qtd. p. 13). This resulted in a deluge of letters, asking Alcott for “advice upon every subject from ‘Who shall I marry’ to ‘Ought I to wear a bustle?’” (p. 13). Such letters, Clark argues, “attempt to achieve intimacy with the author as a person,” whom they imagine as much like her character Jo (p. 13). While the majority of those who recorded their responses to Alcott were white, Clark’s research demonstrates that at least a few women of color identified with Jo; the African American novelist Ann Petry, for example, wrote that she “felt as though I was part of Jo and she was part of me” (p. 48).

Unlike Clark and Day, Hamilton-Honey does not address reception, other than her own, but her analysis is motivated by her interest in the way the books she studies

reproduce and challenge our culture's ideas about what it means to grow up female in the United States and elsewhere. They reflect our fears, hopes, and dreams for young women, as well as the strictures we place upon them and the paths to empowerment that are open to them. If we hope to understand how girls think about the world around them and how they are socialized into expectations for adulthood, there can be no better place to start than by searching their bookshelves for clues. (p. 230)

While Hamilton-Honey does not specify it in her conclusion, these “fears, hopes, and dreams” may be inflected by race. Her introduction, however, notes that like Alcott, the authors and protagonists of the series books produced during the period she examines are all white and targeted at a white audience. Hamilton-Honey reports that the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which published many of the series she analyzes, did not produce series with black protagonists until 1967. She does not address if other publishers did so, information that would have been useful.

Day reports readers' deep identification with fictional characters—much like readers of *Little Women*—quoting, for example, a reader of Dessen who claims that “you can find a part of yourself [in] almost every single one of the characters” (qtd. p. 182). However, it is not clear the degree to which readers who are not white might identify with the characters in the novels she examines. Day states that she is “primarily concerned with the concept of the adolescent woman as white, middle class, and heterosexual” because of its prevalence both in fiction and non-fiction (p. 10). These privileged young women “generally concern themselves with the friendships and romances that are understood to be the foundations of social acceptance and markers of maturation into adulthood” (p. 11). Unlike Hamilton-Honey, Day could easily, one would think, have designed her study to include diverse protagonists and authors. While Day says that she believes that “literature about young women outside of the norm” might “help to illuminate the problematic nature of narrative intimacy,” she does not discuss novels that focus on protagonists that are “people of color, lesbian/bisexual/transsexual/questioning teens, or working class” (pp. 11, 12). (*nota bene*: I think the term “transgender” would be preferable here.) She explains her focus by saying that she is interested in the “norm” about which and to whom much popular culture is presented. There is no question that the novels on the interpersonal topics that she addresses—friendship, romance and sexuality, rape and violence—by the nineteen popular, critically acclaimed white authors that she focuses on merit analysis. Surely, however, some attention to first-person narrators in young adult fiction by

and about adolescent women of color would illuminate the ways in which, for example, “disclosure and discretion in constructions of friendship,” the focus of chapter two, might differ when the friendship is interracial, in for example, Jacqueline Woodson’s *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994) (p. 29). One must acknowledge recent statistics from Lee and Low Books, based on data from the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, which establish the dearth of children’s and young adult literature with “multicultural content”: while 37 percent of the United States population are people of color, only 10 percent of the children’s books published over the past twenty-one years include significant representation of people of color.<sup>4</sup> Given these findings, it becomes even more important that in our work as feminist scholars we examine gender as it shapes and it is shaped by race, class, sexuality, ability, and global location. Only when such analyses have been conducted can we truly understand the role of the textual in the way that gender is constructed and experienced and that the female subject is formed. Future scholarship, utilizing the inclusive methodology found in Wood’s exemplary work, must further this project.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Candace Ward (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1996), 192.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of feminist critics, such as Auerbach and Myers, who pioneered the recovery of women writers, see Lissa Paul, “Feminist Criticism: From Sex-Role Stereotyping to Subjectivity in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*,” ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 1996), 104.

<sup>3</sup> See Carol Gilligan, “Joining the Resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls and Women,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 29 (1990), 501-36; and Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine), 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Ehrlich, “The Diversity Gap in Children’s Publishing, 2015,” *The Open Book: A Blog on Race, Diversity, Education, and Children’s Books*, 5 March 2015, <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2015/03/05/the-diversity-gap-in-childrens-publishing-2015>; “Publishing Statistics on Children’s Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators,” Cooperative Children’s Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin, Madison, accessed 22 August 2017, <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.