

Reese, Ashley N. *The Rise of American Girls' Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. Part of the Cambridge Elements series. Pp. 100. US \$17.99 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-108-93154-0.

Review by Emma K. McNamara

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Dr. Ashley Reese's *The Rise of American Girls' Literature* contributes to a resurgence in scholarship about girlhood in contemporary realistic fiction texts, like Kate Harper's *Out of Reach: The Ideal Girl in American Girls' Serial Literature* (2020) and Julie Pfeiffer's *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* (2021). Reese focuses on the time period between 1850-1940. The monograph consists of five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. Four of these chapters outline "major 'subgenres' for girls' fiction, which emerged in the mid nineteenth century" (1)—domestic and women's literature, family stories, orphan girl stories, and school stories—while the fifth discusses those who were left out, namely Black girls. For each of these subgenres, Reese proffers a set of texts that share similar publishing and classification categories. Each text in each of these sets was published in the United States and is classified by the Library of Congress's copyright book depository as PZ7 juvenile fiction. Of the 665 juvenile fiction books published between the years 1870-1930, 189, or ~28%, were girl's literature. Reese defines girls' literature "as a book written about a girl, for a girl reader" (6) though she acknowledges that "implied readership is not always translated into actual readers" (6). She contends, though, that "girls' literature offers a particular expectation for womanhood" (7) to both its implied and actual readers. Through the use of the bildungsroman form, nineteenth- and early twentieth century novels geared toward girls have an ultimate goal of preparing a girl to become a suitable wife and mother. The novels included in Reese's study predate the post-WWII invention of the teenager and the subsequent young adult genre (11). Reese's concise, yet comprehensive, book discusses how romance and romantic ideals were framed for girls in the US, as well as how gender roles were reinforced through literature for young readers.

Chapter 2, "'Thus Shall the Star of Domestic Peace Arise:' Early American Women's Literature", centers on "the cult of true womanhood" and how the "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" were used to define and describe this ideal (13). Texts depicting "true womanhood" explored femininity as it pertained to a woman's

domestic roles, and were intended to prepare girls for their future roles as wives and mothers. Women's literature during this time period makes clear that "the home should be valued, and marriage, and especially motherhood, are central to American femininity" (21). For this reason, Reese introduces two terms that will appear in other chapters: the republican marriage and the inegalitarian marriage. The republican marriage, defined by Maglina Lubovich, allows unmarried women to "help raise children in their community" (14) through othermothering; the inegalitarian marriage, defined by Amy McCandless, allows the wife to become the household manager (17). The inegalitarian marriage is important in novels where one parent, usually the man, is away at war or dies. Women's literature often depicts two heroines: one flawless, one flawed. The warning of the flawed woman keeps the girl reader from straying too far from the four cardinal virtues.

Chapter 3, "'Toward that Larger and Less Happy Region of Womanhood:' Family Stories," considers that family stories and domestic fiction share many similarities. These stories see girl heroines as they marry and begin their own homes and families, which are expanded upon in sequels. These girls begin as plucky and rambunctious and must learn to settle down and comport themselves if they are to transform and succeed at becoming the kind of ideal woman they are meant to be. Often, these stories have multiple girl characters—sisters—with each one embodying a different character trait which "constitute a collective protagonist" (25). After the magnificent popularity of *Little Women* in 1868, publishers were voracious for writers to create comparable stories. I would argue that this trend did not stop in 1921 as Reese indicates (27), and continues today, with the popularity of series like *The Baby-Sitters Club* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Motherhood, again, is tagged as a significant concept in these texts. Moreover, it calls back to the republican marriage with othermothering, where women in a girl's community, besides her mother, influence her just as much as the biological mother does. Family stories offer tips to girl readers as to how to tame their childish ways as they age in order to become ready for marriage and motherhood.

Chapter 4, "'The Joys of Being an Orphan:' Orphan Girls' Stories," discusses the most popular subgenre of children's literature (50). A girl is considered an orphan if she is missing one or both parents. Just like girls' literature shows girls leaving their carefree childhood for marriage, orphan stories show girls leaving their freedom and lives of possibility to join a family. Thus, regardless of thematic content, in literature, girls are allowed to demonstrate agency, but only in girlhood. Girls must be tamed and domesticated. Visually, this transformation is indicated with orphan girls moving from playing outside to helping her new family inside. Often, orphan girls do not know how to perform "approved feminine behaviors" (51) since they do not have a mother, and thus rely upon othermothering. The orphan girl bildungsroman "includes them learning and eventually adhering to nineteenth-century feminine standards" (51).

Chapter 5, "'Vassar Graduates Do Marry:' School Stories," is about how schools and campuses are almost magical settings. In them, girls adhere to rules created almost exclusively for these spaces and "postponing their inevitable entrance into" domesticity (68). Boarding schools for girls began in the early nineteenth century, with women's colleges appearing shortly thereafter, 1880-1910 being considered their golden age. These stories focus on relationships between the schoolgirls, called crushes; girls' athletic endeavors; and community-based socialization. Crushes amongst the girls are meant to be a kind of mentorship between older and younger students rather than sexual subtexts. In order to be enrolled in boarding schools and colleges, the girls come from privileged families and

continue to observe the basic comportment expected of their class and gender. Indeed, being enrolled in elite schools is not so that the girls can study hard enough to become a doctor or another respectable member of the community, but so they can be deemed more marriageable. Their “education is about learning domesticity, more than scholastic achievement” (77). Books for girls replaced the college setting with the high school setting in the 1930s.

Chapter 6, ““This is What Our Race Needs:’ African American Girls’ Literature,” dispels the myth that books featuring a Black girl protagonist and written with a Black readership in mind did not exist in the past. Reese reminds the reader that these books were not published in nearly the quantity as were books with white girl characters, and she says that it is othering to label these books as African American or multicultural literature (83) since these stories inhabit the same subgenres as the books discussed throughout the above chapters. Given that she says to categorize these books as separate from other girls’ books is to subscribe to a marginalizing framework, it is disappointing that Reese opted to maintain such a separation in this book. Books about Black girls, though, have been scrutinized much more than their white counterparts: either they are considered too mature for young readers because they depict the violence and abuse which Black girls face (84), or they are considered not realistic enough because they do not critique the issues that Black girls face, like lynching and Jim Crow laws (87).

Reese’s study does well in offering both titles that have remained popular since their publications in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, and those that have not. *Little Women*, Gene Stratton Porter’s *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), and Susan Coolidge’s *What Katy Did* (1872) are, of course, discussed, as well as series like Amy Blanchard’s *The Four Corners* (1906-1913) and Pauline Lester’s *Marjorie Dean* (1917-1925). Reese highlights how popular series fiction was at the time, though does not indicate that girls’ series have maintained to be sought after throughout the twentieth- and into the twenty-first centuries. This quick 100-page read, filled with illustrations and covers from the books Reese presents, is an apt introduction to those interested in girls’ literature and useful for introductory and/or undergraduate gender studies, history, and literature courses.