Louise Couceiro, ‘Fantastically Great Women’ and ‘Rebel Girls’: Do Children’s Biographies about Women Inspire or Responsibilize Young Girls in their Conceptions of Girlhood?

A new wave of children’s literature has emerged with exciting vivacity in the United Kingdom since 2016. Feminist biographical illustrated books (abbreviated as FBIBs) such as Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls (Favilli & Cavallo, 2017) and Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World (Pankhurst, 2016) present stories of women’s achievements throughout history. These books position themselves as part of ‘the answer’ to the detrimental effects of gender stereotyping in children’s books, and make their primary aim – to inspire (female) readers into action – very clear.

Whilst there are numerous studies that consider conceptions of girlhood in fiction, there is significantly less work attending to girlhood in nonfiction. I thus begin with an overview of the literary, socio-cultural and academic contexts from which FBIBs published from 2016 onwards, have emerged. Whilst children’s biographies about women and girls existed prior to 2016, I argue that the latter part of the 2010s, which witnessed the ‘watershed’ cultural phenomena of the MeToo movement, offered a burning platform that enabled these books to rise with particular force and popularity.

I then discuss the presentation of girlhood in these books, contending that, despite the positive and admirable intentions underlying these books’ creation, the overarching definition of girlhood that they emanate is complex. Specifically, there is a dangerous undertone that responsibilizes girls. In Good Night Stories (2017: xi-xii), the authors note it is important for girls to understand the ‘obstacles that lie in front of them’ and to ‘find a way to overcome them’. Thus, as female readers are inspired to take responsibility for their aspirations and lives, other factors that produce and maintain their unequal status in the first place, are eschewed. Drawing primarily on feminist and post-structuralist theories, I consider the potential opportunities and consequences of presenting girlhood in this way.

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Charlotte Johanne Fabricius, A Utopia of Co-Becoming? Figurations of Girlhood in Superhero Comics

The past decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of comic book superheroes identified as girls, as the comics industry attempts to diversify and update a genre which is almost a century old and mired in patriarchal culture. In this paper, I will draw on my work on
mapping the emergence of these super-girls and their negotiations of identity in an attempt to understand the potentials they hold for imagining girls as agents of change.

Taking the Marvel Comics series *The Unstoppable Wasp* (2018-) as my point of departure, I will investigate the figurations of girlhood explored in these comics, as well as connecting them to general trends of how girls are imagined in the superhero genre since the turn of the millennium (Gibson, Mel. 2018. “Let’s Hear It for the Girls! Representations of Diverse Girlhoods, Feminism, Intersectionality and Activism in Contemporary Graphic Novels and Comics.” MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture). Girlhood emerges across identity categories and interpellations, and is discussed in relation to excellence, collaboration, friendship, and morality. As well as pointing to these themes and how they exemplify trends in the wider corpus, I will also be situating this new superheroic girlhood in the market logics of superhero publishing (Resha, Adrienne. 2017. “The Blue Age of Comic Books.” The Blue Age of Comic Books. https://scalar.usc.edu/works/blue-age-of-comic-books/index) and the controversies surrounding the launching and cancellation of girl-led titles.

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**Piia K. Posti**, *“Girly Methods”, or “Doing Science” in Lena Andersson’s Picture Books*

Recent research in girlhood studies has certainly endeavoured to answer Mary Celeste Kearney’s call to “subvert the white, heterosexual, middle-class, Western, and presentist framework that continues to dominate girls’ media studies and thus public perceptions of girls’ media culture” (*Mediated Girlhoods*, 2011). New research areas like girls and activism, girls’ bodies and sexuality, black girlhood, girls and hard science, and queer girlhood have contributed vastly to the knowledge of girls’ and young women’s complex realities, and shown the need to redefine girlhood and girl culture. This paper aims to contribute to a similar redefinition. However, I will not endeavour to subvert. Instead, I will show that children’s books which at first glance seem highly representative of the dominating framework can still provide contemporary girl readers with empowering examples. Beside subverting the framework, we also need to un-learn this framework and re-read the texts that have contributed to the framework. In this paper, such an un-learning and re-reading is directed at the concept of science and girls’ relation to science. Swedish illustrator and writer Lena Andersson’s picture books from the 1980s and 1990s portray traditionally sweet and quiet girls in domestic situations: gardening, baking, and enjoying nature. Andersson’s girls have none of the lauded characteristics of today’s exemplary girl characters: they are not brave, exceptionally strong, temperamental, or active. Her picture books are distinguished by their picturesque beauty and nostalgia. In short, they belong in the white, heterosexual, middle-class, Western framework of girl’s books. However, I will argue that her picture books provide an alternative path to evoke and promote girls’ scientific interest, an interest which one-sidedly has been directed toward STEM at the neglect of other scientific endeavours. For girls’ who do not wish to pursue hard science, what other representations of science are there to identify with?
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