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Consenting Fictions, Fictions of Consent

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Take Up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability, and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls
By Lois Keith
Routledge, 2001

The Clubwomen's Daughters: Collectivist Impulses in Progressive-Era Girl's Fiction
By Gwen Athene Tarbox
Garland Publishing, 2000

How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood
By Jane H. Hunter
Yale University Press, 2002

Creating the very girls it presumes, girls' fiction . . . teaches both adult and child readers how to invest in girlhood as a way of either accepting or finding alternatives to consumer culture. The creation of this girl, therefore—whether she seems to facilitate or resist consumerism—is coincident with, and often complicit in, capitalism's rise.

Reading is political. As Jane H. Hunter, Gwen Athene Tarbox, and Lois Keith imply, girls' fiction constitutes as well as addresses girls as a distinct audience in order to facilitate the social changes reshaping late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century US culture. Although they differ on the social impact of the girlhood constructed through fiction, Hunter's *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, Tarbox's *The Clubwomen's Daughters*, and Keith's *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk* all assume that if "the process of reading," as Walt Whitman notes, requires "the reader" of the book as well as its author to "complete" the "text," the text to be completed in girls' fiction is girlhood itself (424–25). All three books share a concern with girls' fiction and social change, and yet what I find intriguing is what all assume but none explore—that is, the larger political and finally national significance of the girl that girls' fiction helps to constitute. Creating the very girls it presumes, girls' fiction, as Peter Stoneley has recently suggested, teaches both adult and child readers how to invest in girlhood as a way of either accepting or finding alternatives to consumer culture. The creation of this girl, therefore—whether she seems to facilitate or resist consumerism—is coincident with, and often complicit in, capitalism's rise.

This investment in the idea of the child—in this case the girl—as a pliable, inchoate subject created through collaborative textual engagement informs all three valuable studies and reflects an important current critical impulse to interrogate rather than assume child identity. Considering what is gained by a collective commitment to the child as "our most convincing essentialism," to quote Adam Phillips (155), the three books read together offer an extended analysis of the social functions that the child identity represented in fiction performs in US culture. As Sharon Stephens reminds us, the "'hardening' of the modern dichotomy of child/adult, like the modern distinction between female/male," precipitated the emergence of "modern capitalism and the modern nation-state" (6), and fiction, as the three books under review make clear, was crucial to this process, if not entirely coterminous with it. A quick tour of the Chicago-based

American Girl Place, where reading is prominently displayed as crucial to constituting the girl identity to which the store then successfully markets, makes clear the ongoing significance of girls' fiction and the girls it creates to US consumer culture—and therefore the urgent need for critical commentaries like those produced by the books under review. With its signature image of a girl reading to her doll and the *American Girl Magazine* that it publishes, American Girl Place uses girls' fiction to encourage the kind of pleasurable consumer “absorption” that, as Ann Douglas and Gillian Brown have suggested, distracted nineteenth-century readers of popular fiction from the pressing social problems coincident with the “realities of the advancing capitalist economy” (Brown 79). Keith concurs that popular fiction for girls brackets the questions of social reform and justice that capitalism makes immediate, while Tarbox and Hunter contend that such fiction offers readers “an increasingly radical view of American girlhood” (Tarbox 5) resulting in “Active Citizenship” (Hunter 382) and, more particularly, in Progressive Era reform (Tarbox 5). However, taken as a whole, these accounts of the genre's wide-ranging social effects urge us to consider the larger political function of girls' fiction. Because the emergence of the girls' novel was itself a response to social pressures facing the nation, these three critical studies collectively suggest the need for an assessment of how the girl identity, created in and through the pages of girls' fiction, in turn grows out of the particular pressures constituting the genre. Whether the girls' novel taught middle-class girls the “taste” essential to their role as “family possessions” (19), as Hunter illustrates, or “important lessons regarding self-interest, ambition, and cultural transformation,” as Tarbox suggests (8), the girls it produces are a response to, and index of, the larger social demands that constitute girls' fiction in the first place. This second half of the story—the sociopolitical context in which girls' fiction develops and its impact on the girls that fiction helps to create—is important to the current critical commitment to understanding the child as a political construct. For this reason, I turn, in the first part of this essay, to a consideration of the social context in which girls' fiction developed as a distinctive form during the time period in which the authors are interested before considering, in the second half of the essay, the possibilities as well as challenges that this larger social framework suggests for our understanding of girls' fiction.

1

While it seems to create the girl anew, the girls' fiction that proliferated over a hundred-year period beginning in the mid nineteenth

century was part of a more extended textual machinery devoted to resolving the particular social and contractual problem that children had represented to the nation since its inception. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, John Locke recognizes the particular problem that children, as a class of persons inherently incapable of consent, pose to his consensual model of liberal democratic society. Children, according to Locke, “*when little*, should look upon their parents as their Lords, their absolute Governors” precisely because they are incapable of the unconditional requirement for elective inclusion within the Lockean consensual body politic—“reason” (145). Therefore, even as the American Revolution created a new people who, as Ian Shapiro and others have noted, based their national identity on an abstract Lockean philosophy of universal rights and then used the child as a rich metaphor to justify their break from the “corrupt” parent country of Great Britain, the child remained a latent conceptual threat to the new nation’s successful continuance (Shapiro 279). Locke’s ideas resonated with Americans because he based consideration of human rights and equality upon an appeal to reason rather than upon the constraints of British history. However, Locke’s concern that “the Characters of [the child’s] Mind” are not and cannot be trained to be consistent with the consent necessary for civil society registered powerfully with a new nation that required the loyalty of the next generation for its successful continuation (206–07).

Legal as well as advice manuals considered, and attempted to resolve, the problem that the child potentially posed to the civic order and longevity of the new republic. William Story’s *Treatise on the Law of Contracts Not under Seal*, for example, cataloged children generally as “persons incompetent to contract” because of their incapacity to consent (43), but its description of the particular conditions under which the child might lawfully enter into a contract reproduces the Lockean requirements of consensual citizenship. Those few contracts that could be initiated before the age of consent—“fourteen years in a male, and twelve in a female” (38)—must be “made voluntarily and freely, and with a knowledge on the part of the infant” about his or her right to choose (35). If late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans repeatedly revised their social contracts in an attempt to realize at every level of governance the consent to the larger social contract that the Constitution codified, the child became a primary site for gauging the success of this national project. Not only were courts increasingly interested in determining as well as directing children’s power of choice, but the popular child-rearing books that proliferated beginning in the 1820s offered parents advice on how to ensure that their offspring grew up to uphold, rather than undermine, the nation’s ideals.

While the single most important parental duty, according to Benjamin Rush, is raising children “in the principles of liberty and government” (23), books such as Lydia Maria Child’s *Mother’s Book* (1835), H. W. Bulkeley’s *Word to Parents* (1858), and Heman Humphrey’s *Domestic Education* (1840) enjoyed wide sales because they provided parents with helpful strategies for encouraging children to become not only “free and independent persons” but “good and wise citizens” who would be able, as Francis Grund writes, to carry “their country and their government in their minds” (150).

Creating as well as addressing child audiences, much of the fiction popular at mid century extended this work of encouraging adults and children alike to align themselves with national interests. Popular fiction written in both the North and South during the Civil War, for example, invited child readers to imagine themselves as protagonists in the war—as active participants in upholding national interests, albeit diversely construed, rather than as bystanders in the national struggle. Indeed, as Alice Fahs has recently shown, this fiction so effectively depicted war as “a splendid adventure facilitated by the embryonic national state” that Theodore Roosevelt recalled in his autobiography the importance of such tales to infusing his Civil War boyhood with a sense of national purpose (270). Whether or not addressing threats to national integrity explicitly, popular fiction tended to feature child protagonists as stand-ins for complicated sets of anxieties about national identity and to thereby encourage what Lauren Berlant has described as a national fantasy of “Infantile Citizenship” (21). Whether aimed at children or not, nineteenth-century fiction, therefore, featured children as agents of national interpellation—as powerful vehicles for soliciting readerly consent to affiliation and governance precisely because of their uniquely contested relation to the national body.

This solicitation took a distinct shape in the case of girls’ fiction, which responded to the social pressures the child posed by making the girl reader into a powerfully flexible social icon. While domestic fiction generally worked to construct a privatized female self, defined by her sensibility, interiority, and feelings, as Nancy Armstrong has shown, girls’ fiction, in particular, provided one of “the central activities of many privileged Victorian girls’ lives” and an important “vehicle to self-culture” (Hunter 39). This self-culture, of course, was immersed in popular culture, and the importance of girls’ fiction to cementing the relation between the two is indicated by the canonization of the girl reader and her fiction. By making the image of a girl reading a powerful trope to which adult and child readers alike were drawn, girls’ fiction foregrounded its form as a text available for diverse social uses. Her display at American Girl Place is only one of her more recent appearances; the image of a girl immersed in a book fascinated American artists and writers throughout the nineteenth

Fig. 1. Winslow Homer, *The New Novel*, 1877. Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA, Horace P. Wright Collection



century. Winslow Homer's 1877 watercolor of a girl reading, *The New Novel* (Fig. 1), for example, visually depicts the girl reader's power, described by Ralph Waldo Emerson, to produce, wherever she is found, "followers in a few days, and in a fortnight a fashion" (407). This "fashion" of reading that the girl creates is invoked even as it is decried by literary critics such as Douglas, who describes her own early days as a reader of "the 'Elsie Dinsmore' books, the 'Patty' books, and countless others" (3) before deploying, as a crucial part of her account of the feminization of American culture, the image of "countless young Victorian women [who] spent much of their middle-class girlhoods prostrate on chaise longues with their heads buried in 'worthless' novels" (10). But maybe the surest sign of the ongoing star status of the girl reader is the girl reader who literally wrote the book on girls' fiction, Jo March. Even as she is often identified by public commentators such as Catharine Stimpson and Carolyn Heilbrun as an important early role model, the fate of Louisa May Alcott's bookish protagonist, as Stimpson and Heilbrun also attest, continues to be hotly contested by *Little Women* fans. Covering the full range of social options that Tarbox, Hunter, and Keith describe, this ongoing conversation among girl readers about the girl reader's final social place—that is, whether Jo should have pursued a life of leisurely affluence by marrying Laurie, or the career in social outreach marriage to Professor Bhaer enables—suggests the current importance of these critical assessments of girls' fiction to understanding the ongoing social legacy of the genre as well as its enduring political effects.

2

The image of the girl reader carries particularly pronounced political weight in *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk*, where her physical

inactivity reinforces what Keith shows to be a repeated plot in girl's fiction over the last 150 years—a girl's education through physical paralysis. Teaching readers to understand femininity as psychologically and physically disabling, stories such as Alcott's *Jack and Jill* (1880), Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872), and Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913) repeatedly feature a girl protagonist who has an accident in which she "becomes paralyzed and later, sometimes several years later, is completely cured" (Keith 23). In their commitment to repeating this story of girlhood illness, these books not only train girls to understand female development as involving a metaphorical paralysis that inevitably produces "passivity, dependence" and a sense of "losing one's place in the world, being cut off and separate, no longer a complete human being" (22), but they simultaneously reinforce the idea that disability is a punishment. In so doing, girls' fiction circumscribes the possibility of changing social attitudes toward femininity and disability, even as such fiction uses "disabling disease to present social issues to young readers" and teach social responsibility toward the poor and vulnerable (23). The image of the girl reader becomes, in Keith's analysis, the plight of the disabled person who, in not walking, "symbolizes our worst fears about dependency, expressed in Victorian fiction as having to 'lie on the sofa always and be helpless'" (22). Reminiscent of Homer's and Douglas's depictions of the girl reader, this girl protagonist becomes the occasion for Keith, from her self-identified position as a former girl reader, current girls' fiction writer, and disabled person, to call for future additions to the canon of girls' fiction that would offer different ways of representing both girls and the disabled.

The Clubwomen's Daughters suggests that such revisionist projects were, in fact, well under way as early as the 1880s, born of a political commitment among clubwomen activists such as Susan B. Anthony, Victoria Woodhull, and Mary Church Terrell to train the next generation of women in collectivist feminist politics. Recognizing that the domestic sphere was increasingly disinclined to foster the political conversation and debate that they had enjoyed as girls and that had inspired their adult activism, such activists encouraged others to write girls' fiction that would model female collective action for girl readers. Therefore, the image of the girl reader who is susceptible to the political messages that fiction provides, in Tarbox's analysis, inspires clubwomen to produce a politically progressive alternative to the canon that Keith considers. Perhaps Tarbox's most important contribution to the subject of girls' fiction is her excavation of an extensive and diverse canon that includes popular but subsequently overlooked texts such as Helen Dawes Brown's *Two College Girls* (1886) and Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins's *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1898). In its 14th edition within seven years of initial publication,

Two College Girls, as well as much of the Progressive Era girls' college fiction that it inspired, clearly had a significant if exclusive following, which Tarbox shows gradually extended beyond the walls of Vassar and Mount Holyoke colleges to include African-American religious organizations and outdoor girls' organizations. Tarbox suggests that by focusing on "the adventures of the members of liberated girls' communities" (7), this rich alternative collection of girls' fiction encouraged girls from all backgrounds to resist the concept of passive femininity that she, like Keith, considers to be endemic to more traditional girls' fiction. Indeed, read together, Keith's and Tarbox's studies exhibit the wide-ranging diversity of taste among nineteenth-century juvenile readers. The texts that Tarbox analyzes are probably less familiar than the heavily dog-eared pages of the *Little Women*, *Secret Garden*, and *Elsie Dinsmore* books that Keith's project brings to mind, but, when placed alongside these familiar books, Tarbox's texts remind us of how important and finally selective a shared canon is, as John Guillory has observed, in constituting cohesive communities. More persuasive, finally, than their contention that girls' behavior seamlessly reproduces the content of girls' reading are Tarbox's and Keith's companion analyses of the diverse and often contradictory range of fictional girl identities available to readers. Therefore, while neither *The Clubwomen's Daughters* nor *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk* takes particularly innovative methodological approaches to their subject, their comprehensive and careful consideration of an understudied topic furthers the important work of complicating our assumptions about an "essential girl" as well as about the political work she accomplishes.

How girls learned to make reading books a priority in the first place—rather than the content of that reading—is Hunter's focus in *How Young Ladies Became Girls*. Featuring "girls as subjects rather than objects, as agents rather than as symbols" (3), Hunter explores the "changing ideas of the female self" occurring over the course of the late nineteenth century (2). As the American middle-class home came to rely increasingly on the work of foreign-born servants and thereby to expand the leisure time of its daughters, girls were encouraged to pursue activities that developed their, and by extension their family's, refinement. Hunter gives the example of advice-writer Frances Willard, who, believing that middle-class girls were priced out of the market for domestic labor, encouraged girls to spend their time producing improved versions of themselves as a way to exemplify family status as well as to defend against potential economic reversals. Reading was crucial to this improvement, and the practice of Jane Addams's father of paying her for every volume of Plutarch she read represents the extent to which girls' reading was considered an essential index as well as guarantor of family status. Therefore,

while advice-writer William Thayer proposed at mid century that girls accomplish their goals of self-improvement through reading 100 pages a day, by 1901 advice-writer Heloise Hersey estimated that “the average young gentlewoman reads a novel more than an hour a day. Thus she gives one and one-third years of solid working days to this occupation” (qtd. in Hunter 39). If girls consented to reading as part of a larger commitment to a self-culture that upheld family status, girls’ reading had the potential to outstrip its purported social purpose. Alice Blackwell, for example, recalls in her diary the repeated attempts that concerned family members made to interrupt her incessant reading with various more menial chores. Therefore, the “elevation of reading to a central and defining aspect of bourgeois girls’ lives” carried with it the possibility that girls would “appropriate reading for themselves” (Hunter 68) to cultivate a “personal taste” and “notion of individuality” (Hunter 87) that did not always coincide with family expectations. If the girls’ novel developed in direct response to a new reading public of leisured girls, girl readers used fiction as a vehicle for a “moral and spiritual self-grooming” that could motivate them to finish their education away from home and in schools, where they assumed leadership roles, often as editors of school papers (Hunter 93). Making reading a priority, therefore, was the first step in enabling girls to develop a self-culture that at times seemed to contradict its initial purpose, leading Sarah J. Woodward, as editor in chief of the Concord High School *Volunteer*, for example, to encourage her female readers to take an active role in public life “instead of sitting in the house reading stories” (Hunter 253). From such evidence, Hunter concludes that the girl reader, even while reinforcing the bourgeois consumer culture this figure ornamented, could work to enable the emergence of a New Woman who would challenge many of that culture’s ideals. These multiple political responses to the self-culture that the girl reader learns played a central role, Hunter concludes, in shaping “the liberal and individualistic culture of the nineteenth century” (402).

3

However, the self-culture that this girl reader represents not only provided readers with various kinds of political agency *within* nineteenth-century US culture but organized that culture at a crucial moment in its evolution. In other words, constituting the very self it represents, the self-culture that girls’ fictions disseminated through the image of the girl reader helped to precipitate a broad historical shift away from locating social responsibility in the state and toward locating it in the self. If the child, as we have seen, had historically

both posed and helped to resolve the challenge of soliciting individual consent to national governance, it continued, through the self-culture that the girl reader represents, to facilitate acceptance of major reallocations of social responsibility that began to occur in the middle of the nineteenth century. The child, as Marilyn Ivy has observed, plays a crucial role in displacing “the possibilities of politics and community in late twentieth-century America into the domains of a privatized imaginary” (247) that finally subsumes the possibility of collective social action. But this impulse has its historical origins, as Ian Hacking points out, in the nineteenth century, when the “emerging welfare state” placed increasing attention on the image of the child in order to “radically increas[e] state control over families” (262). Concerned less with “the protection of children” than with the “increase of state power,” federal and state governments used the image of the child to transform mounting social problems facing the nation into signs of personal and familial, rather than civic, failure (Hacking 262). “Beginning in the Victorian era,” the image of the child, therefore, began to serve as a “rhetorical device for diverting attention” away “from society” and onto the self in order to justify a steady decline in social responsibility (Hacking 285).

Girls’ fiction, I would suggest, facilitated, as well as coincided with, this larger shift toward the social regulation of the self. Indeed, while the girls who do not or cannot read lurk in the margins of girls’ fiction—often as objects of outreach for girls who do read—they remain too busy taking over the girl reader’s domestic responsibilities to have the resources to transform themselves into girl readers. From their position on the sidelines of self-culture, such working-class girls posed an increasing social problem for the state. As reformatory school leader and child advocate Louise Rockford Wardner writes, by way of promoting legislation such as the 1879 Industrial School for Girls Bill, “each unprincipled, impure girl left to grow up” unreformed poisons society as many times as she reproduces and therefore should be committed early in life to an experimental reformatory school (qtd. in Hunter 188), many of which child savers were founding in the late nineteenth century. The same Addams who was rewarded for her girlhood reading, devoted much of her adult life to creating benevolent institutions like Hull House and encouraging literacy among girl tenants in the hopes of preserving the girlhood “innocence,” “tender beauty,” and “ephemeral gaiety” that she believed working endangered (5). Yet even as books such as Jacob Riis’s *Children of the Poor* (1892), Edward Townsend’s *Daughter of the Tenements* (1895), and Franklin H. Briggs’ *Boys as They are Made and How to Remake Them* (1894) hoped to effect major reconsiderations of both the individual’s social responsibility and society’s responsibility to its indigent

citizens, the whole culture of social outreach in the US, as prominent late-nineteenth-century child-welfare reformer and Illinois governor John Altgeld observed, was designed not to eradicate but “to intimidate and control the poor” (*Our Penal Machinery* 126). In his 1897 address to the Illinois House of Representatives, Altgeld reminds political leaders that it is not the poor but the “greedy and powerful” who have the power to destroy the nation and therefore that “our country” will only fully realize its “great vitality” by “listen[ing] to the voices of the struggling masses” (n. pag.). To the extent that girls’ fiction obscured these voices by encouraging a self-culture premised on the leisure the girl reader enjoys, such fiction generally helped to sustain the social order that Altgeld critiques, even as such fiction may encourage some girl readers to become politically active on behalf of those less fortunate. We need to recognize that, among other things, we are consenting to this set of social practices when we identify with the girl reader—when we debate Jo’s marital choice or visit American Girl Place. We need to understand that girls’ fiction constructs not only girls but, through them, the fiction of unilateral consent to the social circumstances that allow the working girl to “announce . . . to the world that she is here . . . that she is ready to live, to take her place in the world” (Addams 8)—but leaves her to struggle unaided for sustenance rather than to enjoy the social benefits of self-culture.

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