

# A YEAR OF GIRLS' STUDIES

by Tracy Wendt Lemaster, Guest Editor

In Winter 1997, *Feminist Collections* released a special issue on “Girls and Young Women,” reviewing works from a limited though promising corpus of books, magazines, and videos by and about girls. Coincidentally, we return to this topic exactly ten years later — with the Winter 2007 issue introducing and this Spring issue launching the journal’s most comprehensive thematic series ever.

Our yearlong sequence is about girls’ studies — the long-unnamed field of scholarly inquiry into girls’ identities and experiences. We hope to represent the many topics, books, and genres available in a field that, it is clear (simply from the growth in editorial space needed to represent it), has become more developed and complex. Yet variations in the range of terminology used just to name the field — sometimes referred to as “girl,” “girls,” or “girls” studies, sometimes capitalized and sometimes not — indicate that this area is not rigidly fixed, but open to new directions. The body of reviews will inevitably reflect this dynamic among the many exciting changes and additions to scholarship on girlhood.

Although they hadn’t originally intended to compile a series, *Feminist Collections* co-editors Phyllis Holman Weisbard and JoAnne Lehman were surprised and delighted by the current amount of scholarship and reviewer interest on girls. “The more we looked,” Phyllis says, “the more we found.” Later, JoAnne notes, our call for reviewers brought in an “overwhelming response” from eager scholars. Invited to guest-edit the series because of my work on representations of girls’ sexuality, I was lucky enough to witness this

expansion both before and after the call went out.

In order to group the many girls’ studies books into manageable categories, we first looked for dominant, repetitive themes in scholarship. We initially compiled nine categories on topics ranging from education to entertainment, literature to technology, and aggression to “othering.” I personally found it interesting that the topic of “the body,” a somewhat established issue for girls within body image research, hadn’t even come up yet! Clearly girls’ studies has diverse and numerous foci. Eventually, as JoAnne put it, “We simply had to stop, there was so much!” We posted a call for reviewers that listed those nine categories, and then added more, based on feedback from some of the many qualified scholars with specialized research and service in their girls’ studies areas of interest. What resulted was, we believe, a strong representation of the many books and topics unique to girls’ studies.

We felt it necessary to recognize, in addition to critical academic books, the many genres that touch girls’ lives, as well as materials that are actually authored by girls. Girls’ studies often turns to such sources as girls’ magazines, websites, diaries, narratives, and artistic production for serious inquiry into psychosocial research. Therefore, the series includes reviews of young adult and pre-adolescent literature for girls, as well as books containing girls’ own writings and self-portrayals. With a review of magazines for seven- to twelve-year-olds and another

of websites by and for girls, the series is diverse in its considerations of different media. Also, by elevating girls’ voices to the same level as the voices of scholars, the series echoes the field’s own practice of treating girls as active subjects in meaning-making, not simply passive objects of inquiry.

The Winter 2007 issue acted as a sneak preview of the series, including a review of texts used by librarians, teachers, and parents to select young adult literature for girls and an article by Sarah Hentges, author of *Pictures of Girlhood: Modern Female Adolescence on Film*, on her pedagogical practices using girls’ film. That precursor issue offered a glimpse into the range of materials — from reference works to popular film — that conceptualize and inform girlhood, as well as into the ways those materials may be adopted, analyzed, or critiqued within education.

In this second issue in the series, I review three foundational texts in girls’ studies that serve as comprehensive points of entry into the field’s current theories and methodologies from authors who both directly and indirectly map the growth and change in the field as it has flourished throughout the past ten years. Reviewer Jessica Taft explores five works — one from Anita Harris, a prolific author and editor in girls’ studies — about girls’ identity formation, focusing on how various social and personal contexts interlock to create discourses on contemporary girls’ power.

Finally, Amy Pattee covers several texts that discuss images of the American girl across a variety of media, including film, literature, and television, noting media's sensitivity to or ignorance of race, culture, class, and sexual differences. As a whole, this issue of *Feminist Collections* offers an interdisciplinary range of critical exchanges on "theories of the girl" across history, psychology, politics, and popular culture and within books, collections, narratives, and autobiographies.

Our next two 2007 issues — and even a few reviews in 2008 — will continue the interdisciplinary approach so central to girls' studies, drawing from more disciplines under such categories as "Marketing of Girls/to Girls in Popular Culture," "Girls and Technology," "History of Girls' Organizations," "Othered Girls: Growing Up Between Two Worlds," and "Girls and the Body," to name a few. In all, the series

includes more than a dozen reviews covering fifty-plus print and electronic sources specific to the complexities and contradictions of girlhood.

Just as interdisciplinarity is implicit in girls' studies, women's studies and feminist theory continually inform, shape, and even challenge scholarship in girls' studies. The majority of scholars in girls' studies draw from topics, theories, and methods in women's and feminist studies, to the benefit of all fields. However, girls' studies is not securely positioned within any field, with some authors specifically focusing on girls' resistance to feminism as an antiquated movement and feminists' resistance to girls as only "potential" feminists, pointing to struggles and knowledge validated only through adulthood. Provocative questions arise: For instance, are girls a women's issue? Can girls be feminists? Do analyses of girlhood enlighten or subvert studies of women or of femininity?

While it is clear that many recognize the importance of scholarly inquiry into girlhood, where the scholarship rests in relation to women's studies and feminism still fluctuates, and the resulting theories are fascinating. Phyllis summarizes the mission of *Feminist Collections*, one that accurately presumes girls' studies as an interest of women's studies, but that also emphasizes the newness of the field and its placement: "Our goals are to be a resource for people studying or teaching women's studies, to keep up with emerging topics, and to help people find resources on new and emerging topics, technologies, and techniques." Because girls' studies has so much to offer in its variety of scholars, topics, genres, and methods, and because it is informed by and against parallel fields yet refuses absolute fixity, girls' studies is a timely and apt focus for *Feminist Collections'* longest series and one of the most exciting scholarly areas today.



Miriam Greenwald