

1 The Rise of Girls' Literature

Girls' books have a rich publishing tradition in the United States. Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, there is a wide selection of literature about and for girls: from books that are part of the broader American canon, such as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*,¹ to the often censored *Forever* (1975) by Judy Blume.² How is a mass-market series, for instance, *Sweet Valley High*,³ similar to the award-winning (although racially problematic) *Little House* books?⁴ What does the religious *Elsie Dinsmore* series⁵ have in common with Jean Webster's college heroine in *Daddy Long Legs*?⁶ With such a vast genre, defining it and understanding its parameters offers a way to not only understand the publishing history of books for girls, but also to interrogate the ideology surrounding girls' literature today. One might say that the future of publishing girls' books lies in the past.

This Element traces the origins of American girls' literature and outlines four major "subgenres" for girls' fiction, which emerged in the mid nineteenth century. While girls' literature, especially so-called "classic" girls' novels, are the center of a few studies, never have girls' texts been examined as an overarching genre in connection with American women's literature. Instead, this important part of children's publishing history has been neglected in favor of examining American children's books as a whole⁷ or as part of smaller subgenres, including North American orphan girls' novels,⁸ or "classic" Anglo-American girls' books,⁹ without defining the genre parameters. One

¹ L. M. Alcott, *Little Women* (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1868–9).

² J. Blume, *Forever* (New York: Bradbury Press, 1975).

³ F. Pascal, *Sweet Valley High* series (New York: Random House, 1983–2003).

⁴ L. I. Wilder, *Little House* series (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932–71).

⁵ M. Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore* series (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1867–1905).

⁶ J. Webster, *Daddy Long Legs* (New York: The Century Company, 1912).

⁷ See A. S. MacLeod, *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

⁸ See J. S. Sanders, *Disciplining Girls: Understanding the Origins of the Classic Orphan Girl Story* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

⁹ See S. Foster & J. Simons, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995).

of the foundational works on broader American publishing history, John Tebbel's *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, gets numerous facts wrong about girls' texts, for example, accrediting *Little Women's* illustrations to Louisa Alcott, instead of to her sister, May, and conflating its publication date with the text's sequel in 1869.¹⁰

Girls' literature is vaster than the "classic" novels that frequently are included in literary history, books such as Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872)¹¹ and Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913).¹² Lesser-known texts influenced their contemporary market and paved the way for this major branch of children's publishing. Although few may now read Annie Fellows Johnston's *Little Colonel* series (1895–1912)¹³ or Lela Horn Richards' *Caroline* series (1921–1923),¹⁴ these texts used to be in conversation with the so-called classics. Together, they form a better understanding of what girls' literature has been and what it is today. Although only a handful of female authors remain in the public consciousness, in actuality, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a "rise of women to prominence as authors, mostly fiction, a trend which was only beginning."¹⁵ Before 1800, only four women had published works in the United States; by 1872, "nearly three-fourths of the novels written that year in America came from their pens."¹⁶ Many of their works were written for children, and, of these, many were specifically about and for girls.

Most of these books were authored by white women. As Lynn S. Cockett and Janet R. Kleinberg note, emerging American children's literature in the nineteenth century was "not truly democratic in its

¹⁰ J. Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing, Vol. II: The Expansion of an Industry, 1865–1919* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1975), p. 598.

¹¹ S. Coolidge, *What Katy Did* (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1872).

¹² E. H. Porter, *Pollyanna* (Boston, MA: L.C. Page, 1913).

¹³ A. F. Johnston, *Little Colonel* series (Boston, MA: L.C. Page, 1895–1912).

¹⁴ L. H. Richards, *Caroline* series (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1921–23).

¹⁵ J. Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States, Vol. I: The Creation of an Industry, 1630–1865* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1972), p. 543.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

representation.”¹⁷ This tendency persists in children’s book publishing, with a recent study showing that Black authors wrote 5.26 percent of children’s books published in the United States in 2019; for comparison, only 21.05 percent total were written by authors of color.¹⁸ Frequently, critics, by omission or indeed direct design, publish histories that only consider books about white children. However, the white, middle-class girls’ story is not a complete picture of the publishing market at this time, neither is it an accurate picture of America. While the number of books is not as plentiful, the publishing history of African American girls’ literature gives a better picture of American girls’ literature. In an effort to broaden our understanding of girls’ novels, this Element seeks to include these books. I must note the problematic use of African American girls’ literature as a label, as it further affirms the standardized “girls’ literature” as necessarily white while “Othering” the non-white protagonist and/or reader. I do not claim to know the answer to this troubling division, but my hope is that by including the ways in which African American girls’ literature fits into the broader genre we might continue to include more voices in our understanding of girls’ literature and its publication history.

As the nineteenth century progressed, book publishing became more prominent in the United States, due in part to the rise of the middle class and its purchasing power. Around this time, childhood became a delimited and celebrated period.¹⁹ As a result of these two intersecting events, books of pleasure, not just of instruction, practically burst onto the market, and, among them, fiction specifically for girls emerged. These books are often part of a series. Although some early American girls’ literature, such as *The*

¹⁷ L. S. Cockett and J. R. Kleinberg, “Periodical Literature for African-American Young Adults: A Neglected Resource” in K.P. Smith (ed.), *African-American Voices in Young Adult Literature: Tradition, Transition, Transformation* (Latham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1994), pp. 115–67, 118.

¹⁸ Cooperative Children’s Book Center, Books by and/or about Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (2020). <https://cbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/cbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-and-or-about-poc-2019/>.

¹⁹ G. Avery, *Behold the Child: American Children and their Books 1621–1922* (London: Bodley Head, 1994), p. 122.

Wide, Wide World (1850), are standalone texts, the majority of the books that follow, including *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867) and *Little Women* (1868), are the first in a series. Turning a successful book into a series – whether comprised of twenty-eight books, like *Elsie*, or four books, like *Little Women* – clearly appeals to publishers. Readers already know the characters and are more likely to continue to buy books in an established series, minimizing both production risks and cost. Advertisements in magazines including *The Youth's Companion* and *The Bookman* focus on the appeal of “established juveniles” for the “many little girls who have already made friends with” the series’ heroine.²⁰ These advertisements promote the newest book alongside its predecessors, potentially drawing the attention of new and established readers of the series, making it known those books that readers might have “missed.” This publishing trend of relying on readers’ invested interest in series fiction continues today, with mass market paperback series, such as *Sweet Valley High*.

Gendered book marketing is found in early twentieth-century periodical advertisements. In the nineteenth century, advertisements for children’s books were often classified under the broader category of “juvenile literature.” In a 1909 notice of recently published girls’ books, the difference between boys’ and girls’ books is outlined. The notice acknowledges the quality of girls’ literature, while simultaneously observing the superiority of the *content* of boys’ books, namely, “a series of adventures which tend to keep up the interest.”²¹ The notice then outlines almost verbatim the girls’ subgenres explored in this Element: “a story of school or home life or of the girl’s effort to make her way in the world in the face of adverse circumstance.”²² (I would argue that the expression “adverse circumstances” describes the orphan girl’s story.) Although perhaps reductive, the 1909 notice observes that fictional heroes have adventures, while heroines are limited by their setting. A girls’ escapade at home is inevitably tamer than a boys’ escapade at sea. Marketing books based on gender remains popular to this day.

²⁰ “Advertisement 151,” *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life*, 30.6 (1910), p. 822.

²¹ “Real books for real girls,” *New York Times* (5 Dec. 1909), p. LS20. ²² *Ibid.*

Using the Library of Congress's catalog, the copyright book depository in the United States,²³ we can start to trace the publishing history of girls' literature. A search of "juvenile fiction" in the Library of Congress's catalog results in well-over 10,000 titles published between 1850 and 1940, the years examined in this Element. Observing select years can provide a better idea of the publication of both girls' and children's literature and the relationship between the two. To conduct this search, I looked for books that are classified as PZ7, the Library of Congress's classification for juvenile fiction, that are in English, are identified as a book, and were published in the specified timeframe. Although I narrowed the search to books published in the United States, the corpus was not limited to American books, as American publishers distributed works by non-American authors. This search provided the number of general children's literature shown in Figure 1. To identify girls' literature was a little more haphazard, as not all the books are digitized or even summarized online, thus, I was reliant on the metadata to determine whether the title might be girls' literature. If the title referenced a girl and was by a female author, unless I knew otherwise,²⁴ I included it in my count of girls' literature. This methodology seeks to "understanding trends with time."²⁵ The data gathered is not foolproof, as "even published government figures are not necessarily clear or reliable."²⁶ Still, the graph in Figure 1 gives a sense of publishing history of both children's and girls' literature in the United States.

As noted in this chart, the number of children's books published in the United States steadily increased throughout the period this Element examines. Publication of girls' literature does not increase at the same rate, but remains fairly consistent: in 1870, it comprises 27.8 percent of the children's books; in

²³ The Library of Congress became the centralized copyright depository for the United States in 1870. Previously, copyright texts were held by clerks of court.

²⁴ For example, I excluded the *Aunt Jane's Nieces* series, as Edith Van Dyne is a pseudonym of L. Frank Baum.

²⁵ A. Weedon, "The Uses of Quantification" in S. Eliot and J. Rose (eds.), *A Companion to the History of the Book*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), pp. 31–50, 40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

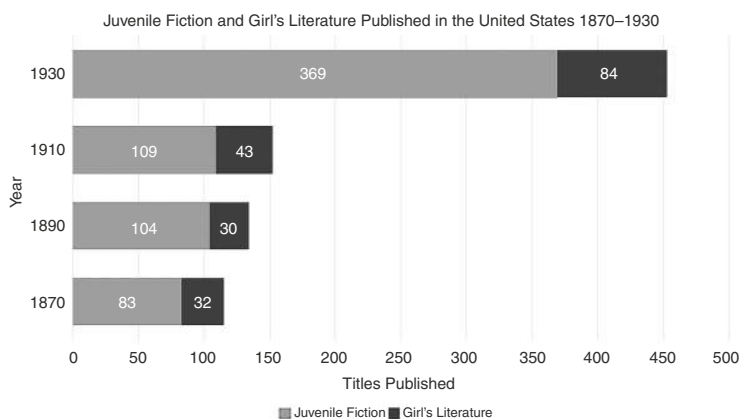


Figure 1 A graph of juvenile fiction and girls' literature published in the United States

1890, it is 22.4 percent; in 1910, it is the highest percentage at 28.3 percent; and, in 1930, which also includes the greatest number and variety of children's books, it falls to 18.5 percent. As these numbers indicate, girls' literature is a prominent part of children's literature. To neglect this genre would be to skew our scholarly understanding of juvenile American literature.

1.1 Defining American Girls' Literature

Girls' literature can be defined as a book written about a girl, for a girl reader,²⁷ with the targeted audience identified in its name, similar to children's or young adult literature. Of course, implied readership is not always translated into actual readers: boys and girls, adults and children alike read these books. For the purpose of this Element, the authors are women, mirroring other girls' literature studies.²⁸ However, in identifying

²⁷ D. Sardella-Ayres and A. N. Reese, "Constructing girls' literature through the *bildungsroman* in Canada and the United States," *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 13.1 (2020), 33–49, 34.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

those stipulations, not only are we led to ask *who* these girls and women are, but as a result *what* the books reveal about them. To ask these questions is to engage Judith Butler's groundbreaking argument that gender is "a becoming, and constructing," with gender reflected as "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame."²⁹ Girls' literature offers a particular expectation for womanhood. As Elaine Showalter observes, a "girls' story" is "designed to bridge a gap between the schoolroom and the drawing room, to recommend docility, marriage, and obedience rather than autonomy or adventure."³⁰ Consequently, these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels collectively imagine a single ending for heroines (and arguably, their readers).

The female *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age story, underpins the genre of girls' literature: "[T]he heroine's trajectory of growth and development remains analogous for both girls' fiction and girls' *bildungsromane*, despite some texts ending before the heroine reaches adulthood. The socialization of the heroine into the roles of wife and mother remains central to girls' literature."³¹ Indeed, whether the heroine begins the story as a tomboy or a college student,³² her ending usually culminates in matrimony. Whereas, in Showalter's terms, a male *bildungsroman* features a boy going on an "adventure," acquiring the "autonomy"³³ that is central to his adulthood; a female *bildungsroman*, however, is about community integration. More specifically, the girl becomes a caretaker of others and a home, preparing for marriage and motherhood. In losing her individuality, Annis Pratt argues that instead of "growing up," the girl "grow[s] down."³⁴ These restrictions often are increased exponentially when the heroine is African American.

²⁹ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 45.

³⁰ E. Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 50.

³¹ Sardella-Ayres and Reese, "Where to from here?," 34.

³² See M. A. Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

³³ Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, p. 50.

³⁴ A. Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 30.

These developmental ideas are based on the period's clear distinctions between girls and boys. Barbara Welter observes that "[t]he nineteenth century was confident that it knew the differences between the sexes and that these differences were total and innate."³⁵ Specifically: "Women were inherently more religious, modest, passive, submissive and domestic than men."³⁶ These ascribed qualities fit the domestic role assigned to girls. Thus, an American adolescent was meant to help her mother run the household, practicing the virtues that supposedly are central to womanhood. As the twentieth century dawned and women attended higher education, more opportunities were made available in girlhood. However, the restrictions for women remained the same, making the gap between girlhood and womanhood that much more pronounced.

Betty Friedan's seminal, albeit problematic, *The Feminine Mystique*,³⁷ followed two decades after the girls' literature examined in this Element. Her "problem that has no name," namely, women's "dissatisfaction" and "yearning" for a life beyond domestic duties,³⁸ helped usher in second-wave feminism. My critique put forth in this Element follows Friedan's claims; namely, that women should be able to choose the life they want. Friedan observes, "experts [tell] women their role [is] to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers";³⁹ indeed, this message is central to girls' literature. While Friedan's critique might be too modern to bear significant weight in reading earlier values, women petitioned for equality concurrent with these texts. First-wave feminism led to the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919, granting voting rights to American white women. Nevertheless, these girls' texts almost never mention suffrage,⁴⁰ and a career, if entertained, occurs before marriage. Instead, there is typically one path for heroines. As Nancy Rosoff and Stephanie Spencer observe, for authors of adolescent girls' fiction: "[T]heir presentation of femininity both teaches the reader

³⁵ B. Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.* ³⁷ B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15. ³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ The only text I found that mentions women's suffrage is Jean Webb's *Daddy Long Legs* (1912).

how they *should* behave *and* reflects their contemporary society's expectations of what is 'natural' female behavior."⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, many girls' books preserve a socially conservative view of acceptable feminine behavior, as they had to meet the approval of the generally male-run publishing houses, as well as that of the social gatekeepers, librarians, bookshop owners, and parents.

While studies of children's books, such as Gillian Avery's *Behold the Child* (1994), often center only on American books, studies on girls' literature rarely make such a distinction, instead grouping together English-speaking texts, whether that means Anglo-American (see Shirley Foster and Judy Simons' 1995 *What Katy Read*) or English-speaking North American (see Joe Sutliff Sanders' 2011 *Disciplining Girls*). These American girls' books did not exist and, indeed, were not read in isolation. The borders between Anglophone readers were often blurred with Canadian books published out of New England and British books imported to the American market. While this Element focuses solely on American girls' literature, it is with the acknowledgment that these books (and their readers) were in conversation with girls' books printed in the United Kingdom, Canada, and other English-speaking nations. Indeed, girls' literature broadly shares similarities, such as female authorship, readership, and protagonist, but some qualities are culturally specific. American girls' books emphasize representing a new nation, ever-expanding opportunities, and deliberately differentiating oneself from Britain. These ideas take root in the American women's fiction examined in section 2 and remain central to the girls' fiction that follows.

Perhaps the strongest example of patriotism is Lela Horn Richards' *Then Came Caroline* (1921),⁴² in which the eponymous protagonist moves west with her family. Caroline quickly adapts to this environment, where social class is less important, mirroring the supposed equality of the United States. Similarly, Caroline's gaze remains fixed on the Rocky Mountains, which symbolize Caroline's future, as she dreams of living beyond them. Thus,

⁴¹ N. G. Rosoff and S. Spencer, *British and American School Stories, 1910–1960: Fiction, Femininity, and Friendship* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 16; emphasis in original.

⁴² L. H. Richards, *Then Came Caroline* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1921).

when a relative offers Caroline the opportunity to move to England, Caroline's response has to be "no," in order to preserve her American identity and continue her journey westward, mirroring the nation's growth, as well as the pioneering spirit attributed to the American manifest destiny.

Similarly, American identity is a theme in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850).⁴³ When the heroine, Ellen, is sent to live in Scotland, her aunt, Lady Keith, asks her to relinquish her American citizenship. Ellen refuses, declaring: "I had a great deal rather be an American."⁴⁴ Ellen's devotion to the United States stands almost in defiance to Great Britain and its classicism invoked by her aunt's title. Ellen's push for equality can be seen in her knowledge-based patriotism: she reads biographies of George Washington and debates her uncle on the justification of the American Revolution. Both Warner and Richards' texts point to the importance of heroines' American pride, which, in part, is defined as not British.

Not all the texts are as explicit in their patriotism as these novels, although heroines are usually proud to be American. Women's patriotic contributions were in raising sons to thereby indirectly influence the nation's development.⁴⁵ While this theme is echoed in British girls' books, the overtness of the patriotism in American girls' books, including the supposed lack of classicism, runs contrary to British girls' texts. Thus, the novels included here are part of a socially conservative book history, wherein the ideology is practically uniform: girls, no matter how autonomous at the beginning of the novel or series, are willing, even happy, to give up this freedom for marriage and motherhood. A model of potential subversion is constructed only to have this subversion contained at the end. This trajectory underpins the genre of girls' literature.

1.2 *Corpus Novels*

This Element traces the development of American girls' literature in the time period 1850–1940. In order to have a clear focus, the texts chosen are

⁴³ S. Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1850).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

⁴⁵ G. Matthews, "*Just a Housewife*": *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 35.