Chapter 4

Girlhood Pastimes: "American Girls" and the Rest of Us

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In this essay, my mom and I present a dialogue between ourselves about how it feels to be twelve and a girl, and a feminist author/professor/mother in a culture dominated by boys and men. We agree about a lot but feel it differently sometimes. My mom (Zillah) says she learns a lot from me, and often I get her to change her mind about things. She sometimes gives the consumerist side of culture too much power. I remind her that I have a mind, and think things through in different ways than what is often expected. So when I wanted a Barbie I convinced her that I made Barbie into what I wanted her to be. She still did not get me a Barbie, but all her friends did.

I look at the American Girls Collection—its books, dolls, games, and clothes, etc.—as a fantastic exception to a boy-dominated world. The American Girls Collection creates a world of girls. Samantha, Molly, Felicity, Kirsten, Addy, and Josephine let me experience different historical periods from the dolls' viewpoint. Through their lives, experiences, dreams, parties, and disappointments I learn about colonial America, slave times, pioneer days, the early twentieth century, World War II and New Mexico's past.

It was great fun to explore these stories. They were a jumping-off point for me to think more about girls who lived in time periods different from mine.

I wondered and was a little bothered that none of these girls was poor, except for Addy when she was a slave, but then even she becomes dazzlingly successful. And none of the girls is Jewish, or Muslim, or Korean, or Puerto Rican, like the girls in my school.
Josephina is the exception to this. She is the newest addition to the collection, a Mexican Catholic girl. But she wasn’t added to the collection until 1997. Actually, my mom was always bothered by the fact that the collection was called “American.” She says: After all, what about all the girls who live in the United States who would not identify themselves as American? And what about South America? I actually agree with my mom—and yet I love the American Girls Collection.

It is this contradiction—that the collection has its faults and its strengths—that keeps my mom and me talking. The American Girls Collection lets me pretend that the world is made up of strong and interesting girls who are taken seriously. Yet, I still know that this is not usually the case; girls are often ignored and their viewpoint questioned. I also know that girls are really very much more diverse than those in the American Girls series. But, in my mind I make the series be the way I want it to be. When the public library did not have all the American Girls books I convinced my mom and dad to buy them for me. They bought me the more than thirty books at $5.95 each. I know that so many girls can’t afford this and I know that this is not fair. But this did not stop me from wanting them. And although my mom and dad refused to get me the doll, Samantha (approximately $85), my mom’s sister, Julia, as much a feminist as my mom is, did. My aunt and I choose my holiday addictions together, and it is great fun.

I’ll share with you the way my mom and I agree and disagree about how I will be a twelve-year-old feminist, my way. I will be writing more of the dialogue than my mom, because as a girl I need more space. Our thoughts are somewhat fragmented because my experiences and my mom’s ideas keep shifting and changing as we explore new places and spaces. We will share our thoughts honestly and directly, even though they jump around and do not always fit together neatly. So let me start.

Sarah: I am twelve and have always been a girl. I know what it feels like to have boys everywhere; in movies, in books, and in the classroom, waving their hands high. Don’t get me wrong! Being a girl is great. Really, I would not want to be a boy. I just wish we girls could have more room to express OUR ideas. I also think that our culture would be more interesting and fun, especially for girls, if girls could be more of a jumping-off place for films, books, etc.

Zillah: It is amazing to me how the American Girls Collection knows how to commercially tap into girls’ interests. The magazine tells them how to make birthday parties and do different crafts; tells stories of girls across time and place; and most of all, takes girls seriously. Sarah, for her eight-year-old birthday party, made petits fours like Samantha did in her Victorian times. She and her friends loved dressing up old fashioned and pretending to live like girls used to. The whole process amazes me.

Sarah: When I was three it seemed like all the books were about boys. Because I read so much it made me feel like everything was focused on boys; everything. My mom and dad would read me stories with boy characters but would change the names so that there were some girls.

Wherever I turned there were boys. I was drowning in a culture where it was all boys. Names, pictures, stories, all my earliest memories were of boys, and I was a girl.

My mom, dad and I searched and searched for books that put girls in the spotlight without making them always seem boy-crazed and stupid. When we found them I felt triumphant. I loved stories with girls, so we continued to scavenge and search for them.

I have already told you that I think it is great to be a girl and I am glad that I am who I am. I don’t want you to think that my search for my own space and mirrors makes me feel inferior, or less than. I am glad that I am a girl even though I know that boys are given more freedom, time, and recognition—almost always.

I am sure that this has much to do with my family life. It probably matters that my name, Sarah Eisenstein Stumbar, is a result of my parents’ desire to be fair rather than follow patriarchal boy custom. My parents decided before I was born that if I was a boy, my last name would be my mother’s. If I was born a girl, I would have my father’s last name.

My dad was the first to hold me when I was born, and he bottle-fed me half the time; my mom breast fed me the other half. In short: I feel like my earliest beginnings challenged the usual boy/girl dividers.
Zillah: It is an amazing process to grow up a second time with an adolescent daughter. We have just been through a hard year at school where Sarah’s classroom was obnoxiously dominated by boys who were aggressive and mean spirited about girls and sex and sexuality. I remember one day Sarah wore a gay rights pin to school and several of the boys in her class went wild. They taunted Sarah, demanding that she tell them if she was gay. Her answer was fabulous and really got them going; she simply said she did not know yet.

I just finished reading *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher and I’ve been reading lines from it to Sarah. The book describes the enormous insecurities of adolescent girls. Sarah is keen to make sure she knows her true self and is amazed when she finds parts of herself described in Pipher’s book. When Sarah starts yelling that she cannot figure out her “advanced math class” problem I remind her of *Reviving Ophelia*, then she calms down and invariably figures it out.

Adolescence seems fabulously tricky. For Sarah it mixes and marbles several selves: her love of history (“herstory,” as she says) and her studies of World War II, especially of children in hiding in those years; her love of sports and athletic challenges; her devotion to friends and friendship; her political commitments to racial, sexual, and economic equality; and her phantasmic imaginings with her dolls, especially Samantha, of the American Girls Collection. Let her tell you about this particular happiness.

Sarah: The American Girls Collection is really one of the only mainstream/popular culture things I do. I do not really watch much TV or see most movies made for kids. I hated *Clueless* but loved *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*, *Antonia’s Line*, and *Sense and Sensibility*. But I’m still a girl who likes to have fun and pretend with my dolls and friends.

**The American Girls Collection and Me (by Sarah)**

In second grade my teacher, Cindy, read a book, *Kirstin’s Surprise*, to the whole class. *Kirsten* lives in 1854. She is Swedish and lives on the prairie in Minnesota. When I realized she was part of a “collection,” called the American Girls, I could not wait to find out more. I was really happy to have a whole series of books to read about four girls’ lives (Addy and Josephina hadn’t been created yet). There were twenty-four books in all. I liked reading about Kirsten because she was a girl and seemed to be a girl with a dream, and a dream she reached for. Kirsten’s stories centered on her feelings, and as a girl I felt at home. She was part of herstory, and made me feel included. Because Kirsten was the first girl in the series that I read about, she holds a magic that none of the other American Girls hold. What I love about Kirsten is that her story feels true: language doesn’t come easy to her, and she isn’t overjoyed about her mom’s new baby, but life still goes on. She can’t always go to school because of housework, but she makes do.

**Addy** is an exslave who is growing up in Philadelphia in the 1860s. I was really happy when American Girl added Addy, the only African-American girl in the series. I had never thought that the American Girls books really represented the variety of girls that exist, but they are closer now that there is Addy. What I like about Addy is she has the seriousness of someone who has known much pain, but still she celebrates her happiness and laughs a lot. She knows that she is lucky to be in Philadelphia, where she is free, and reminds me to appreciate freedom. Addy’s stories taught me a lot about the people who helped newly freed slaves and what their lives were like. What I don’t like about the Addy books is she learns to read and write very quickly. Everything works out perfectly. In the last book the whole family is together, except for her aunt and uncle. This didn’t happen much in real life for exslaves. Even though I find some parts of Addy’s books unrealistic given the reading I have done about slavery, I still love them.

**Samantha** is a young girl growing up in the Victorian era. Until the Addy books were written, Samantha was my favorite girl. Samantha was my favorite girl/doll because she does not let herself be held captive to the beliefs of her time. She climbs trees and says what she thinks. I love the way she makes friends with a poor servant named Nelly, who lives next door. In Samantha’s lifstory there are many varied views about women of her time. Samantha’s grandmother is stuck in the old-fashioned ways, but her aunt is a suffragette. Samantha isn’t quite sure what her beliefs are. What I don’t like about Samantha is she doesn’t know how privileged her life is. She doesn’t know about people that aren’t as wealthy as she is. I also think that she is sometimes selfish and unthinking. In *Meet Samantha* she runs out in the middle of the night, without telling anybody, because she wants to know why the family’s seamstress left without telling her goodbye.
This shows that Samantha is very self-centered and cares much more about herself than anybody else.

**Felicity** is growing up during the American Revolution in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1774. I have never really liked Felicity. Whenever I go to the shelf to choose a book from the American Girls Collection, her books are never my first choice. I do not like Felicity because I think she is a rich snob. In *Happy Birthday Felicity*, Felicity gets her grandmother’s old guitar as a birthday present, and she takes it to her lessons, disobeying her parents. Then she loses the guitar by leaving it on a bench. She does not care, thinking that everything and anything can be replaced. True, she is not all bad and she does help people. In *Felicity Saves the Day* she helps Ben, her father’s apprentice who ran away, but she would not have done so if that fall Ben hadn’t kept her secret about a horse named Penny. Because she loves horses, Felicity had helped Penny run away from Nye, her evil master. I think that if someone asked Felicity to help them, but they could give nothing back to her, that Felicity would not help. She is selfish and self-centered.

**Molly** is growing up on the homefront in the United States in 1944, during World War II. I like the setting and time in which the Molly books take place, but I think that they do not represent enough about what was going on in the war. The books only discuss what was happening in the United States and how Americans were fighting against the Germans. Nothing is said about the Japanese in the United States or abroad, or the horrors in Europe and Africa. I also do not like the plots of the books. *Changes for Molly* is all about tap dancing and her dad coming home. There is little said about her feelings about war, or about Hitler, or about the devastation of Europe. I like Molly as a personal but I think that she could help us know more about the sadness of war.

**In Sum**

Sarah: Even though I do not think that all of the American Girls books are great, I love the American Girls series because it lets me read about girls and imagine them and myself in different times in herstory.

The American Girls Collection lets the part of me—and it keeps getting smaller—that wants to be a part of the popular culture belong. That is both good—a space for girls—and bad—it’s still exclusionary of many.

Zillah: The American Girls series clearly introduced Sarah to pieces of herstory that she then explored further on her own. At the same time it also directs girls toward “shopping” as a way of experiencing their culture and history. This is tough. Sarah knew some of the stuff was silly and unnecessary, and yet she also wanted to take part.

Sarah: I do not like it when the Pleasant Company—the makers of the American Girls Collection—tries to sell you stuff that you do not need for tons of money. Girls who are not wealthy cannot buy from the catalogue. And even middle-class girls cannot buy lots of the things advertised.

Recently the Pleasant Company marketed a new series called The American Girl of Today. This consists of items that Kirsten, Felicity, Samantha, Addy, Molly, and Josephina would wear if they lived in the 1990s. Supposedly these items are what the “average” girl would use and wear today. When I say average, I mean girls who wear jeans, shorts, baseball caps, and rollerblades. In all of the “new stuff” to buy for one’s dolls, there is not a book or a multicultural item. Yes, I do have the jeans for Samantha and a pair of shorts for myself. But I wish that there were different choices of how one can look, and be, today.

I think the Pleasant Company is best at marketing historical items, not the things of today. I think that the only reason the Pleasant Company developed this line is that they are running out of ideas to make money on. And then I get annoyed.

Zillah: As Sarah enters middle school I wonder what her outlets for celebrating her girlhood will be. Samantha still sits on her bed, but I wonder for how long.

**Afterthoughts**

Zillah: It is important to recognize that alternative media—like *New Moon*, a magazine for girls and their dreams, *Stone Soup*, a journal of young people’s writing, and *Skipping Stones*, a multicultural children’s magazine—exist to help young girls find their voice. Given popular culture’s representation of phallocentric privilege in particular “adolescent” form, girls must reinvent spaces for themselves. And many of them are doing so.
These girls—and consumer culture—are a complicated product of the partial successes of feminism and feminism's commercialization. My daughter and many of her friends are thriving, even though phallocratic culture uses feminism for its own market purposes, which are hardly in girls' interests.

Clearly the American Girls Collection was important to Sarah between the ages of eight and eleven. This year, at twelve, and in middle school, she no longer seems interested in American Girl in the same way. She is engaged elsewhere. Nevertheless, Samantha still sits on her bed, and she’ll get the newest Josephina books from the library.

Sarah is annoyed that only the Josephina books are translated into Spanish. She says if The American Girls Collection was serious about multilingual access all the books would be available in Spanish. Sarah clearly feels free to both embrace and criticize the American Girls empire. Maybe this is all we can ask for given the constraints and pressures of a consumer culture that markets male violence right alongside girl's empowerment.