In this, our second issue of Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal (GHS), we continue our work out of respect for, and in memory of, our founding co-editor, Jackie Kirk, who was killed in Afghanistan earlier in 2008 while she was carrying out her work in girls’ education in conflict zones. We carry on with the belief that we all shared from the beginning about the need to respect girls, to study girl culture on its own terms and to keep in mind the importance of further developing the interdisciplinary field of girlhood studies.

In this issue we present a set of essays that addresses the issue of girls coming of age whether it be in relation to the arrival of physiological maturity through menses (and also understood as a culturally commodified phenomenon) or to psychological maturity as we see, for example in the enactment of agency and activism. We use the notion of coming of age here, not in its more usual sense of reaching majority, but in its sense of girls coming into themselves as adolescents—even pre-adolescents—on their way to being young women. Clearly, a girl’s coming of age is its own social and cultural construct. True to the philosophy of GHS, the essays come from authors based in different countries (in this issue, Ireland, England, the USA and Canada), and housed in different disciplines, including art history, education, literature and sociology. The authors represented here study girls and girl culture of the 20th and 21st centuries in texts that range from paintings to ballet, and from comics to conversations around the lunch table, and that feature girls at different ages—from young girls to adolescent girls, and that consider both conventional femininities as well as, for example, tomboyism.

The issue starts off with two articles that make the idea of coming of age explicit, even in their titles. In her article “Adolescent Girls, Adult Women: Coming of Age Images by Five Canadian Women,” Loren Lerner explores the treatment of female adolescence and coming of age in the art work of Marisa Portolese, Angela Grossmann, Natalka Husar, Fiona Smyth and Susan Scott. Each of these artists was asked to explain her understanding of coming of age in relation to the works she
considered most representative, in her oeuvre, of this phase of girlhood. The images created by these women range from those originating in autobiographical sources—their experiences as young women, to those which have to do with the presentation of life circumstances as mother, daughter or teacher in relation to girlhood. Clearly, Lerner’s findings suggest that a girl’s coming-of-age identity and how it relates to body is critical for these artists.

In Sharon Mazzarella’s article “Coming of Age with Proctor & Gamble: Beinggirl.com and the Commodification of Puberty”, the focus shifts to the commodification of menstruation as marker of physical maturity. Puberty and her first period are among the most important rites of passage in a girl’s life. Mazzarella looks at the transnational corporate giant Proctor & Gamble, as revealed through its website beinggirl.com created in 2000, to provide “a forum for girls to explore their collective interests and receive guidance in choosing the right feminine protection products provided by Tampax and Always at the very start of their cycles.” The author uses what she terms a methodology of “experiential analysis” to deconstruct beinggirl.com.

Mary Jane Kehily, in her article “Taking Centre Stage? Girlhood and the Contradictions of Femininity across Three Generations”, takes up the issues related to coming of age intergenerationally by looking at young women’s experience across time, as documented by feminist scholarship from the 1960s to the present and contrasting this with the experience of being a girl as articulated by three women in the same family—grandmother, mother, daughter. As a feminist project on coming of age that draws on memory, the work offers commentary on social change and feminine subjectivity, and it highlights continuity, change and the contradictions of femininity that continue to shape and reconfigure generations of women. As the author points out, new femininities suggest that young women, no longer content with subordinate status in the bedroom or on the periphery of youth cultures, appear to have found their voice as the ‘can do’ girls of neo-liberalism.

Marjorie Goodwin’s “The Embodiment of Friendship, Power, and Marginalization in a Multi-Ethnic, Multi-class Preadolescent U. S. Girls’ Peer Group” takes up issues of relationships in coming of age through the use of videotaped interactions of lunchtime conversations among multi-ethnic preadolescent peers. In her anthropological and ethnographically based study, Goodwin investigates the embodied lan-
guage practices through which girls construct friendship alliances as well as relationships of power and exclusion. What is fascinating in Goodwin’s work is the visibility of exclusion, both in seating arrangements of a marginalized “tagalong” girl with respect to the friendship clique, as well as in the ways an excluded girl is differentially treated when an implicit social norm is violated.

In her article, “The Scholar Recalls the Child: the Difference Girlhood Studies Makes” Megan Sullivan uses the critical lens of Girlhood Studies to re-examine her own published writing on Irish writer Mary Beckett and Irish-American author Lucy Grealy and also on an unpublished account of her own experience of illness as a young girl to demonstrate how feminist scholars can read differently through such a lens. She makes a very persuasive case for scholars who are analysing texts to put the girl back into these texts rather than focus on the woman the girl character will become. Sullivan argues for a feminist methodology based on the belief that feminist scholars could mine their own childhood experiences for insight into the study of girls.

Also providing methods for looking back in order to study girls’ culture, Mel Gibson, in her article, “Nobody, Somebody, Everybody: Ballet, Girlhood, Class, Femininity and Comics in 1950s Britain” offers a textual analysis of a central narrative from a key British girls’ comic of the 1950s—Girl, published by Hulton Press. Focusing as she does on ballet as a rite of passage for many middle-class girls of the time, Gibson’s analysis articulates the relationship between gender and class and shows also how this encouraged the girls who read Girl to make, or, at least, to see, ballet as an important aspect of their cultural practice. Gibson also looks at other texts of the period, including Bunty, launched in 1958, and, in showing how the representation of ballet changed in later comics for girls, she relates this to shifting constructions of girlhood.

Taking up an oppositional space in a girl’s coming of age, Emma Renold in her essay “Queering masculinity: Re-Theorising Contemporary Tomboyism in the Schizoid Space of Innocent/Heterosexualized Young Femininities” critically explores the seduction of contemporary tomboyism for young tween girls within what she describes as neoliberal postfeminist times and an increasingly commodified (hetero)sexualised girlhood culture. A key feature of the article is the contextualizing of the persistence of the tomboy discourse and girls’ appropriation
of tomboyism within competing “schizoid” discourses of presumed innocence and compulsory normative (hetero)sexuality. Renold then goes on to offer a case study of one eleven-year-old self-identified tomboy, Eric/a. Significantly, the essay concludes with a call for future theorizing of girlhood around, for example, issues of tomboyism, in relation to gender, sex, sexuality, age and time and, as the author offers, their socio-cultural and contextual contingency.

Taken together, these essays speak not only to the cultural constructions of coming of age, but also to a richness of methodology that says something analogous perhaps about a coming of age within Girlhood Studies as a feminist project. The authors bring a range of methods to bear in their different investigations. These include memory-work, autobiography, ethnography, visual analysis and textual analysis. As well, several draw on a comparative approach whether it be women artists painting contemporary girls and reflecting on their own girlhoods, cross generational members of a family talking about girlhood, or a writer using self-reflective memory work in comparing the critical biography she wrote with her own autobiography.

The editors