

# The Girl in the Text

## *Representations, Positions, and Perspectives*

Ann Smith



In our call for proposals we invited contributors to explore how the representations of girls in written or graphic texts invite us to think about girlhood(s) from new and/or different perspectives. My interest in how the girl in the text might operate in different ways and/or from different perspectives dates back almost two decades; it was sparked in 1988 when I first encountered Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions A Novel*, published that year. This work of fiction immediately headed up the Required Reading List for the new Feminist Literature elective on which I was working with two colleagues in the Department of English at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. My preference for this Zimbabwean novel had to do, in part, with the fact that Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, often thought to have been the first feminist South African novel, published under the male pseudonym Ralph Irons in 1883, introduces feminism in a kind of separate manifesto about the status of women in society. For me, there is no integration of these ideas into the narrative itself. I was looking for an African novel, written by a woman, in which the didacticism is subtle and integrated, and in which the girl or girls in the text function as its central point both actually and metaphorically. *Nervous Conditions*, set in what was then Rhodesia before the war of liberation, is about a young girl, Tambudzai, known as Tambu, who is given the opportunity to go to school only because her brother has died. Nyasha, Tambu's cousin and friend who has been educated in Britain and who returns to Rhodesia, serves as foil to the protagonist. In this novel, adolescence itself "becomes metonymic of a developing political and feminist consciousness." Adolescence is a "space within which ... chronological development inevitably occurs [but is also that in which] the events of childhood are reconstructed as memories which are themselves immensely formative in relation to emerging adulthood"



(Smith and Mitchell 2001: 291). For Dangarembga's female protagonist the rites of passage are her first menstrual period and her learning how to use a knife and fork as she struggles to deal with the appeal of the elite privilege of the success endorsed by patriarchy. Given that the "nervous conditions" of Dangarembga's title refer to Jean-Paul Sartre's recognition, in his Preface to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, that "the status of the native is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonised people with their consent (1963: 20), we watch Nyasha's loss of the freedom she experienced in Britain manifest itself as an eating disorder representative of such a nervous condition. She becomes seriously undernourished and fades from the text as Tambu chooses to return to school instead of staying behind in the village to help look after her. In this novel, the adolescence of two girls functions "as a literary space in which narration occurs ... [and also] as an exploratory space in which very specific issues of girlhood-in-the-world can be investigated, understood and, at least conceptually, dealt with by girls and young women themselves as well as by those entrusted with their care and guidance. Literary space becomes conjoint with that of feminist intervention and postcolonial social activism" (Smith and Mitchell 2001: 294).

We see Tambu dealing with the overwhelming sense of her own worthlessness as a poor black girl, but, as Roberta Trites reminds us, if we are to read fiction we need an "understanding of the subjunctive ... [the] ability to understand possibility and potential" (2016: viii), so we are not surprised by the concluding sentences.

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fearfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. In was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. (1988: 203)

Again, almost two decades ago, in an article called "Girl Power in *Nervous Conditions*: Fictional Practice as a Research Site," I explored the idea that "seeing a literary text as a site of [educational] research" could lead to the "exploration of how the ideology of theory might intersect with some of the power differentials involved in the practical application of such theory in the classroom" (Smith 2000: 245). The benevolent patriarchy at work in *Nervous Conditions*, means that education both empowers and oppresses Tambu. For Dangarembga, the eating disorder of the adolescent Nyasha is not related to her compliance to normative standards of female beauty and attractiveness but serves as a metaphor for the inappropriateness of her response to such oppression in its unstrategic excessiveness. "Exerting control

over what one eats is not the answer to the patriarchal control of [girls'] access to learning and education in Southern Africa; to fade away is to give up" (252) and it is this recognition that empowers Tambu to pursue her education. All these years later I still think that investigating the agency of fictional adolescent girls who are trying to counter the entrenched sexism in their schools and families could, most usefully, help us rethink the traditional boundaries of what counts as research and that this could, in turn, improve our classroom skills and pedagogic practice.

The fifty abstracts and/or expressions of interest that I received became winnowed down into these thirteen articles; the contributors to this 10th anniversary volume of *Girlhood Studies* present us with a range of perspectives on girlhood as evoked by their understanding of how the girl in the text works. She is presented as central to liberating pedagogical practice and educational activism and also as being implicated in adult-created forms of (often very dangerous) determinism. Girls in texts are presented as heroes who empower themselves and others with lasting effect in Pakistan, Puerto Rico, a Canadian Residential School, and Spain. Representations of the child-woman evoke discussions of the relationship between desire and ethics. The participation of the girl in digital and media texts is explored in relation to different publics.

We open this issue with Linda McKnight's "Naughtiest Girls, Go Girls, and Glitterbombs: Exploding Schoolgirl Fictions," in which she considers "the struggles, denials, and ambivalences that produce and are produced by reading the schoolgirl." In her creative article with its glitterbomb "incendiary fragments of memory and media" detonating, as it were, on the pages she discusses the "postfeminist entanglement in the ongoing re-configuration of the schoolgirl, with [its] implications for policy and practice in education and for cultural and girlhood studies."

In "'This Is My Story': The Reclaiming of Girls' Education Discourses in Malala Yousafzai's Autobiography," Rosie Walters discusses the implications of how "young women's and girls' education activists represent themselves" in relation to "the way in which [Malala] Yousafzai negotiates and challenges discourses around young women, Pakistan, and Islam." Walters comes to the conclusion that "a truly emancipatory understanding of girls' rights would look not to the words and policies of powerful organizations but, rather, to young women themselves."

Fiona Nelson, in "The Girl: Dead," expresses her concern with what she calls the "dead girl genre of Young Adult (YA) literature"—books that she describes as being "artifacts of a culture that allows little to no sexual agency

or subjectivity for (living) teenaged girls and young women.” She observes “that *dead* has come to be promoted as a viable sexual subject position for young women” and worries that these novels “might actually nurture a culture of bullying and suicide.”

In her article, “Girl Constructed in Two Nonfiction Texts: Sexual Subject? Desired Object?” Mary Ann Harlan continues the discussion of a kind of cultural determinism in her investigation of the ways in which two popular nonfiction texts construct girls “as sexual subjects and desired objects.” She points to the dissonance between what these two authors say about girls and what girls themselves have to say about how they “navigate society’s expectations and constructions of them as sexual subjects.”

Wendy L. Rouse, in “Perfect Love in a Better World: Same-Sex Attraction between Girls,” explores the “impact of shifting cultural norms” on the lives of lesbian girls between the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Given the “growing anxiety about the potential sexual undertones of female friendships” as sexologists began to focus on homosexuality as pathology, the literature being produced and consumed by adults led to “tragic consequences for [girls] who resisted efforts to conform to heteronormative expectations regarding their future.”

In the first of four articles on contemporary texts, Tehmina Pirzada, in “Narrating Muslim Girlhood in the Pakistani Cityscape of Graphic Narratives” focuses on two graphic novels to examine “the empowering portrayal of Muslim girlhood that these works offer in addition to advocating for the rights of Muslim girls.” Pirzada is interested in how they rework the “western superhero trope to foreground [the] everyday heroism of these protagonists.” Furthermore, she argues that these authors enable their protagonists to “navigate ... Pakistani cities as familiar places rather than as othered spaces.”

In “Confronting Girl-bullying and Gaining Voice in Two Novels by Nicholasa Mohr,” Barbara Roche Rico examines the representation of bullying in two novels by Mohr. She explores how the protagonist’s “involvement with art enables her to move from the role of object to that of subject” and how this “brings [her] to a deeper understanding of her culture and herself.” Rico discusses Mohr’s reengagement with the “bullying episodes from these novels in a memoir” as a way of “writing back to the tween whose experiences inspired her work.”

Roxanne Harde’s article, “‘Like Alice, I was Brave’: The Girl in the Text in Olemaun’s Residential School Narratives” traces the journey of the eponymous Indigenous girl who wanted to become a student in a residential school so that she could acquire the literacy that would enable her to read

*Alice in Wonderland*. Through her “determination, courage, and resilience ... [she] draws on ... her culture” and [on this] British novel [in order to find] her own methods of resisting colonial oppressions and asserting Indigenous agency.”

Ana Puchau de Lecea’s focus in “Girl, Interrupted and Continued: Rethinking the Influence of Elena Fortún’s *Celia*” is on “the ways in which Fortún, through her shifting characterization of Celia as increasingly subversive presented herself as a female author offering alternative models of femininity to her readers through the character Celia and the social context of the series.” She is interested in how “Fortún’s ideological influence on female writers” helped ensure the narrative continuity of Spanish literature after the Civil War.

Michele Meek’s point of departure in “Lolita Speaks: Disrupting Nabokov’s ‘Aesthetic Bliss,’” is that “a contemporary analytical shift from valuing the aesthetics to a consideration of the ethics of [*Lolita*] has led to restricted critical readings” of this novel. Her concern is with Lolita’s victimization that, for her, disrupts Nabokov’s “aesthetic bliss.” Meek looks at three revisionary texts, all written by female authors, that “give voice to the girl in the text” in acknowledgement of [her] “sexual desire and agency.”

In “Hope Chest: Demythologizing Girlhood in Kate Bernheimer’s Trilogy,” Catriona McAra, “invoking and explaining the relevance of literary theories related to caskets,” uses the metaphor of the hope chest “as both a toy and a cultural repository” that she locates “at the heart of a trilogy of fairy tale novels.” She uses the hope chest to discuss the social transition in these novels of the “child-woman—a hinge-like cultural figure whom Bernheimer represents metaphorically through boxes of accoutrements containing memories and prophecies.”

Moving on to the digital, Akane Kanai, in “The Girl in the GIF: Reading the Self into Girlfriendship,” explores “the practice of reading as a form of social participation in girlhood in digital spaces.” For her, “readers’ aesthetic and social participation” in the circulation of blogs that “use GIFs (looping, animated images) and captions to articulate feelings and reactions relating to everyday situations ... is key to the formation of digital publics in which readers come to recognize themselves as girls through calls to common feeling.”

Paula MacDowell, in “Girls’ Perspectives on (Mis)Representations of Girlhood in Hegemonic Media Texts,” discusses her work with “10 girl co-researchers (aged between 10 and 13) to analyze media as texts with taken-for-granted meanings that need to be understood, questioned, interrupted,

and transformed.” She reports on the production by these girls of a “Public Service Announcement (PSA) to represent how girls and girlhood are (mis)represented in well-established and hegemonic media discourses.” For her, the voice of the girl in the text needs to be heard.

In Teresa Strong-Wilson’s review, “Keeping her Feet on the Ground: A Reader, her Texts, and the World,” Margaret Mackey’s *One Child Reading: My Auto-Bibliography* (2016) comes alive, as it were, as this reviewer invites us to delight in “this story of reading told from the inside out.”

We conclude this volume with a review of Jonathan A. Allan, Christina Santos, and Adriana Spahr’s *Virgin Envy: The Cultural (In)significance of the Hymen* (2016). Eftihia Mihelakis, in “Queering Virginity: From Unruly Girls to Effeminate Boys,” offers us a reading based on “its profound and complex investigation into the traditional boundaries of girlhood and boyhood.”

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