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America Through Rose-Colored Glasses: How American Girl Dolls Shape American Girlhood and Identity

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America Through Rose-Colored Glasses: How American Girl Dolls Shape American Girlhood and Identity

Submitted by
Kelly M. Vaughan
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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Director: Professor Christopher Hager
Advisor: Professor Jack Gieseking
Second Reader: Professor Cheryl Greenberg
rose-colored
(rōz'kůl'ərd)

adj.
1. Having the color rose.
2. Cheerful or optimistic, especially to an excessive degree: took a rose-colored view of the situation.

Idiom:
through rose-colored glasses
With an unduly cheerful, optimistic, or favorable view of things: see the world through rose-colored glasses.¹

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For all of the little kids who never want to grow up, and for all of the big kids who never did.
Introduction: My Pink Limousine is Parked Out Front

Standing in front of my mother and I in line for the café was a three-generation family: a grandmother, mother, and granddaughter, who was about five years old. The family was white and had brown hair, just like us; the mother carried a designer Goyard bag, wore Vineyard Vines shorts and Chanel flip flops. After about twenty minutes of waiting, we followed the line to the entrance of the café. Upon entering the afternoon tea party, a hostess asked my mother and me if we brought dolls with us today. We had not, and were promptly told that were “welcome to borrow one for the experience.” We were directed to our right, where there was a long display shelf with two tiers, lined with about 30 dolls to pick from, including “Truly Me” look-a-like dolls dressed in a variety of different accessories, BeForever historical dolls in their original clothing, Bitty Babies, and the recently released WellieWishers dolls. Each doll was seated on a pink cushioned chair with attachments so that one could easily slide the doll into the edge of the dining table.

After choosing our dolls, we were escorted to our reserved table. On the table was a small pink gift box filled with rectangular slips of paper, each printed with a different question. The questions ranged from, “Would you ever want to live in outer space? Why or why not?” to, “What is the best book you have ever read? What made it so great?” from, “What is your favorite season? Why is it your favorite?” to, “Have you ever stood up to a bully? How did you feel before, during, and after?” and from, “How do you motivate yourself to do something that is challenging and time consuming?” to, “How do you like to show friends that you care about them?” My mother and I read them to each other for fun, but I overheard the young girls at the table next to us also asking each other questions: “If you could take a class to learn anything,
what type of class would you take?” with the same girl immediately responding, “Oh, you like
dance, so you would probably take a dance class!”

There were few tables with less than four adults. It seems that most of these tea parties
were multi-generational, and that for every one girl, her mother, grandmother, aunt, cousin,
teacher, mailman, and town mayor were there to accompany her. Perhaps this is due to the
importance and meaning each doll has for its owner, and therefore a trip to the store is a
monumental experience. Perhaps it is because there is still a little girl inside every grown woman
and they all want their chance to play with dolls and live vicariously through their little loved
one, if only for an hour or two.

Welcome to American Girl Place, midtown Manhattan.

The store sits on the corner of 49th Street and 5th Avenue in New York City. It occupies
four floors of the building; the outside is adorned with cement versions of the signature
American Girl star. Red awnings hang over each window and two large American flags fly over
the front entrance doors to the store. Parked outside of the store was a bright pink Cadillac
Escalade Stretch Limousine, whose driver, a man dressed in a full tuxedo, stood next to the car.

After passing through a revolving door, customers walk on a white tiled floor, speckled
with red stars. To the right is a room with clothing and furniture accessories for dolls, as well as
all of the fiction and nonfiction books published by the company. A small, circular library
occupies the middle of the room, containing all of the dolls’ storybooks and advice books for
older girls. Above this, a large prop hangs from the ceiling that has the words “kind, brave,
courageous, loyal, smart.” To the left is a room approximately double the size, which contains all
of the TrulyMe look-a-like dolls, as well as clothing and accessories for every occasion, style,
and hobby.
The second floor is home to the BeForever™ historical dolls, the Girl of the Year doll, the recently released WellieWishers dolls, a hair salon for dolls, and the doll hospital. In the doll hospital, the “doctor” at the counter, a white, male American Girl employee, was dressed in a long white lab coat and wore a stethoscope around his neck, awaiting the next girl to drop off her Sharpie covered doll whose leg was also torn off by her rambunctious older brother. The BeForever™ dolls take up about half of the floor space and each character receives her own museum-like exhibition with interactive features. In the center of the floor, every BeForever doll is featured in a case together, with another pink circular sign above the case that has the BeForever™ logo, as well as the caption, “Timeless stories, inspiring characters, endless possibilities.” American Girl has created a world in a way that allows each consumer—young in age or young in spirit—to identify their own story within the confines of a prescribed American Girl mold.

The customers throughout the store were racially and ethnically diverse. Although class was not as obvious, there is also a certain financial expectation that families commit to when entering this pink paradise. I stood outside the store for about 15 minutes and noticed that every single individual or family who walked out of the store had at least one shopping bag in hand; few people visit the store simply to browse. I overheard a teenage girl, who was walking through the store, loudly ask her friend what many other people probably think about these products: “Why would people pay so much money for this stuff?” Another father in his mid-30s, tattooed and wearing camouflage cargo shorts, asked “Do they sell boy dolls?” In front of the Truly Me case, a group of adults were looking at the blonde dolls, trying to decide which one looked most like their own little American girl. “Her doll should have freckles,” said one of the adults and

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2 They do, as of February 2017.
another responded, “Yeah, but the one with the freckles doesn’t have hair like her.” The ability to have a doll that looked exactly like their own child was of utmost importance. Each doll is deeply connected to her own family in their stories, regardless of displacement due to war, slavery, or economic depression. The values that American Girl dolls themselves portray collocate with the consumer’s own values, as if the doll itself could make you “kind, brave, courageous, loyal, smart.” Family, friendship, inclusivity, and kindness are all included in the price of tea sandwiches and quality service.

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Children have obsessions with fictional characters with whom they can identify, whether by physical appearance or one’s inner self, but ideally by both. My primary research questions are: how do American Girl dolls represent race, class, and gender and shape American girlhood and identity? Considering that the consuming audience is approximately six to twelve years old, what version of American history does the company choose to convey through rose-colored glasses? Through engagement with scholarship on toy culture, beauty and gender, as well as narratives and central tropes within children’s literature, the following chapters look at American Girl’s impact on American identity and girlhood in the late 20th and early 21st century.

In this thesis, I trace the significance of the first dolls ever sold by American Girl. I analyze the original three dolls released in 1986: Samantha (1904), Kirsten (1854), and Molly (1944), as well as Addy (1864), the first black doll sold by American Girl released in 1993. Although there have been 20 different dolls sold within the BeForever collection, I am most interested in these four dolls since they are the original American Girl dolls.3 Molly, Samantha, and Kirsten are all white dolls; six years later, Addy was the first black American Girl doll

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released. Why were their stories and time periods deemed the most important to share when the company was first founded? How does the company shape and produce whiteness through their dolls? What does a reader learn about American girlhood through these stories? What part of the American Girl consumer experience is lost if one does not read these stories but owns a doll? By analyzing each doll’s respective physical appearances and personal narratives, I seek to ultimately understand their role in constructing a particular version of American girlhood and identity—one that begins with tribulations and ends with an optimistic outcome.

My methodology includes visiting American Girl Place in New York City, reading the dolls’ storybooks to detect themes, and conducting focus groups and an online survey with college women who owned American Girl dolls. One of the most crucial aspects of my own research was spending a day in the American Girl retail store located in New York City. Here, I gained first-hand experience into the atmosphere the company has created, how consumers interact with the products, and how American Girl has fortified the company’s message through these retail stores. When I visited the American Girl Place for the first time in June 2016, I spent approximately three hours scrutinizing every aspect of the store (and celebrating my 21st birthday by attending an American Girl tea party).

Additionally, I read the first book of each of the following dolls: Addy (1864), Kirsten (1854), Samantha (1904), Molly (1944), as well as Felicity (1774), Josefina (1824), Kit (1934), and Maryellen (1954), who I do not cover in this thesis. Since these books can be read on their own as other forms of children’s literature, or as part of an accessory to a specific doll, they function both to teach consumers moral lessons and strengthen their bond with their own doll.

I also conducted focus groups and an online survey with predominantly college women from across the country from a variety of different socioeconomic classes, regions, races and
ethnicities. I was interested in learning how these women remember their experiences growing up and playing with American Girl dolls, as well as how these dolls shaped their perception of what it means to be an American girl versus what it means to be an American girl. I am taking a feminist approach to this thesis by listening to women's voices and understanding their progressing place in society. I intend to prove that their voices matter and demonstrate the importance of their gender and bodies, as well as the impact of their limitations within society. Rather than making assumptions that these dolls were exclusively a toy for wealthy white girls, I created an outlet for women to use their voices to share why these dolls were meaningful to them and “mirror everyday social interaction in relatively naturalistic way.”

Feminist Psychologist Sue Wilkinson argues that focus groups should not be analyzed individually, but collectively in order to understand how all of these conversations are working together. By offering a space in which girls could create a casual conversation, they could also reflect on their own memories based on what other girls said in the moment.

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Pleasant Rowland founded American Girl after traveling to Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia and was disappointed by the lack of educational, yet fun toys available for children. Rowland, who was an elementary school teacher and a textbook editor, aimed to create a toy that would give girls “chocolate cake with vitamins.” In order to do this, she created a line of dolls with historical narratives grounded in important moments of American history, while giving them personalities that girls could identify with.

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5 Wilkinson: 122
The original three dolls are Samantha (1904), Kirsten (1854), and Molly (1944), all of whom were released as part of “The American Girl Collection,” now known as the company’s “BeForever” line of historically centered dolls. Samantha is the only original doll still available for purchase from the company. Each doll is from a different period of American history. Their stories are written as historical fiction, and characterize each girl by both her struggles and her admirable personality traits, such as bravery, kindness, and loyalty.

Samantha Parkington (1904) is described as being “kind, generous, and always ready to make a new friend.” Kirsten Larson (1954) is a Swedish girl who immigrates to the United States, specifically Minnesota, with her family—“in time, [Kirsten] learns the richness of the land—and the true meaning of home.” Molly McIntire (1944) experiences the hardships of World War II, and is described as being a “lively, lovable schemer and dreamer.” Since 1986, the line has developed significantly to include more racially and ethnically diverse dolls from nearly every period in American history, a development I will discuss in my epilogue. American Girl has noted that on average, it takes about two or three years to decide on a certain era to create a doll in, name her, write an authentic story, and design her hair and her wardrobe—all while conducting extensive research to maintain historically accuracy.

The current “BeForever” dolls that are for sale on the official American Girl website include a variety of dolls, although most are white, and all bear the admirable traits of AG dolls. For example, there is Maryellen (1954—“An inventive girl who wants to stand out from the crowd”). The list goes on and on: Samantha (1904—“A compassionate girl who's always ready

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to help others”); Julie (1974—“A free-spirited girl who likes to rise to any challenge”); Rebecca, a Jewish girl with Russian roots (1914—“A dramatic girl with a talent for making people smile”); Kit (1934—“A creative girl who knows she can make any day brighter”); Addy (1864—“A courageous girl who always keeps her chin up and her heart strong”); Kaya, a Native American girl (1764—“A determined girl who always does her best to be a friend to the earth”); and Josefina, a Hispanic girl (1824—“A thoughtful girl who knows making others feel better makes her feel great”). In place of illustrations of the dolls that appeared on the covers of the dolls’ storybooks in the early 2000s with the title “Meet ________,” the present day covers features a photograph of a middle school-aged girl dressed like the doll.

The American Girl storybooks fit into a category known as “branded fiction.” There have been plenty of books paired with different cultural phenomena to enhance consumers’ experience with certain popular sensations, such as Hannah Montana, Nancy Drew, and Harry Potter. American Girl books, however, seem uniquely important to a girl’s enjoyment and enriched experience with her doll. The purpose of these storybooks is two-fold and are beneficial both for the reader and the company itself. From a company perspective, books are another product to sell, created as part of a series to entice customers to continue reading and buying AG products. For readers, these books are educational and allow them to develop a closer connection to a particular doll once they know her story.

Even within the pages, the author has sprinkled in subtle advertisements in the narrative, describing the exact dresses and accessories available for sale online. For lower class dolls like Kirsten (1854) and Addy (1864), they already own rag dolls that happen to look like them. For

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the wealthy dolls like Samantha (1904), she desires a doll that looks like her and is described as “expensive.” The inclusion of this form of ownership may entice a young reader to beg for more dolls, clothing, accessories, while also persuading adult guardians to find value in purchasing a doll that closely resembles their child. These books provide the notorious history lesson American Girl has prided itself on, while creating an emotional connection between the doll and her owner. If a consumer reads the story of the doll she owns, she is most likely going to feel more attached to her and perhaps want to emulate her, rather than just stare at her on a shelf.

These stories do not completely alter a reader’s understanding of historical events. However, the history lesson certainly has been injected with a pricy formula to smooth it out and make it seem a bit more perfect than what the period may have actually been like for girls in these circumstances. While dolls do experience real hardships—Samantha (1904) is an orphan, Kirsten (1854) is an immigrant, Molly’s (1944) father is fighting in World War II, Addy (1864) is a runaway slave—all of the dolls overcome their suffering by being compassionate, hard-working, brave nine-year-old girls.

How, then, did readers actually absorb these historical narratives? Were these dolls just another toy for them to play with, or did they hold both a satisfactory personal and educational experience? Kayla, a twenty-one-year-old black girl from Maryland, explains:

I didn’t have the traditional dolls, I just had the look-a-like so I just read all of the books because with the look-a-like, you just make up your own story. I read all of the historical books for the dolls I was interested in but didn’t really play with. I thought it was a cool way to teach history because like it wasn’t biased and really told the truth. At the same time, an eight-year-old could like understand slavery or the Great Depression.

Kayla seemed to read the books exclusively for the history lessons that were engrained within them. She felt that their narratives were reliable ways to learn about American history, even when subjects like slavery and the Great Depression were not particularly conventional ones for
young girls to read about. While children’s books with empowering and inspiring girl protagonists are common, an antiquated setting with a historical backdrop is far less common. These books manage to not just teach girls about history, but it teaches girls what it was like to grow up in different periods of time, while simultaneously proving they can connect to girls regardless of their background.

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I never owned an American Girl doll. I did, however, have more Barbies and MyScene dolls than I could fit on the designated shelf nailed to my hot pink bedroom walls. I did read the American Girl books and even occasionally received the mail order catalogue from the company, marking all of the pages with the dolls and accessories I wanted to receive for my birthday and Christmas presents. Some of my friends had American Girl dolls growing up but I never felt incredibly excluded, since they were not a staple toy of the other 10-year-old girls I attended school with. Born in 1995, I was part of generation where toy companies attempted to adapt to rapidly changing technologies. A board game known as “Mall Madness” talked to you as you went on a shopping spree; a small, plastic Japanese handheld game gave youths the responsibility of feeding and taking care of a pixelated “baby;” and with a light bulb and a plastic oven, anyone could bake brownies, pizza, or pretzels in under five minutes. In a time when slap bracelets, hair wraps and butterfly clips were the ultimate fashion accessories, American Girls stood out— somewhat inaccessible to some, wholly unaffordable to most, and highly coveted by all.

Even 20 years after the company was founded, owners of the original 1986 versions of American Girl dolls still discuss their views on these dolls. A contributing writer of BuzzFeed

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13 That is, until my first research trip to the store, when even I could not resist a purchase.
recently wrote that “bagging an American Girl doll was like the ultimate Christmas coup. If you were really spoiled, you also got all her overpriced accessories and maybe even the girl-sized matching outfits.”¹⁵ What was is about American Girl dolls that, even still to this day, make them the “ultimate Christmas coup?” Was it their exclusivity and simultaneous absence from any commercial toy store shelf? Their high price tag and status? Their personal, heroic stories? The fact that they more closely resembled their owners than a Barbie doll with heavy makeup and provocative clothing? Megan, an 18-year old white high school senior from Connecticut, shared her desire to own a doll for some of these very reasons: ¹⁶

My mother refused to purchase a $95 doll that I would have never done anything with anyway. I only wanted one because (a) I wanted a doll that I could dress in clothes that matched mine and (b) everyone seemed to have one! I only wanted the ones that looked "pretty" or most like me, it didn't matter which books I had.

Megan points to the importance of having an object that one feels they can physically identify with, regardless of any emotional, shared connection one may receive by reading their stories. She also notes the popularity of these dolls among her peers, which further enticed her to be a part of this exclusive girls’ club. Material consumption among children, and girls in particular, has been studied at length. From the influence of Barbie on girls’ body image, to passivity and heroism in Disney stories, and even the broad gendering of toys within the aisles of department and toy stores across the United States, children are confronted with visual images and material objects that inform them of who they should want to be. American girlhood has been racialized and marginalized by the media, by the consumer market, and society. Girls are not just girls; they are African-American girls, Asian-American Girls, Catholic Girls, Chicana

¹⁶ All names of focus group participants are pseudonyms.
Girls, college girls, Hispanic girls, Latina girls, Puritan Girls, and even tomboys (a girl who participates in a traditionally boy culture) and transgender girls. Clothing styles, hairstyles, and makeup may vary amongst these different races and ethnicities, however, many American girls may feel pressure to conform to a white American culture. All of these girls must still prescribe to the whiteness prescribed by American Girl, a quality that begins with the original four dolls. The narrative structure and central conflicts instilled in all American Girl stories are first seen in the storybooks of the original three dolls, all of whom are white. This creates a fixed expectation that all of the dolls created afterwards will still follow a white narrative. These products inform a consuming audience of what they should like and who they should want to be.

The power of mass media and popular culture among children and young women in the 20th and 21st century has been a subject of current discourse among scholars. However, there is a lack of substantial scholarship on the influence of American Girl dolls in childhood culture and their function as a multifaceted product that serves first as a consumer product and second as an educational resource for young girls. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru is an exception to this—her Ph.D. dissertation, “The American Girl Dolls: Construction American Girlhood through Representation, Identity, and Consumption,” discusses the brand’s history and understanding its impact on young girls and the media. Acosta-Alzuru briefly looks at all of the historical BeForever characters, as well as the “AG of Today” dolls (now know as the “Girl of the Year” collection) and the entire collection of American Girl literature, including the dolls’ storybooks and the advice books for pre-teen buyers. She studies the overall process in which all American

Girl products shape girls’ intimate identities and how their stories interact with American society.

Acosta-Alzuru’s dissertation was published in 1999; therefore, I hope that my thesis will advance her initial findings by providing original insights based on my conversations with former consumers. I contribute new arguments about the affect that beauty, gender, class, and children’s literature have in shaping the conversation about American Girl dolls. By interviewing former, rather than current, consumers of the dolls, I am able to weigh the long-term affect and impression American Girl dolls and their stories have.

Through my own group interviews, I composed several conclusions: the books were extremely important to the experience of connecting with each individual doll. Certain dolls, like Samantha (1904) and Felicity (1774) were more popular than, for example, Kirsten (1854), who many of my participants had completely forgotten about. Playing with these expensive dolls taught them how to treat something of great value with care. As my focus group spoke about their memory with American Girl dolls, they tried to make sense of what aspects of the experience seemed crazy and ludicrous and what aspects seemed reasonable. They remembered more and more small details about the products American Girl sold, their own experiences playing with and shopping for more dolls, and which dolls were the most popular among girls in their schools and friend groups. I include quotes from these interview sessions throughout my thesis as supporting evidence of the significance of dolls in American girlhood, as well as the emotional (and monetary) value of owning American Girl dolls.

Chapter 1 provides a survey of related scholarship from American Studies, English Literature, History, Sociology, and Psychology. I address the major themes that appear in this scholarship on girlhood, dolls, toys, and American Girl dolls in order to place these products in a
broader context of consumption and material culture. Girlhood constitutes products, hobbies, clothing and accessories, and social expectations that are all geared towards young girls. With some exceptions, most toys (including dolls) reinforce gendered behavior and interests. I point to popular trends and interests among primarily adolescent, pre-teen, and teenage girls. By discussing this literature, I am able to understand the ways in which consumers of all ages can connect to these dolls. I compare the different experiences that the American Girl doll company offers compared to other dolls and cultural phenomena among children including Barbie, G.I. Joe, Bratz dolls, and Disney princesses. Furthermore, I acknowledge some of the historically problematic aspects of the toy and doll industry, particular in their representation of racial diversity. By bringing attention to the categories and trends that American Girl dolls constitute, I am able to answer what these dolls do or do not contribute to the toy industry, as well as what they contribute to consumers’ understanding of American girlhood.

In Chapter 2, I discuss constructions of American beauty and the ways in which girls shape their sense of self and identity by engaging with these dolls. I compare standards of beauty and girlhood as depicted in the stories of Molly (1944) and Samantha (1904) as these dolls are often considered to be the “nerd” and “Victorian beauty” of the collection. Samantha lives with her wealthy Grandmary, who tries to teach Samantha about manners and ladylike behavior, such as learning to sew and maintain one’s appearance. Samantha befriends a young, working-class girl Nellie who lives next door; rather than worrying about protecting her white tights and lace dress, Samantha teaches readers that acting like a proper young lady can be as simple as helping others in need.

Molly’s story is centered around her trying to find the perfect Halloween costumes for her and her friends to wear, which proves to be difficult due to the financial burden of the war.
Molly covets the perfect Cinderella costume, which she believes will make her look beautiful. This implies that there is something about Molly’s physical and personal characteristics that don’t make her feel beautiful, and that it is more difficult to feel beautiful when there is a fiscal strain. While Molly’s dream of dressing like Cinderella is not a possibility, she finds personal fulfillment by contributing to her family and community. Given the war-time era of Molly’s story, lessons about American patriotism are injected into the storyline. Molly learns, and then emphasizes, the importance of selflessness and finding satisfaction in the simple things in life. These divergent definitions of beauty are examined closely in this chapter. Class and gender are central themes within both of these stories. Beyond the material products, I consider the maternal and domestic expectations of girls and women, as demonstrated by the lessons provided by the older guardian, maternal figures in Samantha and Molly’s lives.

Chapter 3 aims to examine the company’s digestible, whitewashed historical narratives, as well as their cultural assimilation of dolls with racially and culturally diverse backgrounds into a white, Anglo-Saxon image. Using Addy (1864) and Kirsten (1854), I examine the history of migration and assimilation into American life. I draw historical comparisons between Addy’s life in the North and comparable events for 19th century black girls. Historian Eric Foner’s Gateway to Freedom provides a history of runaway slaves in the 19th century and offers context to assess the truthfulness of Addy’s narrative. Dag Blanck’s “A Mixture of People with Different Roots: Swedish Immigrants in the American Ethno-Racial Hierarchies” serves as a tool to compare Kirsten’s immigrant experience to that of the many Swedish immigrants who moved to Minnesota in the mid 19th century. Both Addy (1864) and Kirsten (1854) have relatively seamless transitions to their new homes. The stories don’t highlight much of the oppression that

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other immigrants or runaway slaves would have faced at this time. The lack of historical realism in Addy and Kirsten’s stories is deemphasized in exchange for their resilience and positivity. Both of these narratives highlight quintessential American values and images, particularly the concept of America being the “promised land”—full of apples, friendship, and a new life for all. In these stories, as in all American Girl stories, history is a vehicle for virtue.

Chapter 4 studies the importance of narratives and storytelling in children’s literature. I analyze how books function as commodities, as canons of literary traditions within children’s literature, and as methods of consumption for readers to learn about American girlhood and history. I use Little Women, Little House on the Prairie, and the American Girl storybooks as tools to understand the literary interpretation of girlhood in a historical framework. These books are all oriented in different periods in American history, yet the characters endure the same financial hardships, family instability, and participation in girlhood despite historical differences. These narratives, and the characters within them, shape readers’ understanding of expectations and behaviors of young girls. Literature is an important component of childhood. Readers form a connection with fictional characters by connecting with their everyday experiences, struggles, and merits. This chapter highlights not only how children’s novels function for readers, but also specific marketing strategies American Girl applies to these stories that support their capitalist business. These tactics include selling the first book of an American Girl doll’s series with each doll in her package, as well as the inclusion of certain accessories or additional characters in the dolls’ narratives.

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In the movie The Devil Wears Prada, Stanley Tucci’s character Nigel, the fashion assistant of a fictionalized version of Vogue criticizes the editor-in-chief’s new, out-of-touch
assistant, Andy, played by Anne Hathaway. Hathaway, who is criticized by her coworkers for looking drab and unstylish, argues that she doesn’t need to invest money into a whole new wardrobe for a job she thinks will only be temporary. “Yes,” he remarks, “because that's really what this whole multibillion-dollar industry is all about, isn't it? Inner beauty.”

Though this quote was directed at the fashion industry, Nigel points to a widely applicable business model: to make money by telling women what products they should covet and what type of women they should aim to emulate. American Girl strategically makes their consumers feel intelligent, empowered, and beautiful so that they will keep coming back for more dolls, more books, more shoes, more teatime.

One of the most important conclusions I drew from my focus group was that the consumers did not absorb most of the actual history that was described in the storybooks, but rather the moral underpinnings and commendable characteristics of the dolls. They did, however, understand that all of these dolls lived through challenging times in American history and therefore had to overcome separation from their family and friends, financial insecurity, oppression, discomfort with their physical appearance, and pressure to achieve academic excellence. Despite these challenges, true American girls (who adhere to the American Girl telling of history) will always be victorious.

American Girl dolls echo previous tropes within children’s narratives while selling a line that is inclusive for girls and teaches them admirable morals and values. These lessons, however, come at a cost, and anyone who isn’t willing to spend $115 plus shipping and handling, or is unable to access one of these dolls, may only read these lessons in other children’s books.

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However, girls lose a particular enrichment when the books are not accompanied by an 18” version of their protagonist character. A material object like an American Girl doll allows a consumer to hug her Addy doll after she runs away from her plantation and leaves her father behind, or after Kirsten’s best friend Marta dies while traveling overseas to the United States. The company attempts to reinforce affectionate behavior within girls while providing a narrative that excites them to improve their virtue.
Chapter One: “She said, she said:” Thematic and Literature Review

In this chapter, I explore a thematic overview of American girlhood, toy and doll culture, and the history of the American Girl company. American Girl dolls fit into the conversation of popular and material culture in American Studies scholarship, which demonstrates why these dolls are worth studying through a critical lens. Discussing such concepts will help inform my project of the history of toys and dolls in American society, as well as the ways in which material objects shape American girlhood and identity. Sociologists, historians, psychologists, and American Studies scholars have studied these topics, and I piece their research together in order to shape a broader understanding of the cultural and material significance of American Girl dolls. Using background from this chapter about girlhood, doll and toy culture, I gain a better sense of the importance of the dolls’ physical experiences as well as their personal narrative. The title of this chapter, “She said, she said” reflects the discourse between young women and girls as they shape their own culture and what it means to be an American girl, as well as the dialogue amongst scholars who write about this very culture. Rather than a “he said, she said,” binary gender dialogue, American Girl dolls provide women and girls the opportunity to talk about their girlhood across multiple generations. Much of this conversation is done through the discourse around girlhood and the consumption of toys, especially dolls.

Girlhood

What does it mean to be a girl? How are race, ethnicity and gender linked together in girlhood? What are the physical, emotional, and interpersonal expectations of American girls? Scholars of girlhood understand this term as “a product of the intersection of the emerging field
of children’s history and the now well-established field of women’s history.”

“Girlhood” originated as a British term and was first introduced in 1748 by Samuel Richardson in his novel, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady.* Girlhood is defined as “the state of being a girl; the time of life during which one is a girl. Also: girls collectively.” This “state of being” has since been absorbed by Americans as they engage in various aspects of American culture and constantly redefine what it means to be a certain type of girl in American society. The process of consuming girlhood culture comes from representations of young girls in print and digital media; characters in books, television, and movies; and the relationship between young girls and maternal figures.

Traditionally, girlhood consists of a series of milestones one is expected to complete as one transitions from being a young girl to a young woman, depending on one’s individual ethnicity, class, religion, geography or heritage. This means that if you’re a fifteen-year-old Latina girl, you will likely be expected to have a quinceañera; if you are a wealthy American, an invitation for one’s Sweet 16 should be embossed in 24-karat gold lettering and placed in the mail with three months’ notice. When one enters college and begins to leave girlhood, sororities, which have raised eyebrows at their often overwhelming whiteness, are still a dominating force generating a community for young women. American girlhood is a time when young girls will make friendship bracelets using craft books, may ask their parents to allow them to have their ears pierced, and start wearing nail polish. Some girls, on the other hand, may want to trade in

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23 Helgren and Vasconcellos
their ballet shoes for a baseball bat and ask to paint over their pastel pink bedroom walls with a shade of dark blue. These are formative years and may indicate future interests or passions for a certain individual.

The term girlhood has been used in a derogatory way (“You play like a girl”) but it has the potential to be empowering, especially when associated with “girl power,” a term used to describe girls’ potential value in society. In 2015, a social media campaign started using the #likeagirl hashtag to reclaim the power of acting like a girl. Companies, particularly those in the women’s consumer marketplace such as Proctor and Gamble (P&G) and Always “feminine products” used the campaign to celebrate the physical and emotional strength of young girls and women. American Girl dolls often ignore (or at least try to ignore) social and gender norms articulated by their parents and more often, their nine-year-old male classmates and brothers. These dolls must be submissive and pleasing to what their guardians expect of them while simultaneously coping with arduous Kit (1934) lives through the Great Depression; Addy (1864), while successfully escaping slavery, still has to deal with the ramifications of leaving her family behind and struggling to keep up with her classmates in school; and Felicity (1774) just wants to be allowed to wear knickers. There are few American Girl doll that have it easy—yet consumers of these dolls still want to emulate them and admire them because the “history” that accompanies them seems to work out.

Product and consumer culture provides a suitable scholarly lens to examine girlhood through. The popularity of these products reflects gendered pressure in society to be, act, and look a certain way. Material commodities reflect popular, sometimes fashion, trends and

representations of women in the media and their corresponding role in society. Model-like dolls, represented by Barbie who is exceptionally tall with a large chest and smaller-than-usual waist, can contribute to girls’ unrealistic body image.\textsuperscript{29} Girls may also feel the need to always have a male companion to make them happy, a theme that has been present in Disney princess culture for generations. As Susan Douglas, author of \textit{Where the Girls Are}, describes: “The most important quality of these characters remains their beauty, followed closely by their selflessness and the ability to sing. There are gestures to feminism—Ariel’s physical courage, Belle’s love of books, and, in Aladdin, Jasmine’s defiance of an arbitrary law that dictates when and whom she must marry.”\textsuperscript{30} However, these characters are predominantly characterized by their ability to woo the male protagonist. In this case, girlhood it is not just a way to describe the early stages of one’s life, but is a term that also summarizes a dangerous consumer culture that reinforces girls as puppets in pink dresses. American Girl dolls fill a necessary void by providing wholesome, admirable morals that teach young girls how to be independent.

Douglas notes that Disney princesses like Snow White and Cinderella were deemed as beautiful to consumers, young girls, and Disney fanatics, yet they were “unself-conscious” and completely unaware of their beauty, at least according to their portrayal in movies. These princesses, who so many young girls aspire to be were “so virtuous, so warm and welcoming, so in tune with nature,” that it seems almost counter-productive for aspiring young princesses to be so concerned with their looks. Despite these princesses’ individual characteristics, the average girl’s attempt to be like her favorite character must begin with a physical transformation.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{30} Douglas: 297
\textsuperscript{31} Douglas: 28-29
A recent 21st century trend is the concern of adolescent and pre-teen girls’ desire to appear older, though not elderly. While young girls don’t worry about wrinkles, a rewards card at Brooks Brothers, and a monthly deep tissue massage for their growing back pains, they may still opt to request four-inch patent leather heels and red lip gloss for their 14th birthday, rather than a uniform of clothing from Limited Too. Considering the consumer products sold at this time, pre-teen girls owned dolls like Barbies and Bratz that projected a mature, womanly image onto their owner. Girlhood has seemingly shifted to include images and products stimulated by the media that promote choices for tweens.32 American Girl provides a relatively conservative response to the flashy, provocative culture that sometimes appears in mass media and culture. Historian Gary Cross argues that “[t]he books and other literature stressed a positive “can do” image of young girls rather than encouraging the child to identify with a ‘[t]een-age’ model.”33 American Girl dolls fills a void for girls who want wholesome, practical characters with narratives and physical appearances they relate to.

Toys

Historically, toys have served a twofold purpose: one, for children to play both with others and on their own, and two, for adults to relive their youth and express feelings of nostalgia. Toys have been a part of American childhood culture since the early days of colonization. They were a source of comfort for immigrants, a material item to hold on to and commemorate one’s past life by, while also providing entertainment as an object one could play

32 Helgren and Vasconcellos: p. 22
with on one’s own or with a companion. Toys offer a tool for social development, an aid for creativity and imagination, and a tool for development as a youth.  

I received my first bike on my fourth birthday. It was purple, had streamers, and a basket with plastic flowers. It was clear to the world that this was a girl’s bike (or at least clear to the kids on my street). The metallic streamers and woven basket were as much of a necessity as the greased chain and inflated tires. For the most part, toy stores gender products into separate categories for girls and boys. For many girls, their ideal birthday haul will consist of boxes filled with products from My Little Pony, Disney Princess, Barbie, Polly Pockets, MyScene, Bratz, Easy Bake Oven, and Littlest Pet Shop. These toys, with their pastel colored plastics, interchangeable accessories, and imaginative storylines, teach girls how to be domestic, fashionable, nurturing, and social. Girls will learn how to dress in coordinating outfits, bake brownies (even if done under a light bulb), and give affection and love. For boys, violence, toughness, and competition is taught through toys like Star Wars and Star Trek, G.I. Joe, trucks, and Hot Wheels. Though there are some toys on the market that speak to both the pink and blue parties like Little People, Legos, board games, and Play-Doh—the majority of toys reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations.

The toys listed above include model human figurines, such as Barbies and G.I. Joes, are almost exclusively white, typically accompanied by only one or two racially diverse counterparts. Representations of race in the toy industry has always been problematic. Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, black dolls were created as a toy to reinforce white supremacy and the inferiority of African-Americans in the era of Jim Crow. Black dolls were not only...

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created out of material that was cheap, but the clothing was made of inexpensive, thin cotton, illustrating that African-Americans were not only poor and dirty, but could be played with in a careless way by white children. In comparison, white dolls that were produced during this time were typically expensive, fragile porcelain dolls dressed in exquisite clothing with layers of crinoline and other fine fabrics.\textsuperscript{36} If tossed carelessly, these dolls would break and shatter, destroying their perfect image; however, a cheap black doll could be thrown around, stepped on, or dirtied and its form would not drastically change.\textsuperscript{37} Cultural historian Robin Bernstein notes that young children would have “whipped, beat, and hung black dolls with regularity and ritualistic ferocity.”\textsuperscript{38} This illustrates that African-Americans were perceived as objects that could endure repetitive violence and ridicule without damage.

Today, toy and doll collections are more racially diverse. It is acceptable, and even encouraged, for a white girl to own a black doll, or for her black and white dolls to play with one another. However, this is not to say that this is a particularly common practice. Cinderella, the white princess with perfectly shiny blonde hair, is still idolized as the face of all Disney princesses, and is situated front and center of promotional photographs and posters rather than Jasmine or Tiana. Though the production and consumption of racially diverse dolls has increased since the era of Jim Crow, consumers still tend to purchase toys that match their own identity.

In the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, black dolls were shaped to adapt to white culture. Dolls, and their clothing, like Christie, the African-American Barbie who was released in 1968, and Addy (1864), the American Girl doll from the Civil War era, are adaptations to an originally white product. Addy does have black hair and a different face mold than the white American Girl dolls;

\textsuperscript{37} Starr: 9
\textsuperscript{38} Bernstein: 165
however, she has fewer accessories than other American Girl dolls, which may make her less appealing to purchase. Although American Girl tries to be historically accurate by providing her with a few attractive and interactive accessories, her slave narrative is both non-appealing to consumers and limits her to a story of servitude. Girls may be more willing to play with a doll like Addy, a slave doll, if she is dressed in pretty, white girl clothes. Thus, “by changing the composition of the black doll, you simultaneously change the mentality of the children looking at them and playing with them.” 39 Though white consumers may now play with black dolls in a more equalized manner, white children may still only play with dolls and toys that resemble a familiar identity to themselves. Thus, the American Girl collection is incomplete, and fails to create a fully diverse collection with narratives that speak to girls of all races and ethnicities. While the company attempts to provide a doll and a story that excites all girls, race and class will always be a barrier.

The toy industry sells “creativity” through material items— all for the sole purpose of exercising one’s own imaginative endeavors. Toys are not just commodities. They also reveal a great deal of history and pastimes within American culture. Baseball bats, toy cars, dollhouses, and large plastic kitchens are “toy” versions of real products adults use, thus training children to prepare for adulthood starting from the time they can stand on their own two feet. The National Museum of Toys and Miniatures in Kansas City, Missouri states that its mission is to act as a site that “educates, inspires, and delights adults and children through the museum’s collection and preservation of toys and miniatures.” 40 This operation proves the importance of toys in childhood

39 Starr: 34
culture and demonstrates that there is a large adult audience that still wants to engage in a culture of nostalgia and memory.

The American Girl company has a similar goal— to educate, inspire, and delight young girls— by creating a personal, reflective experience for young consumers. Since 1998, Mattel has shaped girlhood through all of the American Girl doll collections, creating a personal experience for young consumers in the way they see themselves reflected (or not) within their dolls. Consumers’ values of girlhood become shaped by these dolls—and models they can relate to, or, instead, must aspire to. Douglas notes that even among Beatles fandom, “girls often chose the Beatle that they themselves most resembled, either physically or as a personality type, or the one they most wanted to be like. This imaginary bonding brought a brief but satisfying feeling of completion.” While material and popular culture may seem frivolous, these arguments prove multi-generational consumers want to connect to a familiar narrative. Girls want a doll who they feel could be their friend or sister in real life, while at the same time feeling empowered by them.

Dolls

Toy store retailer Toys “R” Us describes dolls as “one of the most enduring toys of childhood.” The doll market consists of commercial dolls like American Girl dolls, Barbies, Bratz, and MyScene dolls, as well as antique, collectible dolls like Madame Alexander, Ashton Drake, and Tonner and Pullip. In many home economic and religion classes in middle school and high school, teenage girls are given baby dolls to take care of, feed, and burp until 2am, which simulates the experience of raising a child (and is ultimately intended to teach students the dangers of teenage pregnancy). Based on this practice, a project known as “Baby Think Over It,”

41 Douglas: 119
having a child is not just something that they should want, but something they need to be prepared for.\(^\text{42}\)

There is rarely an instance in which a doll is not gendered. Even baby dolls on the market are typically dressed in either blue or pink clothing. Despite the fact that boy dolls exist, the toys are marketed predominantly to girls in order to market and reinforce homely expectations. Beyond this, boys would be ridiculed for playing with a boy baby doll, or even a Ken doll, Barbie’s male partner. However, toys like the Woody and Buzz dolls from the Disney movie *Toy Story*, or G.I. Joe are acceptable, even encouraged toys for young boys.\(^\text{43}\) A great example of masculinity rejecting feminine doll culture is G.I. Joe, an action figure doll that first debuted in 1964. Boys were no longer subject to play with dolls, but rather actionable figurines whose joints they could move. “Before G.I. Joe,” writes scholar Demian Ryder, “boys did not play with dolls.”\(^\text{44}\) While girls were expected to play with dolls that would inspire a sense of style, an interest in fashion, and serve as a device to exercise domesticity, boys could use G.I. Joe’s to instill a sense of patriotism and toughness. Ryder calls G.I. Joe a form of “consumer patriotism” that provides boys with both a physical and personal representation of who they should be and how they should look.\(^\text{45}\)

In contrast, Barbie dolls are considered to be “fashion dolls,” which demonstrates another aspect of girlhood, which is the societal pressure to look and dress in a certain way. There are standards for doing so. Based on Barbie’s appearance, one should be exceptionally tall, thin in the waist but busty at the chest, and clothed in stilettos, hot pink and black leather dresses,

\(^{44}\) Ryder: 181
\(^{45}\) Ryder: 184
and dramatic makeup. Though Barbie is a ubiquitous toy, available everywhere from pharmacy stores, Wal-Mart, large toy stores, and online retailers, she is more privileged than most American Girl Dolls. Though she only carries a $10 price tag, she is known for her “Dream House,” her pink stretch limousine, and a wardrobe that Cher Horowitz could only dream of owning. Barbie has the ability to work any job, and can easily trade in her pilot’s outfit for a pair of surgical gloves.

Though she may be empowering in the same way that American Girl dolls are, her reality is far less obtainable than the daily setbacks American Girl dolls experience. In some ways, it would seem that the middle-upper class consumer of American Girl dolls would be able to relate more to Barbie, the fashion queen, than the dolls who experience financial hardships and great family divides. Barbie not only has an unrealistic physical body image, but an excessively privileged, attractive lifestyle. Barbie sells financially conscious consumers the experience of wealth, while American Girl sells wealthy consumers the moral lessons of living a life of hardship, even when done so in a dress made of crinoline and satin.

The ability to discover or shape one’s sense of self through toys is crucial to childhood development. As Ryder claims, “the ability to project life and personality into a character supports the ability of the child to create both a private refuge world fashioned from their imagination as well as a practical laboratory for experimenting with new ideas and rehearsing social behaviors.”

Dolls provide a model for how one should look or dress, while also giving children the opportunity to assign an original story to these dolls and envision their own possible futures. Dolls like Barbie and G.I. Joe have opportunities to go shopping and fight violently, respectively. They could also get married, go to school, or cook dinner, which presents a

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46 Ryder: 181
“constructive simulation of who a person wants to be.” Children perform with their doll in a way that reflects the behavior and mannerisms of those around them. The opportunities white children were afforded was vastly different than black children.

Dolls have served as a physical site where racial prejudice in children manifest themselves. In the 1940s, psychologists Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark created the Clark Doll Test, which tested racial bias among white and black children. More children thought the white doll was prettier, even though it was identical to the other dolls in every way except for the doll’s skin color. This illustrates children’s desire (and unintentional prejudice) to find a doll that resembles them, while also seeing white dolls (and girls in general) as pure and beautiful and black dolls as dirty. The test examined the relationship between doll ownership and children’s self-esteem. The Clarks found that the way in which black children self-identified was based on mental and observed social segregation and a psychological understanding of one’s self-worth and value. Children want dolls that are both considered to be pretty and that look like them—black children are excluded from this desire. As I later discuss later in my thesis, the group interviews I conducted reveal that girls want a doll that they can not only be inspired by, but can relate to both physically and psychologically.

Advertisements dating back to 1911 attempt to convince their black readers of the importance of owning a beautiful doll that looks like themselves. In *The Crisis* magazine, one advertisement reads:

> The Most Beautiful of All the Toys on the Market Are the Negro Dolls: Your child would be happy if it had a Negro doll such as are sent out by the National Negro Doll Company, Nashville, Tennessee. Every race is trying to teach their children an object lesson by giving them toys that will lead to higher intellectual

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47 Ryder: 196
heights. The Negro doll is calculated to help the Christian development of our race.49

The language of this advertisement attempts to appease white’s fear of blacks as violent and dirty. In order to sell a product and ideally erase the notion that black dolls are tools for racist aggression, the advertisement must appeal to what white consumers want—a product that will make them feel superior. However, the underlying goal is to put a black product in the hands of a white child in a way that will be civil and treasured.

Dolls are one-dimensional without a narrative that speaks to their fictional reality. As Frances Burnett, author of The Secret Garden, noted “literature assisted imagination and gave them character.”50 Perhaps this is why some consumers and scholars have criticized American Girl for assigning their first black doll the narrative of a slave.51 Addy is limited to a particular narrative that isn’t appealing to many young children. Sabrina Thomas, Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, reaffirmed this belief, stating that the way in which "we represent diversity in the toy industry still reflects racial discourse."52 Addy, a black doll, is still part of a collection of dolls that is primarily white. If a consumer changes her story to be more appealing, they erase her of her own history and her blackness; however, by following an establish plot line, Addy automatically becomes isolated from her white counterparts. Robin Bernstein argues that “the scripts that children co-create with authors and toymakers are inseparable from children’s literature and are therefore a functional part of it.”53 While toys serve as an apparatus for imagination, the structured stories of American Girl dolls create a pre-

53 Bernstein: 167
determined identity for both the doll and the girl who connects with her, thus limiting her ability to create an original narrative—which brings us to American Girl dolls themselves.54

**American Girl Dolls**

In order to understand the specific role that American Girl dolls represent in toy and doll culture, I examine the position of dolls in consumer culture. Since the 19th century, consumer culture has informed women that they should own dolls who look exactly like them, an interest that later inspired the American Girl of Today collection, now known as “Truly Me.” Custom dolls are commemorative and meant to be treasured by their owner. The original visionary of custom designed dolls is Izannah Walker, whose ultimate goal was to create an unbreakable doll, a stark contrast from the breakable porcelain that lined most doll shelves.55

For an iconic product for the middle to upper class consumer, there is little published scholarship on American Girl dolls. Perhaps this is because scholars have chosen to study more ubiquitous products such as Barbie or Walt Disney. Instead, toy and doll scholarship has chosen to focus on more historically popular products, such as Barbie or Walt Disney. The scholarship that does exist proves that American Girl products are influential in ways that Barbie and Disney are not. There are few scholarly articles or books that discuss American Girl dolls, so I also rely on Ph.D. dissertations—the recentness of this work speaks to the cutting-edge nature of my project.

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One of the earliest publications on American Girl dolls was a dissertation written by University of Georgia Ph.D. candidate, Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, titled *The American Girl Dolls: Constructing American Girlhood through Representation, Identity, and Consumption*. This dissertation was the first to study American Girl dolls, the impact that owning a doll or reading the storybooks has on young girls as well as their mothers, and how these dolls compare to other toys on the market. Acosta-Alzuru argues that American Girl creates a culture of reenacting history for young girls through dolls and books and “changing the way girls conceptualize America and themselves.”

She guides her reader through cultural studies that impact one’s perception of, and relationship to, American Girl products. This dissertation was published in 1999; therefore, I believe my thesis will have the opportunity to advance Acosta-Alzuru’s initial findings by contextualizing American Girl’s role in shaping girls’ sense of identity, its place in children’s literature, as well as how these products define femininity and provide autonomy a nine-year-old girl.

Gender plays a significant role in the company and its marketing. There is an assumed limitation to any male audience, regardless of whether or not boys want to participate in doll culture. In each storybook that is sold alongside the corresponding BeForever doll, there is often an absent male figure. Despite Addy (1864), Samantha (1904), and Molly’s (1944) fathers’ absences, Stephanie Coontz argues that “there are limits to what parents can do to counter the effects of class position, economic pressures, working conditions, and the all-pervasive television.”

American Girl dolls are always the heroine of their personal hardships. Although these dolls are the primary heroine in their narratives, all of the emotional and family support is

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56 Acosta-Alzuru: 140
presented by the maternal figure. American Girl dolls distance themselves from their guardians’ expectations in order to help a friend or better their community.

Not only are mothers often the ones who are highlighted, but the ways in which they are described places them on a pedestal. This allows the women and the dolls themselves to adapt to some stereotypically masculine characteristics—strong, brave, confident. The mother-daughter relationship between the characters is seen as an extremely important one, however this traditional notion is limiting, especially in the 21st century. Coontz notes that “modern Americans tend to think that a girl needs an especially close relationship to her mother.”\(^{58}\) How will a young consumer feel if she has no mother and only has one father, or perhaps has two fathers or stepparents? Will this consumer feel that they cannot fully connect to the story in the same way that other girls can? Beyond this, it lessens the importance of a father figure for girls who may not have a mothers. From a marketing standpoint, the company may assume that additional experiences like shopping in the retail store, browsing through a catalogue, or sitting down for a tea party only satisfy feminine interests.

If there is at all a tension between the representation of men, women, boys and girls in the company, there is an even more astounding inadequacy of racial representation in the company. Sabrina Thomas argued that “there is [no] true diversity, when Black dolls are just dipped in different skin colors. The uniqueness of race isn't even acknowledged.”\(^{59}\) When American Girl was bought by Mattel in 1998, American Girl doll Addy (1864) received a lighter, redder skin tone and a new dress that matched the poufy, party look of the other dolls. Addy’s story of life as a young slave girl is hardly a digestible one for young readers; in order to make her appealing, the company must give her a look that girls can find attractive. Overall, there is inadequate racial

\(^{58}\) Coontz: 211

\(^{59}\) Yates: 34
representation in the company. The TrulyMe collection provides girls will over 40 different dolls to choose from, one of whom will ideally match their physical appearance; in this collection, there are 28 “fair skinned” dolls, eight “medium skinned” dolls, three dark skinned dolls, and one bald doll. If you are of a minority race or ethnicity, there are far fewer options to find an American Girl TrulyMe doll that looks exactly like you.

Another problematic aspect of the company is the way it represents class, as well as the specific socioeconomic group it targets: the middle to upper class. It provides a narrow view of American girlhood and excludes anyone who is not willing or able to spend hundreds of dollars to participate in this experience. This controversy climaxed with the arrival of Gwen Thompson, a doll from the Girl of the Year collection, whose narrative plot was that she was homeless and living in a car with her mother. Many critics asked how a company can justify charging $115 for a doll whose story is set in the car she sleeps in with her mother, or how they can dress her in a $30 dress that would have cost more than what a real girl in her circumstances could have afforded.  

Beyond the initial price of a doll ($115), additional accessories can range up to $300, additional storybooks in each doll’s series are $10. Then there are dining experiences at the American Girl Place which range between $20 to $30 per person, and the option to have your doll’s hair styled or have her sent to the doll hospital will make one’s credit card statement several pages longer than expected. One may question why parents are willing to invest in this product, an answer I gained some insight to in my group interviews. Additionally, my focus group participants emphasized that the cost of these dolls was a primary factor in their choice to preserve them. As one girl in my focus group stated, “Are you kidding me?! I would never throw

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out my American Girl dolls.” In 1986, one American Girl doll and her book cost $82; however, according to an inflation calculator, an American Girl doll that currently sells for $115 would should cost approximately $132, if the company competed with inflation.\(^{61}\) Regardless of the exact monetary value of the dolls, American Girl dolls are clearly still deeply valued by their former consumers.\(^{62}\) Whether these consumers pass their dolls down to their daughters or sell them on eBay for several hundred dollars, they clearly understand and reinforce their worth by preserving them.

At the heart of these products is a story that girls can both connect to and be inspired by. Self-discovery, in this instance, is a commodity. Susan Douglas discusses the popularity of quizzes published in teen magazines which could tell you, for example, “Which American Girl Are You?” Douglas argues that for decades, girls have been consumed by media tools used to reveal something about oneself through a seemingly unrelated topic (i.e. color choice). While seemingly narcissistic, according to Douglas, girls want to know “who were we? who should we be? how could you fit in with everybody else yet still be a distinctive individual with traits all your own?”\(^{63}\) The readers of sites like BuzzFeed and Betches, which have published quizzes like the aforementioned, include many who owned American Girl dolls when they were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s. This proves that American Girl—and the importance of identifying with the dolls’ stories—still resonates with former doll owners’ years later.

These quizzes are part of a youth culture dominated by online web and print magazines. The BuzzFeed quiz included questions like “When people meet you, what's the first thing they notice?,” “What do you need to get better at?,” “How far would you be willing to go to save the

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\(^{61}\) “CPI Inflation Calculator.” https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=115.00&year1=2017&year2=1986


\(^{63}\) Douglas: 99
day?,” and “What's the biggest change you've experienced recently?” These questions tell us that American Girl dolls teach consumers about the importance of self-worth, self-improvement, kindness, and intelligence. The company allows their consumer to absorb the same idealistic feminine traits, such as kindness, bravery, and brilliance—traits which they have already assigned to the dolls.

In the next chapter, I analyze how American Girl dolls Molly (1944) and Samantha (1904) dolls represent girls’ perception of outward and inner beauty. Based on my group interviews, consumers seemed to value having a doll—any doll—that resembled them physically. However, the detailed experiences of American Girl dolls narrated in their storybooks sometimes shifted how girls perceived these dolls, their beauty, and whether or not they were enjoyable to play with. American Girl satisfies girls’ craving to have a doll that looks like them while fulfilling parental desires that their children will play with a toy that teaches them something new—in this case, who an American Girl should aspire to be. These dolls fulfill the emotional assumptions that women are compassionate and loyal individuals, while also being the occasional rule breaker (all for a good cause, of course). The company has still carved a unique place for themselves in the consumer marketplace—while they provide a similar, interactive all-consuming retail paradise like pre-teen makeover space of the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique of Walt Disney World, the personal qualities of the dolls are more wholesome and virtuous than Barbies and Disney princesses.

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Chapter 2: Beauty is in the Eye of the Doll Holder

In Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*, the eleven-year-old protagonist, Pecola, and her friend, Claudia, are black girls growing up in Ohio in the 1940s. Claudia struggles to feel beautiful compared to the white, blonde haired, blue eyed American girls like Shirley Temple, whom she sees on television and on the shelves of toy stores. Claudia narrates:

> From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother.  

Claudia is reluctant to play with the doll in the way that adults want her to, and finds it somewhat ridiculous that she is supposed to act like an older, motherly figure when she is just ten-years-old. Claudia explains that she does not have an aversion to toys or playing in general, but does not understand why she is supposed to “rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it.” Claudia is pointing out the very gendered constructs that consumer based markets have created for toys, which then become engrained in the play habits and expectations of both adults and children.

Beyond the actual act of playing with a doll in a maternal way, Morrison articulates that girls find it difficult to relate to dolls that do not look exactly like themselves. Claudia not only has a different skin tone than the doll, but her life is entirely different than the “pancake faced” white doll. Claudia is not only in a racially minority as a young, black girl, but she is in a minority amongst her own friends and family who feel that she should both physically and emotionally embrace this type of doll. She describes the experience of touching the doll in the

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
way that the adults want her to: “picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair.”68 The inclusion of details like the vibrant colors of the doll’s eyes and hair are alarming to young Claudia. She finds it impossible to relate to this doll and is frustrated with the pressure to treat it as if it is one of her own children, which causes her to want to become even more violent with it: “break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around.”69 Claudia entirely resists any material object that she cannot connect to, regardless of its apparent beauty. She resents that “nobody ever asked [her] what [she] wanted for Christmas,” which further emphasizes that this doll, which was a Christmas gift, was supposed to be something she would admire and cherish, much like an American Girl doll.

Morrison’s narrative articulates the racialized and gendered constructs that define young girls’ expected affinity for dresses, the color pink, the assumed beauty of Cinderella with the grit of Mulan. Society’s standard of beauty can only be equated with white women’s experience. Beauty has been a subject of how women perceive themselves and other women, and determines how they behave. According to magazines and movies, books and songs, beauty defines that women should, on most occasions, be well dressed but not overdressed, well mannered but a bit of a risk taker, intelligent but not outspoken, slender but not too skinny. Susan Douglas, author of Where the Girls Are, writes that girls have been obsessed with the idea of “perkiness…an absolutely critical mask for girls who wanted to take an active role in the world yet still be thought of as appealing.”70 These qualities and standards can also be found in the American Girl dolls and their stories.

68 Morrison: 21
69 Ibid.
In my focus group, Abby, a 19-year-old white girl from New Jersey, notes that she felt a certain pressure to buy dolls based on their appearance:

I definitely felt a sense of wanting to be like the dolls because one, they’re all supposed to be cute and everyone wants them and everyone wants them for their characteristics. I think that’s one of the reasons why I wanted a “Just Like Me” doll because it would be like ‘oh my friend looks like Kirsten or something like that’ and she loves that part of it and so I wanted a doll that looks just like me.

Abby articulates that girls wanted to own popular dolls who resembled their own physical and personal characteristics. Abby wanted a “Just Like Me” (now called TrulyMe) dolls, which have a variety of different skin tones, eye colors, and hair style and color so that girls can choose the doll that looks most like them. Though their faces are made from the same mold as BeForever dolls, the latter are historically based dolls with fixed narratives. Abby couldn’t find a BeForever doll she could relate to, so instead, she wanted to take advantage of the option to purchase a doll identical to herself.

Douglas shares Abby’s challenge in being a part of a generation of women in the mid-20th century who were expected to be either Americans or a girl. She distinguishes what the expectations were for each of these labels: “Was I supposed to be an American—individualistic, competitive, aggressive, achievement-oriented, tough, independent?... or was I supposed to be a girl—nurturing, self-abnegating, passive, dependent, primary concerned with the well-being of others, and completely indifferent to personal success?” Douglas’ characterization of American girls resemble more masculine traits. She indicates that true Americans are expected to be only concerned with themselves and independent. American Girl collocates these two meanings and creates admirable girls that are both tough and sweet, naïve and intelligent, dreamers and realists. But, more than anything, they must always be beautiful.

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71 Douglas: 25
In this chapter, I examine two dolls—Molly (1944) and Samantha (1904)—and their books, as well as my research participants’ experiences playing with, and thoughts about, them. I selected these two dolls, Samantha (1904) and Molly (1944), because of their respective portrayals of beauty and, for lack of a better word, nerdy-ness and less attractiveness. Samantha has long brown hair, wear a big taffeta bow, and a poufy dress while grappling with her own tomboy tendencies. She is well put together and looks traditionally feminine but pushes the boundaries of what her Grandmary deems as ladylike behavior. Samantha is the only doll who has a company-written description with the word ‘beauty’ in it (“A Victorian Beauty”). I address what physical and personal qualities Samantha embodies that would deem her as a beauty, compared to other American Girl dolls.

In comparison, Molly is a young girl living in 1944 during the height of the Second World War. Molly is a nine-year-old girl, the second youngest of four siblings in a family experiencing the realities of World War II. According to Molly’s narrative, beauty is not seen on the surface, but rather in her patriotism and desire to lend a helping hand. Molly’s family experiences the financial realities of the war, a hardship addressed when Molly tries to come up with beautiful Halloween costume. The central conflict in Molly’s story is that she and her friends want to dress up like Cinderella for Halloween but their families do not have enough money to purchase the perfect princess costume. A homemade costume, however, will simply not suffice.

All of the American Girl dolls all are outfitted in skirts or dresses, have soft skin, shiny hair, and are free of blemishes, braces, and other less-than-perfect qualities. Any girl who does not look like this may not feel a connection to the dolls or the company, and therefore will not think of herself as a quintessential American Girl in the same way that some other young doll
owners would. American Girl acknowledges that outer and inner beauty are important to shaping a wholesome, admirable girl. Samantha (1904), who is already outwardly beautiful, must improve her ability to understand her privilege and help out the important people in her life who are financially less fortunate, like her black seamstress Jessie and Nellie, a working-class girl serving a wealthy family next door. Molly (1944), on the other hand, is a thoughtful and wide-eyed member of her military family, who must cope with the absence of the paternal figure of the household. However, her innocent support is not enough to make her feel beautiful; thus, she seeks a Halloween costume that will make her feel beautiful. These contested notions of beauty are explored in both Samantha and Molly’s narratives.

Meet Samantha

“Samantha entered my world, but more importantly, I entered hers. In doing so, I entered the world of 1904 America.” —The New Yorker

Adrienne Raphel, the writer of an article published in The New Yorker about the influence of American Girl dolls, designates the mutual intertwining of consumers and dolls’

experiences. These dolls become engrained in the fabric of what girls learn about themselves and history. These fictional narratives offer an alternative, yet familiar world that girls can embrace. While Raphel only temporarily entered the world of 1904 America, the moral lessons Samantha taught her remained.

*Meet Samantha,* the first storybook in American Girl Samantha’s series, introduces gender and class roles. Samantha deals with pressure from her Grandmother and live-in seamstress, Jessie, to act like a young lady rather than a reckless young girl. Her story begins with a gendered play experience with her neighbor Eddie, a boy of approximately the same age as Samantha, who makes fun of Samantha’s desire to play outdoors. He tells her, “you’re so dumb, you don’t even know how to climb a tree.” Eddie is implying that not only are girls less intelligent, but that he creates a connection between a girl’s intelligence, her physical fitness, and enjoyment of the outdoors. Samantha, who is depicted wearing a lace dress, large white taffeta bow, and white tights, feels embarrassed by Eddie’s comment, as she looks at her “scraped and bleeding knee.” Samantha is not dressed in clothes one would typically wear when climbing a tree. Samantha tries to maintain her femininity while doing something traditionally more masculine and adventurous, like climbing a tree, but fails to succeed.

Samantha returns home, where she is reprimanded by Jessie, a black, live-in seamstress that lives with Samantha family, as well as her Grandmary for her dirtiness. Jessie assumes the role of her mother, tending to Samantha’s clothing and wiping her tears, while Grandmary reprimands her reckless behavior. Both Jessie and Grandmary remind Samantha that it is time she starts acting like a young lady, an expectation for this nine-year-old girl that it is reiterated through the book. Samantha’s grandmother tells her that acting like a lady involves not only

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manners, but also proficiency in domestic skills like sewing. Samantha’s choice to climb a tree while disregarding the cleanliness of her clothing is a form of rebellion against what Grandmary considers to be ladylike. For the young girls with tomboy tendencies reading this story, they may feel comfort that Samantha shares the same apathy towards such domesticity, which “invokes a host of shifting historical assumptions about labor structure, sexuality, materialism, and private and public space; in its most conservative formulations, domestic ideology reduces women's agency and subjectivity to their nurture and gratification of children's, husbands', and communities' social and motional needs.” Samantha’s actions validates young girls’ desire to rebel against certain feminine social norms. Samantha’s story, based in 1904, reflects the political and social climate of the times.

*Meet Samantha* introduces the reader to an old-fashioned power dynamic between Samantha and her Grandmary. Grandmary tells Samantha: “A young lady must not ask questions of her elders.” To this, Samantha curtsies in reply. This establishes a hierarchical sense of respect and decency required of young children at this time in history. American Girl juxtaposes what manners were expected of children in the late 20th and early 21st century who are reading Samantha’s story. Throughout the book, Samantha struggles with wanting to be an adult—she has to act like one, but can not think or have a voice like an adult, according to her Grandmary. She must look presentable and be respectful—by her grandmother’s standards, of course—but she isn’t actually valued for her own ideas, voice, or talents. While these mannerisms may be bygone, pressure for girls to act a certain way in a certain space is a timeless tale.

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75 Adler: 8
Douglas writes that this fear of being silenced by society has been a concern for both mothers and daughters: “feeling voiceless, and experiencing a severing between their true feelings and their own voices, is also, it turns out, a central psychological drama for adolescent girls in America.”

Douglas points to a central conflict that appears in Samantha’s story, which is the silencing of her voice. Grandmary instructs Samantha that in order to be an appealing lady, she must learn to sew. Samantha is supposed to complete a cross-stitch project that reads, “Actions Speak Louder Than Words,” which further reinforces the fact that Samantha should act like a lady, but should not voice her opinions or thoughts.

Former consumers of the doll seem to remember Samantha’s personal struggles rather than the particular details of her own history:

**KV:** Do you think in all of the American Girl dolls, was there a quintessential doll? Is there one doll who you feel like could be the face of the company? Or was it the collection as a whole?

**Kayla:** It was the collection because they’re all American. Except for Samantha, she was British. She was oppressed in a mansion.

**Brianna:** She was American, she was just Victorian-time. She was adopted.

**Kayla:** She was definitely Victorian era. Maybe she was an orphan? I have some questions now. But Samantha was definitely the most popular.

**Brianna:** I agree. If I had to pick one, it would be her.

**Kayla:** Most girls had her. She had the wardrobe and the nicest bedding. But as a whole, the diversity of the collection is so important.

The girls reflect on both Samantha’s privilege and her oppression. One of the major conflicts in the book is Samantha’s grandmother’s desire for her to conform to conservative standards. Kayla remembers this narrative clearly, telling the other focus group participants: “I loved her story. She was definitely really oppressed. She would be like looking out the window

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76 Douglas: 303
and her Grandma would be like “no you can’t talk to boys, you can’t play with boys.” It was a strict British household.” Kayla points out several important conversations within Samantha’s narrative—first, Kayla indicates that she liked having a story that had a conflict, such as gendered oppression. Despite Samantha’s wealth and refined appearance, she struggled to feel comfortable when meeting to her Grandmary’s expectations.

Kayla also points out that Samantha’s friendship with boys was looked down upon, which reiterates that boys would be damaging to Samantha’s purity. In most American Girl stories, boys are characterized as being annoying, rude bullies. Girls have all the power and are always respectful and empathetic. If boys are in the story and have all the power (Rather than just being, for example, an annoying pest), then the women can’t be successful and strong in a way that is empowering galvanizing for readers. Beyond this, Kayla believed that Samantha was British, not American. She seemed to get the impression that the language, behavior, and expectations detailed in Samantha’s story were not American. This belief implies that there is a fundamental difference between American and British moral strictures and behavioral norms.

Even though Samantha’s story is situated in 1904, the inclusion of proper manners and gendered expectations speaks to the timeless nature of these virtues. Girls learn that if they are well-behaved and respectful, they will be rewarded. These storybooks are clearly targeted not at a girl who likes to read about the 1900s, but at a consumer and a particular type of girl who is learning what expectations society constructs for girls. If Samantha was a responsible girl who didn’t tear her stockings and climb trees, for example, she would be rewarded with an expensive doll. In order to receive this doll, Samantha had to conform to what her conservative grandmother deemed was appropriate. Douglas reiterates that young girls will “learn that to be listened to, she will be expected to speak politely and in a non-inflammatory manner;” behaving
in this way will result in a reward—much like an expensive doll. The American Girl company provides not only the moral teachings but the material reward for following those teachings.

While it is not directly addressed, Samantha’s understanding of ladylike behavior is racialized. Samantha asks her Grandmary if she could save up money to purchase “an expensive doll,” such as the real American Girl doll, Grandmary responds, saying that “A lady does not earn money,” calling it a “newfangled notion.” In comparison, Jessie, their black seamstress, is “tucked away in a corner at the end of the hallway” on the top floor of their home. Grandmary’s comment proves that a working black woman like Jessie would not be considered a respectable lady at this time.

Emma noted in my focus group that she followed Samantha’s example by doing this just this: “once I had the first one someone had bought for me as a gift, I really wanted another one. She wasn’t as historically associated and I wanted to buy it myself so I saved up for it and it was my first big purchase.” It seems that Emma ignored what Grandmary deemed as appropriate for a lady but admired Samantha’s drive and responsibility. Emma clearly felt owning another American Girl doll was worth saving up for; any young child’s first big purchase would be a memorable one, and Emma’s choice to buy an American Girl doll proves its value. While my participants thought of Samantha as beautiful, it is also worth asking: do wealth and beauty mean the same thing?

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77 Douglas: 301
78 Adler: 14-15
79 Adler: 4
Meet Molly

Meet Molly, the first storybook in American Girl Molly’s series, introduces the financial familial and hardships of World War II. Her father is “a doctor who is somewhere in England, taking care of wounded soldiers but brings safety and happiness” to Molly’s family. Molly’s mother “holds the family together while Dad is away.” This implies that all of the responsibility is forced on Molly’s mother and that if Dad was present, he would be the glue, reinforcing traditional paternal gender roles. Molly wears her light brown hair in bangs and two long braids, each of which are tied at the bottom with a red ribbon. Her other signature feature is her round, wire-rimmed glasses. The other notable characters in the book include Mrs. Gilford, the McIntire’s housekeeper who is described as being a grumpy, older woman, Ricky who is Molly’s “little annoying brother—a big pest,” her little brother, Brad, who is “a little pest,” and Molly’s two friends, Linda, “a practical schemer” and Susan, “a cheerful dreamer.”

The book highlights Molly’s preparation for Halloween. Molly is obsessed with having a costume that will make her look glamorous, graceful, and pretty. This implies that girls with

80 Adler: 4
glasses, thin, wispy brown hair, braids, or argyle sweaters do not necessarily already consider themselves to look glamorous, graceful or pretty. These words describe exactly how Molly wants to look, rather than who she wants to be.

Molly’s choice to dress up as the ever-popular Cinderella for Halloween is a popular desire for young girls. Cinderella’s story is not only well known, but it is often received as the quintessential Disney princess story. Cinderella begins as a servant in a dusty room feeling sad and lonely. The only thing that will make Cinderella happy is getting to dress up for a ball, where she will meet her prince, fall in love, and live happily ever after, dust broom and mice out of sight. Molly feels that getting dressed up like Cinderella will make her feel better about the negative affect the war is having on her family. While she isn’t looking for a bachelor, Molly wants to feel special despite the trying times.

Peggy Orenstein, author of Cinderella Ate My Daughter, and Susan Douglas consider young girls’ obsession with looking like a Disney princesses to be problematic.81 Douglas shares similar concerns about a feminine culture built around “selfless, beautiful girls [who] are rewarded by the love of a prince they barely know.”82 American Girl dolls are not focused on finding love, but rather finding their best moral self, which creates a more impressive and admirable narrative than the fantasy life of Disney princesses. Douglas notes that Disney princesses like Snow White and Cinderella were deemed as beautiful to consumers and young girls, yet they were “unself-conscious” and completely unaware of their beauty, at least according to their portrayal in movies.83 These princesses, who so many young girls aspire to be, “were so virtuous, so warm and welcoming, so in tune with nature,” that it seems almost counter-

82 Douglas: 297
83 Douglas: 28
productive for aspiring young princesses to be so concerned with their looks, instead of their moral fiber.\textsuperscript{84} Despite these princesses’ individual, personal characteristics, the average girl’s attempt to be like her favorite character begins with a physical transformation. While Molly may already be virtuous, warm, and welcoming, in order to fully feel like a princess, she must put on a costume.

The participants in my focus group briefly touched on the differences between the emotional experiences of American Girl dolls versus Disney Princesses:

\textbf{Brianna:} Did you guys ever go to Disney and go to the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique? I feel like that was the same thing, you could get your hair done and you would see these girls with like the tight, high bun thing with the crown. It was a whole thing and girls had these like dolls not like American Girl dolls but like dolls and you could be the princess for a day.

\textbf{Abby:} But that makes more sense because you want to be a princess for a day

\textbf{Brianna:} But I feel like American Girl dolls was like “who wouldn’t want to be one of them?”

This conversation reveals that girls felt participating in princess culture was a particularly special experience, as it involved a process of choosing a princess to transform into and acting out that role. As Abby notes, an experience like visiting the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique of Walt Disney World only lasts for a day but “[t]he princess makeover is a fully immersive environment, a world apart, where the fairy godmothers-in-training invest a great deal of authority in the princess-consumer and her right to future happiness.”\textsuperscript{85} In this world, girls’ personal satisfaction is presented by the hands of an elder who is in control of fulfilling their desires.

By contrast, the American Girl store offers accessories that you can continue to play with for years. Even if girls buy new outfits to match with their doll, these outfits are still ones you

\textsuperscript{84} Douglas: 29
\textsuperscript{85} Bennett, Susan and Marlis Schweitzer. “In the Window at Disney.” \textit{TDR: The Drama Review}, vol. 58, no. 4, Winter 2014, pp. 23-31
could wear out of the store and not receive second glances. Consuming American Girl products and stories is a more natural, everyday transformation, one that encourages girls to constantly improve their character, rather than focus on her looks.

Orenstein describes a so-called perfect girl, one who “now feel[s] they must not only ‘have it all,’ but be it all: Cinderella and Supergirl. Aggressive and agreeable. Smart and stunning.” In a way, this description of the “perfect girl” describes American Girl dolls. Addy (1864), a runaway slave with no education or literacy, studies hard for her school’s spelling bee and wins, beating out dozens of other students, all while wearing a silk dress her mother sewed for her. All of the dolls have perfect skin, rosy cheeks, large eyes, shiny hair, and perfectly matched accessories— all of the qualities of a princess. Yet one of the titles in each of the doll’s storybook collections is called, “__________ Saves the Day”— insert your doll’s name and she has most likely saved a friend, an animal, a family member, or herself. Cinderella, meet your Supergirl.

Why is it that Molly (1944) wants to be Cinderella and not Rosie the Riveter, a cultural icon for women that emerged during World War II? The young women from my focus group noticed a powerful message engrained in American Girl products:

**Caroline:** …when you think about it my American girl dolls were always strong and always the best at their sport, like we had gymnastics and soccer and ice skating. The leotard was so fun.

**Kayla:** Oh yeah and it came with tights!

**Brianna:** Oh yeah that was cute.

**Kayla:** I used to skate so I loved that.

**Brianna:** I had the gymnastics leotard and it looked just like my team’s leotard which I thought it was like the coolest thing.

__Orenstein: 17__
Kayla: They also had something for the Olympics too. I think the Olympics were like in Athens when we were little and for every sport they had a cool little special feature outfit. But there was also a Halloween costume thing. Like there was an astronaut.

Brianna: Yeah there were some really cool Halloween costumes.

Kayla: It wasn’t just princesses and stuff, they had like astronauts and cowboys and really cool things.

Brianna: I think it was nice to have some options that weren’t as girly. They definitely had stuff that appealed to every type of girl.

The participants highlight an important element of the America Girl company— the products the company offer are all things the girl consumer can relate to, at least at a material level. Kayla points to the fact that the company offers products for girls with all interests, not just feminine girls who wear taffeta bows like Samantha. Even for girls who enjoy sports and more adventurous activities, American Girl offers something for them.

American Girl reminds their reader that Molly’s (1944) story takes place in a wartime era and money is tight. If Molly wants to be Cinderella, she is going to have to be the do-it-yourself version. Douglas notes that these costumes highlight a significant, gendered expectation for girls: “[i]f my daughter want to be a journalist, an actress, a politician, or a tennis champion, looks will matter much more for her than they will for any boy aspiring to the same occupations.” In order to be who you want to be, you must pay for a material object to prove your capabilities to the public. Molly finally decides on a Hawaiian dancer, an exotic costume that she can make with different arts and crafts materials. Molly and her friends find it is a cheap costume that allows them to all look identical (rather than Molly being Cinderella and her friends dressing as the ugly step-sisters).

87 Douglas: 300-301
Within the American Girl collection, privilege is not just financial. The dolls exercise a personal privilege that includes a stable family life, access to an education, and clothing. There are some instances in the dolls’ narratives where their fathers are away from the home but are helping an important cause, like Molly’s father who is fighting in World War II. However, their primary caretakers are all women, and for the most part, are their mothers. Molly’s mother makes her a homemade Halloween costume since her family can’t afford the perfect Cinderella dress that she really wants; and Samantha’s (1904) seamstress Jessie repairs all of her clothes that she rips while playing in the dirt. These older women not only take care of their daughters/wards, but they all share characteristically conventional domestic skills. Stephanie Coontz distinguishes how women care for and condition their children to act a certain way based on their class. As Coontz notes, “within the home, women cared for the personal needs of their families; outside the home, elaborate and consciously feminine rituals allowed lower-class women to express needs in terms of childish helplessness and upper-class women to express caring in terms of moralistic mothering.” All of the dolls have a maternal figure, regardless of class, who tend to them, which in itself is a privilege.

The importance of learning and exercising effeminate maternal qualities is crucial to understand when thinking about the importance of dolls in doll culture. Girls play with dolls not only for the sake of having a toy to play with, but as a way to practice and perform submissive, motherly practices. Dolls offers girls the opportunity to take care of something that they deem as having worth. While women may find these domestic expectations frustrating, scholars note that they are cyclical and reintroduced in material forms for women. For example, Barbie ‘imitates a seemingly comprehensive constellation of ‘feminine’ attributes, social roles, life experiences,
structural inequalities, and unspoken aspirations." Both Barbie and American Girl dolls may have the same values, but the American Girl storybooks narrate these social roles and feminine characteristics in a more digestible way. Kayla, a 21-year old black girl from Maryland, articulates what she felt were the differences between consuming Barbies versus American Girl dolls:

Kayla: If you look at Barbies, all they can do is buy expensive things, go to nice hotels, go shopping and do a lot of stereotypical girly thing. Or be a nurse. And there’s nothing wrong with being a nurse, there’s nothing wrong with being girly and going shopping but I think that Bratz and Barbies and MyScene dolls are so limited to what girls can do. Everything is pink and frilly, everything is going on a private jet, and so that’s why my mom didn’t love that I played with Barbie because it was so limited. And even if you look at studies on body size of Barbie, it shows you what a woman’s body should look like. So with American Girl dolls, it adds this whole new dimension of what girls can do like being a marine biologist, being a hippie, someone who has to take care of her family and get a job because it’s the Great Depression and her dad lost her job...stuff like that, like fighting slavery and seeing your brother get taken. There was a lot more stuff with American Girl dolls that showed women were strong and taking care of their families, but not just as homemakers, that I think is still special. So I think it taught me a lot of those aspects. And if I didn’t read the books, there are no other representations of girls doing all of that awesome stuff.

Kayla acknowledges that her mother wanted to invest in products that were going to empower her to do anything or be anyone she wants. The limitations of “fashion dolls” like Barbie or MyScene dolls indicate that their interests are superficial and materialistic. While there is also a certain materialism to investing in $115 dolls, there is a clearly defined mission within the American Girl company that offers something more redeemable than just teaching a girl how to shop.

Why American Girl dolls? Why invest in these dolls above all others? While Barbie is empowering in that she can be a doctor during the day, a rock star at night, and then a scuba
diver the next day without so much as a blink of an eye, she is still twice the age of the average girl who plays with her. American Girl dolls are the same age as the average girl playing with her (~nine to ten years old) and have stories girls can identify with. These dolls offer a momentous and formative experience, as well as a unique form of education through their historical narratives. Their stories reinforce certain domestic and gendered expectations of young girls, yet empower them in an acceptable space.

American Girl dolls and their consumers are not career-oriented like certain Barbies, because of their age (American Girl dolls are approximately nine years while Barbie is approximately 18 years old). While becoming a rock star or a scuba diver may be a particular aspiration of a young girl, it is not at the forefront of American Girl dolls’ and their young readers’ identities. Instead, these dolls mobilize their reader to be a decent, moral person. For the young girls reading American Girl storybooks, their concerns are similar to the dolls in the story: making friends in school, wearing the perfect Halloween costume, or being rewarded for one’s good manners with a beautiful, expensive doll.

For a doll like Samantha (1904), she is not concerned with managing her physical appearance; instead, she simply feels pressure from her grandmother to act like a lady (implying that her physical features already make her look like a lady). Molly must find her own meaning of beauty. Both girls want to look, feel, and be treated like older ladies—Samantha must act like a lady while Molly must put on a costume that convinces others she is a lady. The story goes that if you can be compassionate, fearless, creative, and intelligent, you can be anyone or do anything you want.

For other dolls, such as Addy (1864) and Kirsten (1854), their narratives are further complicated by their journeys towards “becoming” American girls. The average consumer who
is not reading the books, however, only sees them as American Girls, not girls discovering what it means to be a wholesome, upright American. What changes when that experience of “becoming American” is acknowledged? What are the cultural and moral tropes of being an American that must be learned by an “outsider”? In Chapter 3, I look at the process of becoming an American girl, through the lens of Kirsten, an immigrant from Sweden, and Addy, a runaway slave.
Chapter 3: Just A Spoonful of Sugar Helps the History Go Down: Cultural Assimilation in Narratives of Minority American Girl Dolls

“Even as a child, I always thought like in commercials ‘why aren’t there more black girls for Pantene or why aren’t there darker or nude underwear to match my skin tone?’ But if you’re already white and you already see a representation of yourself in the media and in stores, you’re not going to wonder why. It’s already there, it makes sense. It makes sense that white consumers wouldn’t need or benefit from having a black doll because the ones that look like them are already on the table.” –Kayla, a 21-year-old black woman from Maryland

Kayla, one of the participants in my focus group, points to the racialized nature of material culture in the consumer marketplace. She notes that many companies, not just American Girl dolls, are focused on selling products to white consumers rather than minority consumers. White consumers have plenty of opportunities to try different shampoos, or connect to the story of a new, white American Girl doll; this option does not exist for black girls. Kayla notes that American Girl creates several unique narratives featuring white girls, but when she was a young child in the early 2000s, there was only one American Girl doll and story featuring a black girl. That girl was a slave. While the white dolls could exist in various decades throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, American Girl’s narrative for black girls remained static in their confinement.90

In this chapter, I explore how American Girl books and dolls reproduce narratives of “American” cultural assimilation. I pay special attention to the politics of whitewashing over racial, ethnic, and class differences to create the ideal “American” subject. After a brief review of literature on the history of Swedish immigration in the 19th century and the realities of runaway slaves prior to, and during, the Civil War, I discuss two dolls and their accompanying storybooks: Kirsten (1854) and Addy (1864).

90 Melody is the newest black, BeForever doll, from the other period associated with African-American history—the Civil Rights Movement. White girls can do anything in any period, but black girls are confined to their past.
Kirsten is a young Swedish girl who moves to the United States with her family in 1854. Her story is split between narrating her experiences and concerns aboard the ship and detailing what her new home in Minnesota is like once she arrives. Addy is a young slave who escapes plantation life in North Carolina with her mother in 1864, leaving her father and brother behind. Addy’s new life is threatened by financial burdens and pressure to succeed in school, and segregation in Philadelphia. There is also little mention of the threat escaping a plantation posed and the potential violence and segregation a runaway slave could still experience. Both dolls are running to a new place that maintains a certain vision of what American life will be like—this vision is portrayed in a way that celebrates the “promised land.” For Kirsten, this land constitutes the entire United States, while Addy only celebrates the new life the North offers.

A Brief History of Immigration and Assimilation, Runaways and Arrivals

Swedish immigrants who arrived in the 19th century had an arguably less oppressive experience than other ethnic groups who arrived in the United States at the same time. Though Swedes entered a new set of traditions, customs, and geographic pathways, their physical appearance, religious beliefs, and cultural values were the same as Americans who matched a very particular White Anglo-Saxon Protestant image. While individual Swedish immigrants may have had the same anxieties about adjusting to life in the new world as other immigrants, historian Dag Blanck claims that Swedish-Americans had a “way of embracing the Anglo-Saxon elements of their adopted homeland while at the same time distancing themselves from certain immigrant groups.”

Though they entered a new set of traditions, customs, and geographies, their physical appearance and spiritual values were the same as an ideal American created

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through a particular White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (W.A.S.P.) image. Swedish immigrants could use their white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes as a means to distinguish themselves from other immigrant groups.

In comparison, most other immigrant groups such as Italians, German and Irish, people of color from Africa, Central or South America, and Asians were considered to be “sojourners” and “birds of passage.” This is due to the fact that their process of assimilating into this W.A.S.P. culture was far different than what many other Europeans experienced. Although the immigrant experience is often generalized, historian John Bodner argues that “varying degrees of commitment to an assortment of culture and ideologies were evident, and that not everyone faced identical experiences.” In one particular political cartoon from the 1850s, German immigrants were portrayed as rambunctious alcoholics wearing a “lager bier” barrel. Irish immigrants were not only depicted in this same manner wearing a whiskey barrel, but another cartoon illustrates an Irish immigrant as an ape dressed in a suit coat and top hat, smoking a pipe.

New immigrants had a unique relationship to those who were already living in the United States. Blanck calls notes that the “ways in which [Swedish] immigrants met and interacted with other immigrant and minority groups in the new land” while “finding a place for themselves in the American social fabric” created a complex social and personal relationship to the United States. Swedish immigrants were already part of an established white social clique, or an “American ethno-racial hierarchy” before even touching U.S. soil with their clogs.

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93 Ngai and Gjerde: xvii
96 Blanck: 37
97 Blanck: 52
Although Swedish immigrants had a relatively easy time integrating into American life, formerly enslaved blacks faced the exact opposite. Historian Stephen Kantrowitz notes that blacks were “excluded from public life in many of its forms.”\footnote{Kantrowitz, Stephen. More Than Freedom. Penguin Books, 2012, New York, p.3} He goes on to say that blacks “created what some scholars have dubbed a ‘black counter-public,’ in which they looked to one another for support and affirmation. They practiced citizenship as a matter of survival.”\footnote{Kantrowitz: 5-6} Kantrowitz points to the general importance of free blacks needing to use their own community to find a place in northern society. Despite fears of personal safety and the risks associated with flight, many slaves believed that life would be better off the plantation. For slaves who either were emancipated or took control of their own fate and ran away, they were confident life would be better across the Mason-Dixon line.

Philadelphia, the city Addy and her mother escaped to, was a popular site for runaway slaves like Henry Box Brown, who shipped himself in a box that was “three feet one inch wide, two feet six inches high, and two feet wide.”\footnote{Brown, Henry Box. “Narratives of the Life of Henry Box Brown.” The Long Walk to Freedom: Runaway Slave Narratives, edited Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise. Beacon Press, 2012 Boston.} For enslaved and freed blacks, the ability to read, write, and interact with everyday individuals was the ultimate form of autonomy, and as Frederick Douglass said, carved the “pathway from slavery to freedom.”\footnote{Foner, Eric. Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad. W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, New York.} One of the controversial schools dedicated to educating African-American girls was Prudence Crandall’s Academy for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color, located in Canterbury, Connecticut.\footnote{Turiano, Evan. ""I Began To Realize That I Had Some Friends:” Hardship, Resistance, Cooperation, and Unity in Hartford's African American Community, 1833-1841”. Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2016. Trinity College Digital Repository, http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/594} Crandall recognized that access to a quality education was extremely limited for girls, and especially African-Americans girls, during the 19th century. Crandall initially invited one black
young girl to join her entirely white school, which reinforced horrors of racial mixing within the community. Upon this invitation, all of the white girls at Crandall’s school left. At this time, there was not only an unease towards young girls receiving an equal education to boys; it was also an unthinkable idea that African-American girls or formally enslaved children would receive comprehensive literacy training.

Crandall’s progressive school was established partially in response to the unease towards integration and amalgamation in the divisive communities in the North. At the same time, it also spoke to a greater need to provide a positive educational environment for all girls. Once Addy has successfully escaped to Philadelphia, the majority of the second half of her story takes place in school, which demonstrates the importance of freed blacks receiving an adequate education (or at least American Girls). The mixed school Addy entered offered an immediate immersion into northern society, while also providing a familiar setting for young readers. Addy’s experiences in school are similar to those narrated in other American Girl storybooks—there are a few wealthy, white girls who are mean to her because she can’t afford nice clothing. However, Addy’s past as a slave is not acknowledged, nor do the girls question where the new girl in class moved from.

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104 Ibid.
Meet Kirsten

In the last chapter, I discussed how most things in Samantha’s life are extremely comfortable (despite her being an orphan). The story of Kirsten Larson, a Swedish immigrant living in 1854, addresses a life of instability head on:

With a pioneering spirit, Kirsten and her family leave their home in Sweden to set sail for America. After many months of traveling, they finally arrive at their new home in the Minnesota Territory. Everything in the New World is strange, but friends and family help Kirsten find the true meaning of home.

The structure of Kirsten’s book also speaks to her transition from Sweden to America that is outlined over the course of 53 pages. The first chapter of Meet Kirsten is titled, “America!” and the final chapter is “Home at Last;” Kirsten’s home is no longer Sweden (although Sweden was never acknowledged as being “home” in the first place. Kirsten arrives at her family’s farm in Minnesota in the final chapter of the book. This indicates two things to the reader: the first is the idea that the United States is the real home of all of the dolls, regardless of where they have roots. These dolls develop their wholesome American values and patriotism in the United States, which are considered to be the admirable qualities girls should want to emulate.
Second, it asks the reader to consider the meaning of home: is it a place where one lives and forms their identity, or is it a place where one can successfully thrive and shape the life they have desired all along? If it is a place in which one is shaping their sense of self and embracing their culture, then this further ignores Kirsten’s genuine Swedish roots. Blanck argues that “the Swedish story was one of permanent settlement and cultural success,” so perhaps Kirsten’s pride and enthusiasm for her new life in the United States is unsurprising. Additionally, Blanck highlights the relative struggle Swedes had when immigrant to American compared to Italian, Jewish, or Irish immigrants. Although Kirsten was coming from a different place, her blonde hair, blue eyes, and light skin wouldn’t make any other Americans blink their blue eyes; she was already one of them before she even got there.

Kirsten is dressed in a style that is meant to reflect her era as well. She wears her blonde hair tied up into two braids, secured with blue ribbons, and bangs to conceal her forehead. She wears a full blue dress that touches her ankles and has long sleeves; over the dress is a red and white striped apron that ties at her waist and hits at the knee. In addition to her dress, customers can buy a red and white bonnet for Kirsten. She is accompanied by her Papa and Mama and her brothers, Lars and Peter. While the book asserts that the Larson’s came to the United States with an optimistic “pioneer spirit,” there are other consequences of immigration that American Girl does not address such as potential economic hardship, war, or religious persecution.

The reader immediately learns how excited Kirsten is to immigrate to the U.S. and although “the Larson’s sometimes long for Sweden… they never lose heart for the challenges of pioneer life.” Kirsten makes it seem like a happy place to come to, illustrating a sense of

105 Blanck: 40
106 Blanck: 40
108 Ibid.
patriotism before even arriving on United States soil, which American Girl books refer to as “America.” The name of the ship she arrives on is *Eagle*, an icon of American culture. There is no mention of Swedish pride or even a general fear of leaving home; Kirsten and her family are leaving Sweden because her father thought they could have a better life in the United States. The first line of the book reads, “‘That’s America!’ Kirsten said happily,” which indicates that the United States has been glorified and is a place one should be excited to come to.\(^{109}\) Kirsten and her friend, Marta, a fellow immigrant, express that the first thing they are excited to do together is pick and eat apples, reinforcing a traditional American stereotype that this is a land of plenty, one with a wholesome culture. It is unclear where Kirsten received the positive image of the United States, but she feels it is a place that will bring her equal happiness and prosperity to that of Sweden.

Kirsten’s transition to the United States is not an easy one. The first barrier Kirsten experiences is one of physical health on the ship, particularly when she is faced with the death of her friend, Marta. Additionally, concerns about adjusting to the new land arise when Kirsten gets lost in New York City upon arriving at Ellis Island, but ten pages later, she is reunited with her family. The narrator tries to paint the United States as a completely foreign place, as if told from an immigrant’s perspective. The vision of the United States that Kirsten had on the ship—one of fruitfulness and fulfillment—immediately disappears when she arrives on in New York, suddenly feeling scared and unsure of her future. However, Kirsten’s fears are subjective and mainly addressed when there is a physical barrier, such as navigating new land, rather than an emotional setback.

\(^{109}\) Shaw: 1
Kirsten does not express fears about fitting into American culture, making friends, or creating a new home. We only see the immediate outcome of Swedish immigration in a form of flash cultural assimilation. The confusions, losses, absences, and breakdowns a real life nine-year old from Sweden would have faced are not mentioned. Over the course of the book, readers see Kirsten grow personally and realize the positive qualities of America, which in turn will offer the reader the same opportunity to reflect on their country. However, once Kirsten arrives to her family’s farm in Minnesota, she concurs that she is officially home because she is safe and with her family.

As emphasized throughout this thesis, consumers may choose a doll based on her physical appearance, personal narrative, or both. However, the participants in my focus group found it difficult to relate to Kirsten, the “foreign” doll:

**Brianna:** Kit had short hair and I had long hair and I wanted one that looked just like me. Because like I really wanted Samantha but I was like I don’t look like Samantha, I don’t want her. Because like I really wanted a Just Like Me with long blonde hair. Plus, all of my Barbies had my hair, that’s definitely what it was. It’s easier to find dolls that look like me but I remember wanting a blonde American Girl doll.

**Kayla:** Oh yeah Kirsten had those ugly blonde buns.

**Brianna:** Yeah Kirsten was blonde but her braids were ugly.

**Kayla:** See you would like the new blonde one that came out, she has long blonde hair, she’s like a hippie and has really cute clothes.

**Brianna:** Oh yeah she has cute outfits. Yeah that’s why I got Kaylee because she had long blonde hair and cute outfits. And like a braid in the front which was how I wore my hair.

From this conversation, an important question arose— was Kirsten ugly in her immigrant-ness?

Brianna points to the importance of having a doll that looked liked her, while also acknowledging the plethora of blonde American Girl dolls already in existence. The American
Girls in my focus group found it difficult to relate Kirsten whose accessories, in this case her signature braids, identified her as an immigrant, not just a blonde, American girl.

![Figure 4: An illustration of Kirsten's life on her family's farm in Minnesota.](image)

When Kirsten arrives on the new farm with her relatives, she is immediately offered clothing to change into (see Figure 4). This new outfit is the clothing that the doll comes packaged with and what she wears on the cover of the book. Kirsten was now “dressed just like her cousins.”¹¹⁰ She is no longer a Swedish immigrant: she is an American girl, with a vague Swedish heritage, blonde hair and blue eyes. Her whiteness allows her an easy cultural assimilation in “American” culture, as Swedes were particularly absorbed into white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant society.

Even when Kirsten is speaking to her family, the language is English and is not peppered with Swedish phrases or vernacular. The only indication that she spoke a different language than English is when she stumbles to say “Minnesota,” described as a “strange word.”¹¹¹ When Kirsten’s family arrives to New York on the ship, the *Eagle*, her mother notes that “Swedish

¹¹⁰ Shaw: 48
¹¹¹ Shaw: 7
children could get easily lost in America.” Her mother’s comments depict Swedish children as mindless, and the United States as an enormous, threatening place—not only in its geography, but the cultural force to immediately assimilate. One can also assume, however, that any mother would be worried about losing her child in an unfamiliar setting, but the ethnic undertones points to a deeper concern about assimilation. Kirsten points out that the dress she is wearing when they arrive in New York looks not only different, but much dirtier than the other, already “Americanized”, girls around her.

John Bodner points to the ways new immigrant families faced prejudice based both on ethnic traditions and class-based realities. Kirsten’s mother, however, distinguishes that Swedish immigrants may have experienced the same overwhelming feeling of being in a new place that all other immigrant groups faced. However, there is an underlying message that Kirsten and her family would not have stuck out in the same way that other ethnic groups like Italians, Irish, Germans, and Asians would. American Girl made a unique choice to assign their immigrant doll a Swedish heritage, which was not by any means the largest ethnic group emigrating to America in the mid to late 20th century. Her blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and assumed Protestant would have made it easy for Kirsten to blend in to her surroundings, which represent an assimilation that didn’t face much adversary.

Scholars have studied the immigrant experience, the implication and meaning of the phrase “the melting pot,” cultural assimilation, and ethnic relationships. Dag Blanck discusses Swedish immigration during the 1850s, the same history that is represented in Kirsten’s story. Blanck examines the role of Swedish immigrants in American society, noting that “in contrast to this Irish Catholic experience, the Swedish story was one of permanent settlement and cultural

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112 Shaw 13
113 Bodner: 210
success.” Kirsten has a relatively seamless experience settling onto the farm, her new home, once her family arrives in Minnesota. While *Meet Kirsten* does depict the physical and emotional difficulties immigrants experience, Kirsten’s own hardships are discussed when she is on the ship and just arriving to the United States.

**Meet Addy**

Addy, a runaway slave from 1864, has a catch phrase stating, “Today, I’ll keep my family strong: I’ve escaped to a new life. My whole world is opening wide, but I’m learning that freedom doesn’t make everything easy. Through it all, family is what keeps me going. Just the thought of us all together gives me strength.” She was first released in 1993, five years before the company was purchased by Mattel. After the company was bought out by Mattel, Addy

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114 Blanck: 37-55.
Vaughan

underwent a noticeable physical transformation—her skin was lightened and made redder. In Figure 6, Addy has softer facial features, larger brown eyes, and a more feminine, sweet pose. Addy wears a bright blue dress, with a subtle paisley, floral pattern, accented by black ribbon around the neck, arms, waist, and skirt; underneath the dress, she wears white bloomers and black boots. Her hair is tied back behind her face with thin blue ribbons.

Addy’s family is enslaved on the same plantation together. Her father “wants to give the family strength,” while her mother exudes “love that helps the family survive.” Here we see the reassertion of tradition gender roles— the father providing power and toughness for his family, while the domestic woman can protect her family just with her love. While this certainly speaks to traditional paternal roles, it does not illustrate any of the complexities of race or class involved in slave life. American Girl is applying these norms that we understand to a situation that would not have necessarily been true. Despite the fact that Addy’s family in enslaved, their simplified family structure mimics that of all the other white American Girl dolls. 19th century historian Eric Foner argues that such a traditional family structure would not have existed for enslaved black families until after the Civil War. Emancipation allowed for the stabilization of black families and the transformation of roles within those families.

Addy’s story begins with her overhearing her parents discuss the possibility of running away from their master on the plantation. They express their fears of the entire family getting caught and being forcefully split up is a major concern. The narrator notes that Addy’s parents were “talking about the kind of freedom a slave had to run away to get.” The significance behind this act is not hid on Addy or her parents; her father wants to protect his family,

117 Ibid.
118 Porter: 6
especially Addy who he says “[goes] out in the morning, her eyes all bright and shining with hope. By night she come stumbling in here so tired, she can hardly eat.” In this moment, Addy’s father is articulating that he wants to preserve Addy’s innocence and beauty, while also speaking to the physical and emotional affects that slavery had on young children.

While the story of Addy and her mother is certainly heroic, it is not realistic. Addy and her mother escape slavery in North Carolina and flee to Philadelphia, leaving her father and brother behind, yet the possibility of such an escape was almost impossible. In his book *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*, historian Eric Foner writes,

> Most fugitives…were young men who escaped alone. Those with immediate families often sought to retrieve their wives and children after reaching the North. Some, like Douglass, planned for months; others, like Pennington, decided to run away because of an immediate grievance—in his case, his owner’s threat to whip his mother for insubordination.\(^{120}\)

While Addy’s escape was planned and organized due to fear that the Union soldiers would never make it to North Carolina, the notion that a woman, let alone a woman with her daughter, would run away is misinformed.

While it is true that flight was much more available during the Civil War, historian Evan Turiano states in his undergraduate thesis that “slaves in the Deep South had far more daunting prospects and would usually attempt to exit by ship in New Orleans or Charleston, flee to Mexico, or attempt to travel out West.”\(^{121}\) Addy and her mothers escape from North Carolina to Philadelphia is also unrealistic. However, one may question whether or not Addy’s somewhat inaccurate story matters to a young girl being introduced to the Civil War. Even though this

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\(^{119}\) Porter: 8  
\(^{120}\) Foner: 5  
particular scenario is unrealistic, it allows a young reader to process other harsh aspects of slavery, such as family separation and the fear that running away would result in a brutal whipping, or worse.

Addy notes that she “remembered when [her brother] Sam had run off the year before, shortly before Esther was born. He was tracked down by Master Steven’s dogs and brought back. He was tied to a tree and beaten with a whip by Master Stevens…when the beating was over, Sam’s back was covered with blood.” Even though Addy is not getting whipped or raped by her slave master, an all too traumatic thought for a young girl reading the story of her beloved doll, the reader does get a graphic image of slavery. If the story opened with Addy as a free slave in a Northern state, the reader would not get an introduction into the brutal, more physical aspects of slavery; however, it is hard to imagine that a children’s story about an enslaved child with no hope for a happy ending would be particularly profitable.

Addy was re-released in 2014, after having been previously archived by the company due to low sales. When they redesigned and released her, they also expanded her story. The original half of her story in which she is enslaved remained, but an additional 100 pages was added. In this portion of the story, Addy begins attending a mixed race school in Philadelphia, where she “learn[s] to read and write…have spelling matches, learn our sums… even study the war.” Addy and her mother are welcomed to Philadelphia by the “Freedom Society of Trinity A.M.E. Church,” a group that that helps Addy and her mother find a place to stay. Addy’s mother is matched with a white woman who owns a dress shop and needs a seamstress to help out; Addy and her mother promptly move in.

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125 Porter: 57
Addy is fearful to leave the new residence where her and her mother are staying because she worries she will get lost in an unfamiliar place (similar to Kirsten); any concerns of being caught as a fugitive and brutally punished are absent from the narrative. However, Addy does notice the discrimination against “colored folks,” and is surprised that her “freedom wasn’t the way she dreamed it would be.”\textsuperscript{126} Addy’s mother reassures her that education will give her access to the freedom she has been longing for. Historian Barbara Sicherman claims that “[f]or African-Americans, claiming expressive literacy was both a matter of enhancing knowledge and of securing their due standing as Americans.”\textsuperscript{127} Based on Sicherman’s argument, it is clear why Addy’s mother placed an emphasized the importance of Addy receiving an education—it would be a tool of both personal empowerment and social integration. Addy’s schoolteacher, Mrs. Dunn, reassures Addy that she will catch up to the rest of the class in no time, a sentiment that is confirmed when Addy wins her class spelling bee just a few weeks after arriving in Philadelphia.

Connie Porter, author of \textit{Meet Addy} and \textit{Finding Freedom}, is able to provide readers with a brief, but striking story of American slavery before giving young girls and parents the story they really want to read—Addy’s rather pleasant integration into a Reconstruction era society. The hardships she experiences are not all that different from other American Girl storybooks—she is bullied by other girls at school, she works hard to win the spelling bee in her class (which she later does win), and she misses her father and brother (in the same way Molly misses her father who is away in England fighting during World War II). Addy’s post-slavery life is nearly indistinguishable from a white girl living in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. This is a digestible story for the target United States market: affluent, mostly white people who can afford $100+ dolls, who are

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
also predominantly white. While Addy and her mother acknowledge the existing discrimination in Philadelphia, the main focus is Addy adjusting to a new school and trying to fit in with her wealthier, better dressed white classmates. Like Kirsten, the focus of Addy’s story is her effort to both physically and culturally assimilate, in her case, into northern society.

It is simplistic to assume all dolls of one race will speak to and fit the interests of all girls of that race, especially when the brand offered only one black doll. One participant in my focus group, Kayla, African-American college student, did not want to play with Addy because of her slave background:

Kayla: …When the dolls first came out, they were only historical and my friends had them but I was really, really against playing with a doll that was a slave. It was just a lot and I read all the books first and I just didn’t want a doll that was a slave and that was the only black doll they had. I thought that was weird because there were other eras in American history that you could include a black person, but you had to pick the worst part so as a kid I didn’t want that. Plus, the slave doll had less amenities than the other ones, so all my friends had Samantha’s who had a really cool bed and accessories and the slave doll had like mat which makes sense but like as an 8-year-old or as a 6-year-old I was like ‘no I don’t want to play with this.’ It wasn’t until the look alike doll two years later that I was like ‘okay I can work with this’ because I could make up their own story.

My mom didn’t want to get [an American Girl doll] for me. She thought it was a waste of money and the only reason why I ended up getting one was because my godmother, who I said is from Bermuda, really wanted me to have one. For her having a black doll was a huge deal because in Bermuda it’s a small island and a British colony so all the dolls they have, even though it wasn’t a lot like there’s not a lot of toy stores there, but all the dolls are white. My god-sister who is our age only had white dolls that didn’t look like her. And she would come for Christmas because we used to live in Connecticut and she would get a bunch of dolls like Barbies, Bratz, and few American Girl dolls and send them back home [to Bermuda]. It made me think of how representation is important through that.

But that was one thing I didn’t like about American Girl dolls and now they’re making it more diversified and relatable to young girls. But when I was six and the only black doll was a slave doll was something I didn’t like. But now their new doll is really cool. She’s a black doll, she’s from Detroit from the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. My mom is from Detroit [and grew up] during that time…if I was young, I would’ve want that one.

128 More black dolls have since been added to the collection in the mid 2000s to the present.
Kayla points to several problematic aspects of the company, including American Girl reinforcing the idea of “playing slavery.” Robin Bernstein notes that “[m]any nineteenth-century white children—especially but not exclusively girls—read books about slavery and then used dolls to act out scenes of racialized violence and forced labor.” While the current doll owners are most likely not using Addy as a tool to perform their aggressions against African-Americans, her narrative subtly reinforces an opportunity to commodify slavery.

Additionally, Kayla acknowledges that Addy is inherently going to be a less appealing toy to young girls because American Girl provides her with historically authentic, and thus less attractive, accessories. While a wealthy white girl like Samantha would sleep in a large white bed with a pink canopy and wear expensive fur jackets, Addy’s clothing and furniture is less attractive and less abundant. The company must strike a balance between creating products that will make money while also providing some historical accuracy. However, in doing this, something will be sacrificed—either a toy that is appealing to a young girl, or an honest retelling of a young girl’s slave experience. The only way both of these missions can be accomplished is

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129 Bernstein: 160
by creating a black doll from a time period that is not exclusively associated with black violence and civil rights, a narrative that is currently absent from the American Girl collection. The company is slowly progressing in its inclusion of diverse narratives from perspectives of minority girls, a development I will touch on in my epilogue, However, American Girl still seeks to create a feel-good product.

The Cultural Assimilation of Girlhood in the Mid-19th Century, American Girl-Style

For American Girl dolls, the United States offers more promising opportunities than one’s current condition—for Kirsten, that place is the United States as a whole and for Addy, that is the North. Despite their destitutions, American Girls always triumph. Kirsten is not fearful of leaving her Swedish heritage behind, nor is Addy overly concerned with what life will be like off the plantation. Addy’s story does not address the number of slaves who were fearful of their life off the plantation, the unknown treatment and anticipated discrimination they could experience. Though Addy is sad to be leaving her father and brother behind, and is aware of the repercussions if she were to be caught running away, she does not see the “free land,” the northern states, as a threat to her personal freedom or happiness. For Kirsten, she is only excited about what America will bring. She has only heard that life is better, the soil is better, her life will be better the minute she finishes crossing the Atlantic Ocean. While this doesn’t necessarily prove to be true in Kirsten’s story, American Girl is still presenting the idea that “America” is home. For Kirsten and Addy, they become who they want to be once they move to an entirely new place, both of which are different parts of the United States. The narratives do present challenges and inequalities, however American Girl presents the idea that one can solve their problems simply by
In Chapter 4, I will introduce the connection that young girls form to their dolls by reading their storybooks, while asking the overarching question of the importance of narratives and storytelling in young girls shaping their sense of self. What is gained through a textual narrative, in addition to a visual portrayal of a certain historical era? I will also compare American Girl storybooks to other children’s literature, such as Little Women and Little House on the Prairie. I intend for this analysis to illustrate the importance of children’s books in shaping children’s values, sense of self, perception of others, and the overall construction of American identity and girlhood.
Chapter 4: “Giving Girls Chocolate Cake with Vitamins:” Narratives and Storytelling

“Books are the heart of the collection, but the dolls are the way the stories are visualized and experienced as little girls act out the stories using the dolls. They came together. I never conceived of one without the other.” –Pleasant Rowland, founder of American Girl

In fifth grade, several students and I were interviewed by our town’s local newspaper asking us why we enjoyed reading. We all agreed that it was an escape to another world, even if that escape was only temporary. A familiar sentiment was echoed by screenwriter William Nicholson, who summarized this escape in a way that readers of all ages can connect to: “We read to know we are not alone.” Individuals want to know that their experiences—whether banal or remarkable—have been shared by others. What is the classical tradition within children’s literature? Why experiences, successes, failures, virtues are shared by all girls, regardless of race, class, or era?

Reading and analyzing children’s literature in a scholarly form facilitates conversation with many other areas of studies—media studies, childhood studies, English literature, childhood psychology, history. Before understanding how American Girl texts function as a retail item and commodity, it is important to consider what features of classic children’s literature either appear or are absent in American Girl texts. In this chapter, I compare American Girl texts to Little Women and Little House on the Prairie, both of which have some historical features and are geared towards girls of the same age group as American Girl readers. I analyze books as a retail item and commodity, paying close attention to the specific marketing ploys American Girl texts employ. Finally, I summarize how these texts are perceived and understood by the girls who read them and what characteristics of children’s literature are incorporated within these pages.

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Children’s narratives have been staples of American culture, education, and childhood. Stories like *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Swiss Family Robinson* and even British children stories, such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, all are shaped around the idea of growing up, family structure, a sense of adventure, and moral reasoning. Narratives are told through a number of forms, including books, movies, photographs, oral storytelling, music, plays, diaries. Literature serves as a way for a child to enter an imagined world that offers adventure, innocence, and lessons that teach children what it means to be young.\(^{132}\)

The various American Girl books, *Little Women* and *Little House on the Prairie* all share similar historical features and are geared towards girls of the same age group as American Girl readers. Each of these stories have young girls as the protagonist characters and each experience similar hardships while also living quintessentially American lifestyles, a life in which hard work is rewarded. The girls in *Little Women* face the same financial burdens of the Civil War as American Girl Molly (1944) does in the midst of World War II. The characters in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* and American Girl Kirsten (1854) both grow up in the Midwest in the mid-19th century, and are comforted by the simple pleasures and opportunities of living on an American frontier.\(^{133}\) These recognizable plots reinforce a series of experiences that all girls, regardless of when they grow up, should face.

Although it may seem like an unconventional tool, it is unsurprising that books are an important part of American Girl’s product line. For Pleasant Rowland, founder of American Girl,
the educational aspect of the original American Girl collection was just as important as the dolls themselves. Valerie Tripp, author of a number of American Girl books, shares that her goal is to “create a character the reader will care about and make friends with so they care what’s going on…[T]he characters are an allegory or metaphor for the major social and political problems…[T]he stories are gentle life lessons, humorous, sad, and an honest portrayal.” Tripp points to the literary goal of the company, which is to teach girls about what it means to be a girl. While this lesson partially comes from playing with a doll, it is further fortified by the inclusion of the storybook in the doll’s physical package. When girls buy a doll, they are automatically receiving an educational tool, which is the storybook. It doesn’t matter whether or not they initially intended to read the book or even had any interest in reading in the first place. The book has been placed into their hands by the corporation, thus facilitating deeper engagement with the doll.

Books allow girls to form a closer relationship with her doll. They become attuned to their characters’ personality traits, their hardships, their relationships with others, and familiarize themselves with a particular setting as if they are there with their doll. A doll serves as a material object for the reader to connect to and bond with. Even after a reader finishes the story and closes the book, one can continue to play out that doll’s story, or create an entirely new narrative for the doll. One can become invested in the story and the doll as a girl with a background and personality, treating her with a closeness and familiarity that she may not treat her other dolls like Barbie or Bratz.

Books as Commodities

The American Girl storybooks are a crucial and valued part of the consumer experience. Each doll from the historical BeForever collection comes with six storybooks; the first book in these series is included with the doll that consumers purchase. The inclusion of the book with the doll serves three purposes. First, the book creates an opportunity for a consumer to become closer to her doll when she recognizes that they have comparable misfortunes and ambitions. Second, the inclusion of the storybook with one’s purchase of a doll reveals that the company values education and that their consumer is most likely a well-educated individual who equally values educational learning and imaginative play. Finally, this is also a savvy capitalist decision from the company: if a consumer is reading her doll’s story, she most likely won’t be satisfied with just reading the first book in the collection. She will likely ask for the remaining five books in the collection to finish her story, which drive revenue for the company.

According to the girls in my focus group, the books were enjoyable and welcome additions to their bookshelves full of other young children’s books. Molly, a 19-year-old white girl from Massachusetts, said that she “read lots of historical fiction so these books were just more of the same for [her]” while Taylor, a nineteen-year-old white girl from New York City, “read more of the books than the dolls [she] had.” These books may have been important for the connection the consumer formed with her doll, but more so, they seemed to be enjoyable books for young readers. Bernstein argues that “children’s literature as a genre…emerged in crucial part through the relation between books and toys,”135 which demonstrates the relevance of this pairing. American Girl recognizes that children’s literature provides a written story that

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135 Bernstein: 160
interprets and presents the significance of a toy in childhood culture—in this case, the significance of a doll in a young girl’s life.

Beyond the books serving a purpose of establishing a closer bond between the consumer and the doll in the story. All books are commodities because they are designed to sell. An author may write to tell a story they think is valuable or important to share but their ultimate goal is to sell books as a source of income. The American Girl storybooks have also endured significant change over the thirty years of the company’s existence. The original storybooks the company produced were approximately 60-70 pages in length, contained colored illustrations, and a brief history lesson called “A Peak into the Past” at the end. The current books are upwards of 200 pages in length, have no illustrations, a much shorter “Peak into the Past” section, and are chapter books rather than short storybooks. These books seem to de-emphasize history and instead try to make dolls more relatable. These books focus more on teaching girls how to be girls, rather than giving them a history lesson. It may be yet another business decision. For devoted Addy (1864) consumers who read the first edition of her book in the 1990s and early 2000s, they may want to find out how her story continued after she escaped to the North with her mother, a narrative that is unanswered at the end of her first book.

The six-book series of each doll also serves as a collector’s item, but not in the sense that these books will have a high selling value in future decades (although that is also entirely possible). There is a certain urge, however, to own as many of the books as possible, to read all of the stories, and engage with the company as much as possible. American Girl books are much like Nancy Drew series beginning in the 1930s or Magic Treehouse series in the 1990s, in the sense that each book included different adventures, some new characters, but similar threads with the same primary protagonist. Each character must work with a close group of friends or
family members to help fix a problem; while the stakes seem high, these problems are always solved within an approximately 100-page chapter book. These stories are continuous as old characters grow and new characters are introduced; the more a child reads, the more closely she will become invested to these characters and their story.

Consumers of narratives, whether in books or in film, will always want to know what happens next. There is a certain pressure for the authors to create stories that feel distinctly different enough that it is worth investing time or money to buy more or travel to the local library with the intention of reading all of the books in a certain collection. The books must offer something more than just a familiar character or amusing plot; there must be lessons and values engrained within the stories that will be useful yet still congenial for readers, both young and old. American Girl books are also selling a line in this case. They are proving that their products are good for kids because they are offering both a toy and an educational resource. What else could be more American than learning to be a good, wholesome American?

This education is constructed in a very particular way. All of the American Girl BeForever books are written for 21st century readers, unlike, for example, Little Women which was written in the same historical time period in which the story is set. In comparison and as an example, Meet Addy (1864) is written in what readers consider to be contemporary but is set in the past. By taking a character whose story is set in 1864 but giving her expectations of how she should behave that match a contemporary society, Addy’s life can never truly be represented. However, this story is a form for young readers to learn about slavery without being faced with grim images. These books make historical events like slavery or the Great Depression somewhat enjoyable to read about, even if it was certainly not an enjoyable experience. This is because every child that reads Addy’s story should want to continue reading and buying books.
American Girl as a business has a responsibility not to “scare” girls by threatening them with historically accurate narratives about the United States. Rather, they entice them to invest in these stories while learning and tightening their bond with, for example, Addy (1864), all for a profit. These books all bound to specific values and norms of American-ness that include some but not all of the following qualities: a historically accurate setting; a valued, if not always stable, family structure; a close friendship between a girl and her doll. Brianna notes that for her, the books of the dolls she owned inspired her to read other stories:

I think I remember reading them with the dolls I had and then I started liking them so I kept reading and my mom had my read everyday and I found books I liked so I’d have to read those. I’m trying to remember but I definitely think I read books for dolls I didn’t have but I started with like the books I had. Like they come in the box I think so I had those and then went from there.

Most of the participants in my focus group agreed with Brianna. These books were just as enjoyable as all of the other children’s literature placed on their bookshelves at home. The fact that girls wanted to keep reading them proves they were well-written, enjoyable stories that girls wanted to invest themselves in. American Girl is clearly employing talented authors to create books girls will love, which reinforces their goal of providing girls with products that are fun and instructive.

Books are not the only educational tool American Girl offers—the entire company educates girls with all of their products, including the dolls. The education they provide comes in a number of ways. When a girl interacts with her own doll, she is learning how to be responsible and take care of something valuable. She is learning not only what it means to be a guardian and how to take care of something, but also how to love a material object. However, the books teach education in the traditional sense, through their inclusion of historical details.
All of the storybooks include a section at the very end called, “A Peek into Past” which details what American society was like for the characters in a certain era and places with particular characters written into this context. For example, the historical details outlined in *Meet Molly* (1944) reads:

> Almost every family in the United States had to say good-bye to someone who went to war. People missed their relatives, just like Molly’s family missed Dad. But they were also proud of these men and women...Like Molly and her family, they wondered where the people they loved were and whether they were safe.\(^{136}\)

This history is rudimentary and always drastically simplified, whitewashed, and blurs class distinctions, and erases cultural violence—but, at the same time allows girls to consider the calamity families experienced during this time. Beyond the obvious history lessons the author is trying to push, there are other educational tools sprinkled throughout the text. In *Meet Felicity*, small, hand drawn illustrations are included in the margins that explain what a “bit and harness,” “coral necklace” and “garters” look like.\(^{137}\)

However, books function differently when they are a part of a larger line of products within a company that are interwoven into the books as well. Addy (1864), Kirsten (1854), and Samantha (1904) all have their own dolls in the story that they are close with and treasure. While Addy and Kirsten already own their rag dolls, Samantha must work hard and be kind in order to earn the expensive doll as a gift from her Grandmary. For Addy and Kirsten, their rag dolls serve as a source of comfort, a symbol of home, and something to hold on to that they can cuddle, care for, and love. This is a way for the author (and the American Girl company) to show readers the importance of having a doll that will love you who you can love back.

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Robin Bernstein notes that “[t]oday, children’s play, literature, and material culture are conjoined.”  All of these accessories give customers more enticement to continue shopping within the company and for the girl to keep playing and connecting with her doll. Dolls accessories include additional outfits (which are also available in sizes for girls), accessories like hats and shoes, furniture, pets, school lunchboxes, hairstyling kits, bed and bedding, and family heirlooms. A girl may choose to read the second story within Addy’s (1864) collection or she may choose to put Addy to sleep in her miniature bed every night. Either way, these products keep a girl invested in the lives of her doll and a parent of guardian investing money into the American Girl company.

Additionally, the doll’s toys, friends, and furniture are included in the narrative of the doll’s storybook. The beds that Addy (1864) and Samantha (1904) sleep in, the ragdolls Addy and Kirsten (1854) carry, and the dresses that all of the dolls are depicted wearing on the cover of their storybooks are available for purchase on the website. These storybooks are primarily a fiction narrative, but also a second catalogue. In Felicity’s (1774) story, her best friend Elizabeth was a central figure and made available for purchase. For devout fans of Felicity, they would most likely own both Felicity and Elizabeth dolls. The author’s inclusion of these small details in the stories turns every object and outfit into a commodity. It is an interesting ploy to shape characters whose families have financial burdens within a company whose goal is to sell expensive merchandise.

Although the characters experience financial hardships, the stories emphasize material objects. The new clothing Kirsten (1854) receives when she arrives on her family’s farm in Minnesota, Addy’s (1864) rag doll that she holds on to as a special treasure during her escape,

138 Bernstein: 167
the letters Molly (1944) receives from her father who is away fighting in World War II in England, and Samantha (1904) has a locket pinned to her dress containing a photograph of her deceased parents. While these objects are not necessarily extravagant or costly, the storybooks value commemorating people and places through material objects.

Books as Literary Tradition

There is a close parallel between Felicity (1774), the Revolutionary War era heroine and Civil War era Jo March in Little Women. Both are tomboys who try to resist traditional notions of what it means to be a young girl. Felicity is dissatisfied with the pressure from her mother to conform to a certain style of dress and domestic skills. For example, Felicity admires the comfort and flexibility that her brother’s knickers provide compared to the restricting fabric and silhouette of her dress. However, despite Felicity’s opposition to gender norms, she still exhibits compassion, attachment, and heart for her community. These emotions are still commonplace feminine attributes. Historians Barbara Sicherman and Sarah Elbert both argue the Little Women is a girls’ book specifically in response to the adventure novels of boys.139 The protagonists in Little Women resist traditional domesticity that young girls and mothers may find themselves also frustrated by. Sicherman also notes that there is a significant experience for girls reading fiction because it is one of the only ways to imagine a life of adventure and success outside of the home.140 The characters in these fictional girls’ books are role models for readers of all ages because they achieve success outside the confines of the house.141

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140 Sicherman: 18
The title of Louisa May Alcott’s novel, *Little Women; or, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, proves that the narratives she has constructed are shared more or less universally among young girls. These stories could apply to these four individuals or they could apply to all little women who are reading this tale. *Little Women*, as Sicherman notes, is “the most popular girls’ story in American literature.”¹⁴² There are particular tropes within this literature that all girls not only can enjoy reading about, but more so, can relate to. Despite the story taking place in the Civil War era, there is a certain universality to the themes that appear. Each of the four girls must offer universally appealing qualities; the book would not have success if only one type of girl with particular interests from a certain era, place, class, or race could relate to the novel. As Elbert argues, the title indicates something very particular about the stage of life in which these characters are existing: “a complex overlapping of stages from childhood to elder child, little woman to young woman.”¹⁴³ This concept of personal development demonstrates that Alcott has created a text that will be understood by women who are currently experiencing, or did experience, this unique, complicated time in one’s life.

Alcott draws a distinction between the physical appearance of the characters and their moral fiber. After writing detailed descriptions of each of the girls, Alcott writes, “What the characters of the four sisters were, we will leave to be found out.”¹⁴⁴ Not only does she indicate that their beauty is separate from their disposition, but she minimizes the significance of Jo’s “round shoulders” or Beth’s smooth hair and bright eyes.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Elbert: 195-196.
¹⁴⁵ Alcott: 8
Additionally, these writers are touching on the same thematic hardships that all girls experience when maturing from childhood to womanhood. Sicherman calls Jo the “feisty tomboy heroine who publishes stories and…promoted self-discovery.” A key theme within children’s literature is discovery—discovery of the self, discovery of others, and discovery of the world around you. These themes exist in the American Girl literature as well. Towards the end of the book *Meet Samantha* (1904), Samantha’s live-in seamstress Jessie moves back to New Orleans to be with her family. Samantha misses her, so she and her friend, Nellie, plot to go find Jessie and ask her to come back to work for her family. When the girls arrive to Jessie’s house, Samantha realizes that Jessie lives in the “colored part of town.” Samantha learns that because Jessie is black, she has to live in far worse conditions than a wealthy white girl like Samantha ever knew existed. When she returns home and prepares for bed, Samantha appreciates the safe, warm environment she lives in compared to Jessie: “her nightgown had never felt so soft and warm. Her bed had never smelled so sweet or been so welcome.” Samantha’s awareness of the intersection of class and race is mild, but reveals that she is learning to understand what society is like outside the confines of her Grandmary’s mansion.

Elbert reiterates girls’ connection to storybook figures, arguing “Alcott’s works appeal to generations of female readers precisely because women always face an involuntary choice between domestic life and individual identity.” Children’s literature, especially literature geared towards women, reflects what girls see in themselves, as well as what they fear. This is due in part because literary classics geared towards girls were written by women who were once

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146 Sicherman: 15
147 Adler: 41
148 Adler 46:
149 Elbert: xvi
girls themselves. There is a girls’ club written into these narratives in which readers may identify the same hardships, successes, fantasies, and fondness as the characters in these stories.

*Little Women* is somewhat reflective of Alcott’s own childhood experiences.\(^{150}\) Therefore, women writers like Louisa May Alcott, Laura Ingalls Wilder and the female authors of American Girl books are the ones constructing literary traditions. They follow a set of rules that define what it means to be a girl and what is important for girls to read about. Sicherman identifies Hans Robert Jauss’ literary theory known as the “horizon of expectations” which “…not only preserves real experiences but also anticipates unrealized possibilities, widens the limited range of social behavior by new wishes, demands and goals, and thereby opens avenues for future experience.”\(^{151}\) Readers of American Girl texts may see parts of themselves in the characters in the stories. If a young girl is moving to a new school or town, she may identify with Kirsten’s (1854) nervousness as she immigrates to the United States. A girl who read’s Molly’s (1944) story may feel better about the fact that she also cannot have a beautiful new dress or Halloween costume due to her family’s economic depression. At the same time, these books teach girls how to overcome these hardships, rather than dwelling on their disappointment or fears.

*Little Women* is somewhat reflective of Alcott’s own childhood experiences.\(^{152}\) Therefore, women writers like Louisa May Alcott, Laura Ingalls Wilder and the female authors of American Girl books are the ones constructing literary traditions. They follow a set of rules that define what it means to be a girl and what is important for girls to read about. There is a social engagement that occurs between the reader and the characters in the story. In reading

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151 Sicherman: 16
152 Elbert.
different narratives, readers have the opportunity to remember an event or encounter they once
had or imagine a new experience altogether. When a reader notices something unique about a
character in a story or sees a mirror image of herself in these characters and their experiences,
she includes herself in a large social circle of girls like her, whether real or imagined.\textsuperscript{153}

Authors are bestowed with a certain responsibility to share an honest and warm chronicle
of their own childhood when creating a narrative for other young children. John Miller, a scholar
of children’s literature, contests that “[a] primary function of children’s literature is to instruct its
young readers in correct behavior and to reproduce the culture by passing down the wisdom of
the elders.”\textsuperscript{154} The presumption that children’s literature is designed to instruct children of
gendered social norms and expectations gives both the author and the reader certain
responsibilities. The author, to a certain extent, will be expected to share her own experience of
growing up as a young girl in a certain time. It is equally expected that the reader of this story
will pay attention to and embrace this personal and ultimately engaging tale.

Young girls want to know that they are not alone in dealing with bullies, pressure to
succeed in school, financial and structural challenges within their family, or feeling like they
aren’t well-dressed or pretty enough. Through the storybooks, girls can connect with the
American Girl dolls because they discover shared experiences and learn that they are not alone.
Sicherman contests that “[b]y immersing themselves in the alternative worlds opened by books,
young women came to recognize previously hidden thoughts and feelings, a necessary stage
before acting on them.”\textsuperscript{155} Sicherman elaborates that books lend themselves to a certain “social
experience” that is two-fold; on one hand, the act of reading the book can be a social one.

\textsuperscript{153} Elbert: xvi
\textsuperscript{154} Miller, John E. \textit{Lauren Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture}. University
\textsuperscript{155} Sicherman: 3
Guardians who read with their children, classroom teachers who read to their students, or children who sit in reading groups with their peers in class are all forms of social engagement. Based on Sicherman’s argument, there is also a personal relationship between a reader and the characters in the books. Today, adults and scholars study the impact of literature on girls’ understanding of their own self-worth, social and moral consciousness.\textsuperscript{156}

Elbert writes that “women’s fiction in the nineteenth century has been characterized as following a formula in which the heroine, often orphaned, progresses through a series of lonely ordeals that prove her inherent worth and her ability to survive independently.”\textsuperscript{157} In a feminist reading, there is a construct in which society is expected to admire hardworking and successful men but yet cannot appreciate women who may achieve the same hard work and success. Readers commend the women in these texts not for their success, but for everything that they had to overcome and (continue to suffer): racial and ethnic oppression, slavery, financial distress, adoption, immigration, displacement in one’s home or community, peer pressure, intimidation from peers, learning a new language or family instability.

\textbf{Books as Consumption}

Author Francis Spufford reflects on what elements of, and experiences with, children’s literature resonate with him decades after he has outgrown the label of “young reader”:

What follows is more about books than it is about me, but nonetheless it is my inward autobiography, for the words we take into ourselves help to shape us. They help form the questions we think are worth asking; they shift around the boundaries of the sayable inside us and the related borders of what’s acceptable; their potent images, calling on more in us than the responses we will ourselves to have, dart new bridges into being between our conscious and unconscious minds, between

\textsuperscript{156} Forman-Brunell: 551  
\textsuperscript{157} Elbert: 197
what we know we know, and the knowledge we cannot examine by thinking. They build and stretch and build again the chambers of our imagination.\textsuperscript{158}

Spufford’s powerful passage highlights what exactly it is about books that resonates with children. He notes that when a child reads, something is triggered in the mind that both consciously and unconsciously provides an awareness both about oneself and the world around them. He believes there is power both in the words and images and that the connection a reader forms with a character is not solely due to a total admiration or desire to emulate a character entirely. There are also certain experiences and insecurities that fictional characters and children share. Children’s books are educational in a less pronounced way; their lessons are not blatant like the history included in American Girl’s like “A Peek into the Past” section. Rather, they craft each narrative in a way that allows readers to learn their connection to these dolls.

How are these books actually functioning for the girls reading them? My focus group provides some insight into their reception of these narratives:

KV: What do you remember from the books? Do you remember if your motivation to read them was because they went along with your doll or because you wanted to learn about a certain time period?

Brianna: I think I remember reading them with the dolls I had and then I started liking them so I kept reading. My mom had my read everyday and I found books I liked so I’d have to read those. And I think I’m trying to remember I definitely read books for dolls I didn’t have but I started with like the books I had. Like they come in the box I think so I had those and then went from there.

Kayla/Abby: Yeah I thought they were realistic.

KV: Do you remember if you liked the book for the history lesson or the connection with the doll or like you were getting to know her better through the book…or both? Or did you totally disassociate the doll from her story? Do you think they taught you anything about what it meant to be a girl like in the general sense of being an American girl or just a girl at that time and do you remember picking up on any certain characteristics or traits?

\textsuperscript{158} Spufford: 21-22
**Caroline:** I think all the girls are pretty strong and brave you know they always survive a difficult time period in their own different ways and I think that’s what I grasped the most. I didn’t understand the great depression at 9 years old or even slavery. I mean knew what it was but I wasn’t totally getting the whole idea of it but just seeing how those girls handled those specific situations was what I took away the most just learning to be like an independent sort of young girl.

**Kayla:** And Barbies had books too but it was just about shopping with Teresa and following Ken around.

This conversation reveals that readers picked up on the difficult lives many of these characters experienced. As Cami notes, she didn’t necessarily make sense of the specific factors of slavery or the Great Depression but she did recognize that these girls had something to overcome and observed what efforts they made to prevail. Kayla equated these storybooks with reading a history encyclopedia, which is an unlikely comparison if asked about *Little Women* or *Anne of Green Gables*. Kayla noted that the books were not biased, perhaps in the way that some textbooks or even classroom teachers may present themselves. She also contests that Barbie advocated for a more blatant form of materialism and superficiality; even if these undertones existed in American Girl books, the readers did not verify this.

This focus group conversation also raises the point of how we construct stories and understand others’ stories through narratives. Elbert argues that “Alcott’s archetypal American Girl is a self-transforming heroine, and in all her guises—confidence woman, rebel slave, and restless tomboy—she has become part of many readers’ identities and their shaping of history.”

American Girl attempts to characterize their dolls in this way, but also complicates our understanding of connectivity. How are young girls growing up in the 21st century supposed to connect with dolls whose stories take place tens of decades earlier?

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159 Elbert: xv
The authors of these storybooks deemphasize the unique features of the 1850s or the 1930s and instead, accentuate certain characteristics—both positive traits and individual insecurities—that many girls share. Sicherman notes that children’s literature offers a moral and cultural training for young readers. Readers connect to the narratives and characters within children’s literature because of the mutual experiences and aspirations readers share with *Huck Finn, Peter Pan, or Alice in Wonderland*, even if it seems like an alienated setting. All of these stories maintain commonalities of family, friendship, innocence, freedom of mobility, and fantasy as central themes of the past, present, and future.

As Francis Spufford argues, “The book becomes part of the history of our self-understanding. The stories that mean most to us join the process by which we come to be securely our own.” Spufford argues that books are crucial for readers to feel secure in their own experiences while growing as they witness the hardships and successes of characters in their stories. Within American Girl stories, common tropes of vulnerability exist in each doll’s narrative.

Molly (1944) is vulnerable to loss within her family, as she must adjust to a shifting family structure since her father is off fighting in the war. Because of this, money within her family is tight and she cannot experience the same luxuries, like a Cinderella Halloween costume, that would make her feel beautiful like her wealthier, blonde classmates. Addy (1864) is vulnerable to discrimination and racism, even in a northern community like Philadelphia, given the Civil War era. Like Molly, Addy also suffers from a lack of money and compares her clothes to her wealthy, white peers. Addy, while successfully escaping slavery, still has to deal with the ramifications of leaving her family behind and struggling to keep up with her classmates.

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160 Sicherman: 17
in school. Kirsten (1854) is vulnerable to a new home in the United States and the anxieties and fears that come with being an immigrant. She experiences an entirely new set of American customs and values that she must adjust to. Samantha (1904) wants to prove to her Grandmary that she can be a lady, even when she climbs trees while wearing white tights. She ultimately proves to her Grandmary that acting like a lady is not based on physical appearances, but rather one’s moral fiber. There is not one American Girl doll that has it easy— yet consumers of these dolls still want to emulate them and admire them. These dolls manage to overcome great adversaries and find personal fulfillment.

The lessons engrained in American Girl texts allow girls to either connect their personal conflicts to a character they admire, or simply gain a broader view of what life is like when the grass is not necessarily greener. Books offer an escape—this escape may be a fun, adventurous one, an escape from bullies or family conflicts, or a chance to connect to a like-minded fictional character. Literature presents the realities of childhood while fulfilling the venturesome spirit of young readers. All of these stories highlight the importance of a supportive family in a child’s life and demonstrate that meaningful and guided relationships with one’s family can help alleviate societal pressures young children face. American Girl dolls, regardless of race or class—and even gender—experience similar hardships and overcome these barriers in similar ways.

Perhaps girls don’t feel the need to change the look or clothing of their doll because girls recognize their individual differences. At the same time, these dolls and their stories are united in what they strive to teach consumers—how to ignore bullies; find creative solutions when money is tight; be a good sister, daughter, and friend; recognize one’s own privilege and parallel ability

162 MacLeod, Anne Scott. American Childhood: Essays on Children’s Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. The University of Georgia Press, 1994, Athens.
to help others in need. Their message is timeless—even as the political and social landscape changed over the two centuries American Girl dolls cover, their history is not static. They contribute to consumers’ vision of the past, even if done so in an utopian narrative. Thus, the BeForever characters inspire girls to push boundaries, incite conversation, and push themselves outside of their comfort zones—all admirable qualities that can be achieved, regardless of if a girl is wearing a dress or a pair of knickers.
Epilogue

On August 25th, 2016, American Girl became a part of a contentious conversation happening regarding race in America. The release of Melody, the newest doll to be added to the BeForever collection, was a step towards the company’s much needed diversity. Melody’s story takes place in 1963 Detroit at the pinnacle of the Civil Rights movements. Historians of African-American history as well as Civil Rights activists were a part of a team dedicated to creating a historically accurate depiction of the 1960s for the company’s young consumers.\textsuperscript{163} The Advisory Board included:

the late Horace \textbf{Julian Bond}, chairman emeritus, NAACP Board of Directors and founding member of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); \textbf{Gloria House}, director and professor emerita, African and African American Studies, University of Michigan-Dearborn; \textbf{Juanita Moore}, President and CEO of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit and founding executive director of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis; \textbf{Rebecca de Schweinitz}, associate professor of history, Brigham Young University, Utah, and author of \textit{If We Could Change the World: Young People and America’s Long Struggle for Racial Equality}; \textbf{Thomas J. Sugrue}, professor of history at New York University and author of \textit{Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North}; and \textbf{JoAnn Watson}, native of Detroit, ordained minister, and former executive director of the Detroit NAACP.\textsuperscript{164}

The syntactical elements of Melody’s storybook are unique in that the story is told from the first person perspective of a young girl living in 2016. This narrator, who is learning how to play a song on the piano for an upcoming recital, struggles to connect to the music or find passion in what she is doing. She then gets transported to 1963, where she meets Melody, a girl who is passionate about music, and teaches the narrator how to show passion for the things she cares about. The narrator continues to think of Melody every time she is practicing her recital song so


that her passion will be present when she plays. The majority of plot in this book takes place in 1963—but also in the narrator’s mind. The narrator, who does not have a name, age, race, or ethnicity, time-travels and learns how similar she is to Melody, a girl living fifty years before her time (for example, both of their fathers are politicians and are often away from home). This construction decreases the possibility that a consumer will ignore a doll simply because of the color of her skin. American Girl’s attempt to prove that girls have universal emotional qualities and personal struggles is more successful when the reader can put herself in the place of the ambiguous narrator.

Many of the common tropes that appear in previous American Girl stories are present in Melody’s—the companionship two girls find in one another, the emotional power of standing up for what one believes in, the absent father, the sprinkle of marketing through descriptions of the clothing and accessories the characters wear in the books are also sold in the stores and online. However, this new narrative technique that collocates the past with the present force the reader to think about the similarities between the past and the present, while also learning about the past to galvanize the reader’s role in their own community and society. As Melody battles an unstable family structure and experiences racism from her classmates and local businesses, she also motivates herself and the narrator to get involved in their community and make a difference. Melody’s social activism is empathetic for readers; Melody spends part of her time protesting outside of a store where she and her brother experienced racial profiling and additionally, dedicates time to developing a community garden.

In addition to the first person narration rather than the typical third person narration American Girl has utilized in the past, at the end of each chapter, readers are given a choice as to how they want to see the story continue. In the beginning of the story, an introduction reads,
“You, the reader, get to decide what happens in the story. The choices you make will lead to
different journeys and new discoveries... Want to try another ending? Go back to a choice point
and find out what happens when you make different choices.” For example, Melody and the
debate whether or not to enter a soda shop they know does not serve black people. Melody’s
older sister, Yvonne, asks the girls “What do you think? Should we try to make a difference
here? Or would you rather keep walking?” Readers are then given a choice: “To keep walking,
turn to page 104” or “To go into the shop, turn to page 93.” Readers must decide not only
which story they want to read, but who they want Melody to be—a social activist and a risk-
taker, or someone that looks out for her and her friends’ safety.

This encourages readers to be actively engaged in the storytelling process. It also teaches
young readers the importance of thinking about the consequences to one’s actions, rather than
proceeding with the more appealing fun option. This narrative technique doesn’t necessarily
teach readers about the difference between right and wrong, but rather a good decision and a
better decision. Readers must confront how their decision making affects the story they read, and
reinforces the importance of deliberation before action.

Connectivity has always been a mission of the American Girl company. The company is
not only making history accessible to young consumers, but they illustrate the influence the past
has on the present. The small archival-like room of the American Girl Place retail store creates a
physical space that allows girls to watch 1950s TV with the simple push of a button or view the
teepee a Native American would have lived in. Young girls seem to have fascination with dolls
that resemble them both physically and mentally. Based on my interviews, not only did these
girls want dolls that looked like them, but they valued a doll that had a similar personality and

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165 Falligant and Patrick: Front Matter.
166 Falligant: 80
interests to them. A story like Melody’s, which allows the reader to immerse herself in the 1960s rather than passively reading and observing Melody’s movements through a third-person perspective, creates a more successful form of engagement. In my focus group, Caroline, a 19-year-old white girl from Massachusetts, added that despite not personally being invested in the American Girl storybooks, she still understood the historical message the company was trying to convey:

I just want to quickly add I didn’t read the books. I don’t know why. I just wasn’t interested in it. But I remember the history being a bigger deal in the store. There’s that whole display each girl had their own case. That’s huge—that has a whole set up and puts everything into perspective and you see a lot more than what’s in your house like the two items like it didn’t seem that historical but I remember in the store I spent the majority of my time in that room. And then there’s things to read about there so I spent the majority of my time there.

The immersive, museum-like space that American Girl creates allows customers to view these stories as timeless and historic, both in the tangible, factual history they provide and the ubiquitous moral lessons that are reinforced.

Just over four months later, the company made another huge advance towards increasing the diversity in the collection. The 2017 Girl of the Year is Gabriella, a black girl from Philadelphia. The Girl of the Year collection consists of a line of dolls that are supposed to represent modern girls’ interests—baking, traveling abroad, gymnastics—and are not focused on the past. The line was introduced in 2001 and Gabriella is the first black doll to appear in the collection. Given that the past two dolls released by the company have been black, and that in the past, the company has received criticism from consumers and scholars at the lack of diversity in the dolls available, this clearly implies that the company is attempting to progress in its cultural awareness and broadening what it means to be an American Girl.
I believe this progression towards more diversity is correlated with what was happening politically and socially at the time these dolls were released. American Girl noted that on average, it takes approximately two or three years to create a doll and see her story fully manifest. With this in mind, Melody, who was released in 2016 and Gabrielle, who was released in 2017, would have been conceived somewhere between 2012-2014. At this time, the Black Lives Matter movement was beginning to take traction, George Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder of Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. American Girl seems to be trying to appeal to a general outcry for giving a voice to racial and ethnic minority groups in America.

A spokesperson for American Girl acknowledges that "[t]he one thing we've heard loud and clear is a desire for more — specifically more characters and stories from today — with more experiences, more diversity, and more interests." The sudden spark of not only two black dolls, but a range of new, more diverse dolls in general—the first ever American Boy doll, Logan, Z. Yang, the new Korean-American doll, and Nanea Mitchell, a Native Hawaiian girl growing up during World War II proves that American Girl is not just listening to their consumers, but they are also trying to appeal to new audiences.

Based on my group interviews, girls seemed to find that the American Girl company did not intentionally create a lack of diversity to represent an American girl, but rather the consumers typically represented an upper class, white demographic. What is American Girl’s responsibility to its reader? Is it to provide accurate, historical stories? Is it to provide a representation of Americans of all different backgrounds? American Girl’s recent developments prove that they are trying give readers new ways to connect to the past. While these dolls’ (and their readers’)

individual stories may be unique, the relationships they have with family and friends, their achievements in school, and devoutness to their community are consistent in all of these narratives. While American Girl is not the leader of conversations happening about the intersection of race, class, and gender, their contributions may inspire girls to start their own dialogue.
Full List of American Girl BeForever Dolls

listed in order of the year they were released, with their historical period in parenthesis

- **1986**- Molly McIntire (1944)
- **1986**- Samantha Parkington (1904)
- **1986**- Kirsten Larson (1854)
- **1991**- Felicity Merriman (1774)
- **1993**- Addy Walker (1864)
- **1997**- Josefina Montoya (1824)
- **2000**- Kit Kittredge (1934)
- **2002**- Kaya'aton'my (1764)
- **2004**- Nellie O’Malley (1904)
- **2007**- Ivy Ling (1974)
- **2008**- Ruthie Smithens (1934)
- **2009**- Rebecca Rubin (1914)
- **2011**- Mary Grace Gardner & Cecilé Rey (1853)
- **2012**- Caroline Abbott (1812)
- **2015**- Maryellen Larkin (1954)
- **2016**- Melody Ellison (1963)
- **2017**- Nanea Mitchell (1940s)
Appendix

The chart below lists who the participants of my focus group were, and includes their pseudonym, class year, race, home state, and number of American Girl dolls owned. All of my focus group participants are Trinity College students.

The pie charts represent an online survey I conducted with 35 college women from across the country (not exclusive to Trinity College), in which I collected data regarding their personal background and experiences with American Girl dolls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Class Year</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
<th># of dolls owned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latina</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do you still own your dolls? (35 responses)

- Yes: 82.9%
- No: 17.1%

Did you read the books? (35 responses)

- Yes: 88.6%
- No: 11.4%

Did you ever visit an American Girl store? (35 responses)

- Yes: 85.7%
- No: 14.3%
Which region of the country do you live in? (35 responses)

- Northeast - CT, DC, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT
- Midwest - IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI
- Southeast - AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV
- Southwest - AZ, NM, OK, TX
- West - AK, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY
- International

94.3%

Did you own an American Girl doll? (35 responses)

- Yes
- No

94.3%

What is your gender? (35 responses)

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

100%
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