

# CONTENTS

1	<u>Introduction: Unpacking America's Doll</u>	1
2	<u>Branding the American Girl: The Making of Cultural Icons</u>	13
3	<u>Situating American Girl: Tools of Socialization in a Changing Culture</u>	35
4	<u>"Baby Doll, You Made the World a Little Bit Better by Speaking Out for What You Believe In": Narratives of Femininity and Political Action in the BeForever Collection</u>	71
5	<u>From "This Where Freedom Supposed to Be At" to "She Knew She Would Never Stop Speaking Out for What Was Right": Racial Logics and African American Identity in American Girl</u>	105
6	<u>"This Is My Home": Representing Race, Ethnicity, and the American Experience in American Girl</u>	137

## x CONTENTS

<b>7 Conclusion: Constructing American Girlhood</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>197</b>

## Introduction: Unpacking America's Doll

Addy and Samantha sit on my desk encouraging me to write. These two enthusiasts are not my daughters, not my friends, and not my pets; they are two American Girl dolls. Since 1986 when the American Girl Collection of dolls and books was launched, the company has produced eighteen-inch dolls with stories to accompany many of them. If Barbie is our nation's most popular doll, American Girl comes in second; as of February 1, 2017, its corporate website claimed that over twenty-nine million dolls have been sold in the last thirty years and their accompanying stories are on the shelves of nearly every school and community library. American Girl dolls—unlike Bratz and Barbies, who are young adults and promote a sexy version of femininity that highlights big breasts, miniscule waists, and curvy hips—are young girls with soft undeveloped bodies, buck teeth, and child-like facial features. Unlike Disney princesses and Barbie dolls, American Girls are not passively waiting for a prince to rescue them, nor for a Ken to ride with them up to their dream house.<sup>1</sup> Unlike princess fairy tales, American Girl stories do not encourage girls to tether themselves to a mirror; their narratives do not insist on what Rebecca C. Haines has called the “princess pretty mandate.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, American Girls are courageous, resilient girls who take risks and often use their voices to engage in everyday democracy. At \$115 per doll, American Girl is a toy for the elite, but the dolls' stories, which situate each of them in a particular historical time period, make the brand popular and accessible. Created by educator and entrepreneur

Pleasant Rowland, the brand had a feminist inspiration: to create stories about girls who took themselves and their participation in American life seriously.<sup>3</sup>

Like many media scholars, I approach this study with two lenses; I am both a fan and a scholarly critic.<sup>4</sup> As Henry Jenkins has argued, utilizing these dual lenses allows for the researcher to shift fluidly between two epistemologies: the knowing attained through theoretical analysis and the knowing attained through communities of fandom and user-engagement.<sup>5</sup> While I am not a member of the American Girl fan community, I cannot deny that I have loved reading the American Girl stories that line the bookshelf in my office, not only because they offer rich material for analysis, but also because they are often simple pleasure. Even when I doubt the complete veracity of their history, I enjoy their historical settings, with hairstyles and clothing to match. I find it difficult to resist cheering on these girls who fight against normative femininity and sexist views about girls' capabilities and value to society. These girls defy expectations and use their voices for change. Depending on the character, the change can range from personal independence to gender equality, workers' rights, or social and racial equality. Take Caroline Abbott, a white girl growing up on the shores of Lake Ontario during the War of 1812, who confides in her family that her fervent wish is to be a sailor. I feel Caroline's disappointment when her cousin, Lydia, remarks, "You can't be captain of a ship!" and shares her own dream of following the conventions of femininity: getting married, living in a big home, and raising six daughters. Alongside Caroline, I experience the disconnect she feels when Lydia cares more about protecting her skin than enjoying the warm sun on her face. I feel wounded when her father, a shipbuilder, also questions Caroline's nautical dreams, not only because she is young, but also because she is a girl. I cringe when a nosy neighbor suggests that Caroline ought to be at home learning how to cook and do needlework.

It is difficult for me, then, not to take pleasure in the fact that Caroline doesn't let these negative reactions stop her; she puts in the effort to learn about knot-tying, sailing, and ship building. I delight in Caroline's mother, who runs the family's finances and business and also leans on her daughter as an ally when Caroline's father is taken prisoner by the British with whom the United States is at war. I celebrate when Caroline is able to give her imprisoned father an embroidered map marking British loyalist strongholds so he can be safe should he find a way to escape. How brazen she is when, in the presence of the British soldier who guards her father,



Caroline performs a daring act: "Moving only her finger, she pointed straight at Papa. Then she touched the X and shook her head slightly. *Not—safe!* She mouthed the words silently."<sup>6</sup> Does it feel silly to read about a nine-year-old taking a dangerous voyage to an enemy fort and secretly giving her father an escape route? Absolutely! Yet Caroline's story, along with those of her fellow BeForever historical characters is not about a passive, weak girl, or a girl whose focus is on boys and cosmetics, nor is her story about a young woman following her dreams or owning her sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Instead, these tales are about young girls whose minds and bodies are robust, active, creative, and ripe with agency. They may be dreaming about a future but they are living in the moment of girlhood.

Consider the newest BeForever story about Melody Ellison, an African American girl growing up in Detroit at the height of the Civil Rights movement. Unlike Caroline, whose story takes place 150 years earlier, Melody's whole family supports her desire to question social norms and expectations. This support helps Melody not only use her voice in the service of her family's well-being but also in the service of social change. Author Denise Lewis Patrick weaves the experience of racism and being the object of others' fear and hate into a story about love, music, family, community, protest, and social justice. After I finished reading Melody's story, I sat with my nine-year-old daughter and read it again because I wanted to share it with her, and then I passed the book along to my eleven-year-old son. I wanted them to feel as angry and sad as I did when Melody's sister is denied a job at a bank because she is black and to witness Melody and her brother being followed around a department store and then accused of stealing. I wanted them to feel the frustration, along with Melody's cousin, as her family continues to be rejected by one racist landlord after another in the neighborhoods in which they seek to live. The shameful histories of segregation and racism are not news, but there is something magical about Melody, who does not just give readers an age appropriate and intimate narrative about the need for fair housing laws, racism, and inequality, but who also feels real fear and fights for real change. Melody feels immense pain and terror when she learns about the four young girls who were killed when a bomb exploded in their Birmingham church. She has to overcome her fear of going back to her own church, which has always been a place of safety and communion. With the support of her family and community, she does conquer her fear and turns it into action. With her neighbors, she creates a protest against the local department store that mistreats black customers; with her friends, she organizes

a playground revitalization committee because the city is not maintaining the public space in her moderate-income community of color; and with her voice, she sings songs of racial equality. Along the way she learns lessons about political struggle, community organizing, and leadership. One of the thrills of Melody's story is that it is not just about a heroic girl who saves the day; it is about the process of learning how to be a leader. Melody learns from her elderly neighbor that, "You are never too young or too old to stand for justice."<sup>8</sup> And, when Melody questions her leadership of the Junior Block Club she has formed, she learns from her father that, "A good leader helps everyone see that they're part of a special team. Leading takes patience, just like gardening...You're a wonderful gardener. You know how to make things take root and grow. As your club works together, it will become stronger."<sup>9</sup> Like many of the American Girl stories, Melody's creates a picture of American identity that involves thinking critically about the status quo and participating to make change.

Most of the mothers I spoke with in my research share my pleasure in giving their children stories of girls who, as one mother describes them, "are willing to take a little bit of a risk for what is right," and "fight for causes that they believe in." With the aim of protecting their children, mostly daughters, against a culture that sexualizes them early, and in which tween television on Disney and Nickelodeon depicts characters who are filled with "attitude" and are "disrespectful to adults," the mothers I spoke with turn to American Girl for a media source that is not "over-sexed" and as one mother, Violet, explains, will communicate to their daughters that "You just have to be the best person that you can be...You tell the truth ... and you just always do what's right." Girls, too, recognize that the dolls are not just beautiful but that they also, as fourteen-year-old Ruby explains, tell stories about "the struggles that the girls went through in history, and the different aspects of people's cultures, and how they affect your gender." Many girls expressed an appreciation for the age representation of the dolls as girls, rather than young women, because they remind them of themselves and their friends and because their imaginative play can revolve around more child-like activities like horseback riding, playing in the woods, and going clothes shopping. A few of the older girls also shared that the collection fed their interest in history, bolstered their grades in social studies classes, and left them feeling "really cool [when they began to study these time periods in school] because I knew all this stuff that no one else knew."

Although I have encountered these narratives with the curiosity of a fan and the concern of a parent, I first began to explore the whole American Girl brand, and continue to do so, through the lens of feminist media analysis. From this perspective, my critical analysis extends beyond the books to the entire American Girl mediascape of dolls, accessories, and retail experiences. So, too, does my analysis extend to the brand's conflicting and contradictory textual and material narratives about femininity, race, ethnicity, immigration, and what it means to be an American.

Nearly every time I tell people about the research I am doing on American Girl, they ask for a quick binary appraisal; "Should I buy these dolls for my daughter or not? Should I keep her away from the stories as long as possible?" But, of course, there is no simple answer. This is a massive brand, with over five doll product lines, as well as a magazine, and a library of advice books, started by Pleasant Rowland, but now owned by the Mattel corporation. Even within the brand's core collection of historical dolls, which is the focus of this book, there are fourteen characters, in thirteen time periods, that span over 200 years, and with books that are written by nine different authors. In addition, the ideological constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, and nation within these collections are multidimensional. The textual narratives frequently present girls as countering the prescriptive femininity of the times in which they live and ascribe a high value to the political work in which many of the girl protagonists engage. However, the accessories product lines emphasize hair care, fashion, bedroom furniture, and food play, all of which echo traditionally normative feminine playthings. Further, representations of race and ethnicity are multifaceted and inconsistent; with dolls of color and stories about Native American, Latina, African American, and Jewish American protagonists, girl consumers are asked to value the cultural diversity of American society and celebrate differences, but only sometimes asked to consider the institutionalized discrimination with which they live.

Throughout this book I explore the inherently paradoxical position of the American Girl brand as a form of commodity activism. Like other manifestations of girl power media culture, American Girl is a collection of material goods produced and purchased within a capitalist system but also a material form of resistance to historical power dynamics. Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee argue that scholars must historically situate commodity activism and seek to understand the muddiness of production and consumption practices in an era of activist consumption. They suggest that scholars steer clear of an either/or analysis in which



commodity activism can be understood either as “corporate appropriations, elaborate exercises in hypocrisy and artifice intended to fool the consumer, [and] sophisticated strategies aimed at securing even larger profits” or, on the other hand, as examples of the “nettled promise of innovative creative forms, cultural interventions that bear critically ... on modes of dominance and resistance within changing social and political landscapes.”<sup>10</sup> Through this dualistic lens, American Girl would either serve as an example of the market cooptation of feminism, watered down enough to appeal to the masses and leave little trace of oppositional or emancipatory promise, or contrarily, as a site through which feminist professionals bring to bear their resistive feminist messages to challenge the dominant paradigms of femininity in the toy industry. This book, however, seeks to recognize American Girl as a product both of a massive corporation whose messaging is organized around a capitalist imperative and also of critical feminist writers and product designers whose intentions are politically inspired. So, too, I understand American Girl consumption not only as jumping on the bandwagon of a trend to conspicuously consume a luxury doll, but also as a political act, through the consumption of an available, adorable, and palatable feminism. This consumption is driven in part by the parental goal of shaping a generation of resilient, self-directed girls who recognize the power of their voices (and not just their sexuality) as a critical part of their (American) identity. The act of consuming these contradictory texts is neither autonomously agentic nor representative of the full capitalist incorporation of individual subjects.

These stories and dolls are a part of our cultural discourse about girlhood; they create meaning for girl readers about what it means to be a girl and what it means to be American. I started studying the American Girl collection in 1995 as I was writing my Master's thesis. The company was less than ten years old and I was less than twenty-five years old. Since then, the company has been sold to one of the big toy conglomerates and has expanded in numerous directions. However, many of the same people who were there from the company's start, or at least its early days, are still on staff or writing its books. To unpack these definitions of American and girlhood created by the brand, this book uses three methods: (1) interviews with American Girl authors and industry executives; (2) textual analysis of the American Girl BeForever books, dolls, and accessories; and (3) interviews with girls and mothers about their experiences selecting, buying, reading, watching and playing with American Girl dolls, books, and movies. This multi-method analysis allows for a multifaceted understanding of the collection through