

# Critical Girls

## *Girl Power Revisited*

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### BOOK REVIEW

Hains, Rebecca C. 2012. *Growing Up with Girl Power: Girlhood on Screen and in Everyday Life*. New York: Peter Lang.

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For those of us who were girls at the height of the girl power era, the recent publication of several scholarly texts analyzing this cultural phenomenon is testament to the complex and often contradictory gendered messages of our formative years. Rebecca C. Hains's *Growing Up with Girl Power: Girlhood on Screen and in Everyday Life* joins recent books like *'Girl Power' Girls Reinventing Girlhood* by Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz (2009), and Emilie Zaslow's (2009) *Feminism, INC. Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*, in analyzing the cultural discourse of girl power using feminist ethnographic methods. Hains's detailed work contributes several innovative insights to this growing body of scholarship, particularly in regard to the complex ways in which young girls interpreted and negotiated the commercialized girl power messages found in the girl hero television shows of their youth. And while girl power's reign of cultural dominance, which began in the mid-1990s, may be waning today, Hains demonstrates the cultural significance that girl power discourses had in shaping girls' popular media culture and girls' interpretations of it.

A key strength of *Growing Up with Girl Power* is the careful and detailed ethnographic work that informs it. Hains spent over two years interviewing three groups of 8- to 11- year-old girls, supplementing her focus group research with individual interviews and keen observational insights. Drawing on Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh's (2008) "girl-method" (110), Hains privileges the voices of her research participants and models a reflexivity that many researchers into girls' studies lack. As a result, the spirit of her girl subjects is highlighted throughout the book and Hains avoids reductive and one-dimensional portraits of her participants. Her study is further aided by her commitment to girls' active participation in the research



project and she details the useful insights she gained by allowing girls some agency in the process, such as letting them pick some of the television shows they watched and allowing them to bring their Bratz dolls to the focus group. Consequently, the book serves as an accessible guide for anyone interested in ethnographic work with girls.

The book is organized thematically, covering a range of topics related to girl power, such as feminism, strength, identity, beauty, and race. While some of these discussions are unsurprising and have been thoroughly explored in previous research, such as the normative body ideals privileged in girl power images, Hains also offers plenty of provocative analyses that ask us to reconsider girl power in new ways. For example, in the third chapter, “Did the Spice Girls Kill Feminism? Young Feminists Speak” Hains interviews self-identified young feminists on their memories of growing up with the Spice Girls, the British pop group that popularized (though did not coin) the term “girl power,” as well as their recollections of girl power more broadly. Based on these interviews she argues that the Spice Girls cannot be analyzed as either a feminist or anti-feminist text, but instead advocates for understanding the pop group as offering a “pathway” to feminism (69). In doing so, Hains does not simplify the media reception practices of girls; she demonstrates how girls’ engagement with popular culture is often complex and sophisticated. Hains’s exploration of how racial discourses intersect with girl power is another provocative section of the book. In chapter nine, “Beyond Girl Heroes: Girl Power, Racism, and Power Relations,” Hains explores how a group of predominantly African American girls negotiate girl power cartoons, including the popular yet controversial *Bratz Dolls* (based on the dolls of the same name). While Hains reminds us that organizations like the American Psychological Association have criticized Bratz dolls for their sexualized appearance, her investigation again reveals the girls’ savvy play with the dolls as complex cultural and social negotiation. She describes how her research participants used Bratz dolls to enact a story about slavery and the Underground Railroad, arguing that, “because the dolls were racially diverse, the girls could ignore the problematic aspects of Bratz—their emphasis on appearance; their lack of interest in anything besides looking good—to grapple with America’s history of slavery” (256). Hains goes on to note: “Therefore, while the girls’ Bratz play could be problematic, Bratz simultaneously opened avenues for play that other toys did not” (258).

Thus, while scholars such as Christine Griffin (2004) have critiqued the way in which a privileging of whiteness dominates girl power representations,

Hains offers a new layer of insight that shows how girls themselves insert discussions of race into girl power play. However, Hains is explicit that this type of play does not negate the undercurrent of racism within girl power, and she outlines this problem throughout the book, revealing the key tension that is her primary focus: how do real girls' understandings and use of girl power culture simultaneously challenge and conform to hegemonic standards of gender, race, and class? While the diversity offered by Bratz dolls may offer some African American girls new opportunities to explore racial identities and inequality, other girl power texts that seemingly offer diversity, such as Scary Spice, the black member of Spice Girls, the pop group, may only reinforce harmful stereotypes. It is these types of contradictions that inform Hains's analysis throughout *Growing Up with Girl Power*.

Hains clearly sees some positive aspects of girl power culture, but she is careful to avoid being overly celebratory of the phenomenon. Indeed, she continually reminds us that while girls can and do subvert girl power messages, the discourse remains constraining to girls and offers limited acceptable identity positions for girls to embody. For example, Hains found that girls understand the one-dimensional identity types depicted by girl hero cartoons as limiting girls to the categories of "girly girl," and "tomboy," (149) and sometimes "diva" (158), encouraging girls to see themselves as narrow types rather than well-rounded, complex, and changing people. While resistance is possible within these identity types, Hains argues that they nonetheless often rely on and enforce normative femininity, while marginalizing girls who stray from this ideal.

As a feminist scholar, I am concerned with how we connect our scholarship to the actual lives of girls and women and how we can use our research to produce practical recommendations for social betterment. Thus, I was pleased by Hains's inclusion of a list of "lessons learned" (263) in her concluding chapter that clearly outline practical strategies for action based upon her research. She lists suggestions such as the importance of feminist parenting; the need for curriculum-driven pre-teen programming; the importance of taking on history; the usefulness of creative and quality interactions in children's media studies; and the importance of talking with girls as strategies to produce critical girl audiences, more progressive media, and more nuanced girl-centered scholarly research. These recommendations are very useful for thinking about the future direction of girls' media studies and demonstrate the important work that still needs to be done in the field.

*Growing Up with Girl Power* is a necessary read for those interested in girls' studies, feminist media studies, feminist ethnography, and childhood

studies. Most importantly, Hains's work is testament to the continual need for scholars to seek girls' perspectives about girls' media culture, rather than rely solely on adult interpretations and insight. And while Hains's research demonstrates that this ethnographic approach often produces insights that are contradictory, complex, and perhaps more difficult to neatly summarize, her results are much more provocative and ultimately useful for truly understanding the multifaceted ways that girls interpret, negotiate, accept, and subvert popular media texts and cultural discourses in their everyday lives.

## References

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