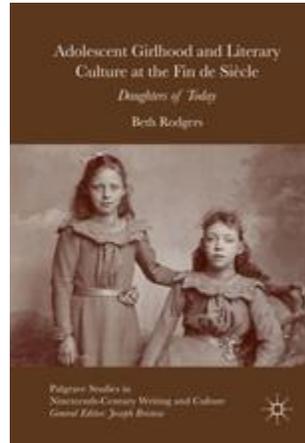


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**The *Fin-de-Siècle* Girl**

[\*Adolescent Girlhood and Literary Culture at the Fin de Siècle: Daughters of Today\*](#). Beth Rodgers. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 256 pp.

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<1>Building on Sally Mitchell's foundational *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England, 1880-1915* (1995)([1](#)) and more recent work by scholars including Sarah Bilston, Michelle Smith, Kristine Moruzi, and Hilary Marland,([2](#)) *Adolescent Girlhood and Literary Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (2016) by Beth Rodgers is a welcome addition to the vibrant field of scholarship on literary girlhood. Arguing that 'adolescent girlhood was a distinct cultural category in late nineteenth-century literary and print culture' (1), Rodgers examines the symbolic value of female adolescence and the ways in which it was 'an ambiguous and difficult concept within Victorian theorizations of gender, sexuality and culture' (1). Offering a fresh take on the subject by examining both readers and writers of adolescence as well as fictional 'girls' – a word, as Rodgers discusses, that has concatenations of meaning – the volume also offers perceptive cross-analysis of texts from a range of genres, including girls' magazines, girls' school stories, New Woman fiction, and commentaries upon journalism as a career for girls.

<2>Like several recent scholars, Rodgers rejects the common notions that adolescence is primarily a mid-twentieth-century concept and that as a concept it was inaugurated by G. Stanley Hall in *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (1904). Instead, she argues, 'the advent of adolescence as a recognizable life stage between childhood and adulthood can be explicitly connected to the social conditions of the late nineteenth century' (2). Such studies as have

discussed or acknowledged late-nineteenth-century adolescence have, as she points out, generally focused on male adolescence. Her book is therefore positioned as part of the rediscovery of *female* adolescence in the nineteenth century.

<3>The book's subtitle, *Daughters of Today*, indicates its focus on the modernity and topicality of adolescent girlhood within the 1880-1906 period Rodgers examines. As she writes: 'alongside frequent references to borderlands, thresholds and the generally elusive nature of girlhood in late Victorian material on girls and girlhood is a singular sense not only of the newness of girlhood as a category but also of its intrinsic connection to the contemporary moment' (5-6).

<4>Divided into chapters focusing on specific literary genres, the volume deliberately and usefully forges conjunctions between genres and texts not often considered together. In doing so, it identifies commonalities in the genres' take on adolescent girlhood including themes of community, *esprit de corps*, and adventure. Chapter Two, for example, explores girls' magazines of the 1880s and 1890s, particularly the *Girl's Own Paper* and *Girl's Realm* but also *Atalanta* (edited by L. T. Meade), positioning them as less conservative and less like conduct literature for girls than might be anticipated. Arguing that these new magazines had a 'central role in the construction of and dissemination of debates about girlhood' (25), Rodgers shows that they 'offered a highly significant platform for the "girls of today" to articulate their views and contribute to ongoing debates about their lives' (7). Rodgers demonstrates that the characteristics of modern girlhood evidenced in and promulgated by such magazines – community, heroism, resourcefulness, and creativity – were presented as 'universal across a range of social backgrounds' (35), geographical locations, and ages (not necessarily restricted to the teen years). In this way an 'idealized, inclusive [imagined] community of girl readers...[was] constructed' (37).

<5>One of the most intriguing elements in Rodgers's study is the discussion in Chapter Two of the correspondence pages and competitions for girls run by the girls' magazines. Examining real-life readers from diverse backgrounds, she shows how the magazines created 'textual communities' of girl readers through these measures, which were both commercially beneficial to the magazines and also 'established a platform from which readers could make their voices heard, in ways that sometimes markedly diverged from the editorial agenda of the magazine' (70).

<6>Similarly fascinating is the analysis of how magazines and books for girls recount the girlhood of aspirational heroines like Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale. Such heroines, Rodgers argues, operate euphemistically as 'metaphors whereby the transition from child to woman does not depend upon marriage or sexual maturation, but rather on girls' emulation of the values espoused by dutiful' heroines (36). Victoria's 'dramatic, overnight transition from girl to Queen,' which is repeatedly emphasised in girls' magazines, 'cannot help but suggest to readers the exciting potential of movement between roles that may be possible in their own lives' (53).

<7>Chapter Three examines girls' school stories 1886-1906 by prolific and popular authors L. T. Meade, Mrs George de Horne Vaizey [Jessie Bell/ Mrs Jessie Mansergh] and Raymond Jacberns [Georgina Mary Isabel Ash]. Rodgers makes a clear case for the importance of their work – particularly Meade's – in the history of the school story, and shows that, like the concept of adolescence itself, the girls' school story was not, as is often assumed, simply a twentieth-century phenomenon. *Fin-de-siècle* school stories, she shows, were significant to depictions and readerships of modern girls and also to the establishment of the school story form. Emphasising community, girls' school stories were also 'fuelled by, and in turn help to fuel, the sense that new ways of making transitions are key to the modernity of girlhood in the late nineteenth century' (82). The common narrative pattern of a new girl joining a school and integrating into the school community, Rodgers argues, gave readers 'an alternative mode of self-identification' (82) through which girlhood become "not an empty in-between stage waiting to be brought to an end by marriage' but 'a time to be celebrated on its own terms, defined by positive tropes such as community, friendship, resourcefulness and heroism' (82). In this way, girls' school stories helped 'to construct the idea (and ideal) of the modern girl of the period' (82).

<8>Chapters Four and Five turn from literature *for* girls to adult literature *about* girlhood, specifically considering the complex roles of girls in New Woman fiction. As Rodgers highlights, female adolescents not only appeared as characters in New Woman fiction, but also undoubtedly formed a significant proportion of its readership. Discussing connections between girl readers, fictional girlhood, and the New Woman, Chapter Four focuses on Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Surprisingly, given its controversial content including 'illegitimate pregnancy, transvestism, [and] atheism' (127), Schreiner's novel was, as Rodgers identifies, endorsed by girls' magazines and columns as suitable reading for girls. Positioning the novel's female protagonist Lyndall as perhaps 'the New Woman's seminal girl of the period' (128) and yet also a kind of "'anti-new girl'" (143), Rodgers argues that Lyndall 'helps to shape the fictional girls that follow her as well as the actual girls who read her' (128).

<9>Continuing discussion of the complex fictional girls of New Woman fiction, Chapter Five analyses Sarah Grand's depictions of "'the new girl's new girls'" (146) in *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), *The Beth Book* (1897), and *Babs the Impossible* (1901). Like Schreiner, Grand was a popular author among girl readers, and, as Rodgers shows, her representations of girlhood are integrally related to 'the political potency and feminist bravado of her novels' (144). Grand presents girls whose 'energy, articulacy and performance' are depicted positively, enabling them 'to be socially transgressive and pioneering' (156).

<10>Chapter Six examines girls, both real and fictional, as writers, by exploring ways in which the 'girl journalist' and journalism as a female career were presented in the period's fiction and nonfiction. Journalism was at once 'a modern job for the modern girl' (210) and a continuation of an older female literary tradition. As Rodgers discusses, Ella Hepworth Dixon's novel *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) reveals the dark side of life as a female journalist while correspondence and advice columns in girls' magazines and articles by contemporary journalists including W. T. Stead offered advice to girls who aspired to journalistic careers. Rodgers's interesting discussion of Stead argues that his 'role in establishing journalism as a

legitimate profession for girls' meant that he had a 'pivotal role in the construction of the "daughters of today" and their accompanying representation across the wider literary marketplace' (197). As she shows, too, girls were often inspired towards journalism by the example of the editors and journalists who produced magazines they read.

<11>A coda to the volume usefully considers ways in which girlhood was constructed in the early twentieth century, particularly by Virginia Woolf who, as Rodgers highlights, was herself an adolescent in the 1890s.

<12>The book has its origins in Rodgers's PhD dissertation, and there are slight traces of dissertational 'belt and braces' in such aspects as defining terms or parameters and there are a few minor slips in the endnotes but these are comparatively insignificant quibbles. Overall – and in its constituent chapters – *Adolescent Girlhood* is a well-researched, lucidly-written volume which offers some very neat, valuable, and cross-genre insights into the complexities of *fin-de-siècle* literary and cultural girlhood.

#### Endnotes

(1) Sally Mitchell. *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England 1880-1915* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1995).<sup>(^)</sup>

(2) Sarah Bilston. *The Awkward Age in Women's Popular Fiction, 1850-1900*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.

Michelle Smith. *Empire in British Girls' Literature and Culture: Imperial Girls*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Kristine Moruzi. *Constructing Girlhood in the Periodical Press, 1850-1915*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.

Hilary Marland. *Health and Girlhood in Britain, 1874-1920*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.<sup>(^)</sup>