

Book Review: Girl Trouble: Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women by Carol Dyhouse

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As author **Carol Dyhouse** covers in her book, ***Girl Trouble: Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women***, despite massive advancements in education, work opportunities, political rights, and personal and reproductive freedoms, moral hysteria has accompanied popular rhetoric regarding the place of young women in society since the Victorian era. Can we afford to be optimistic about the impact of modernity on girls? **Katherine Williams** recommends this insightful, and often witty, read to anyone interested in gender studies, or social histories.

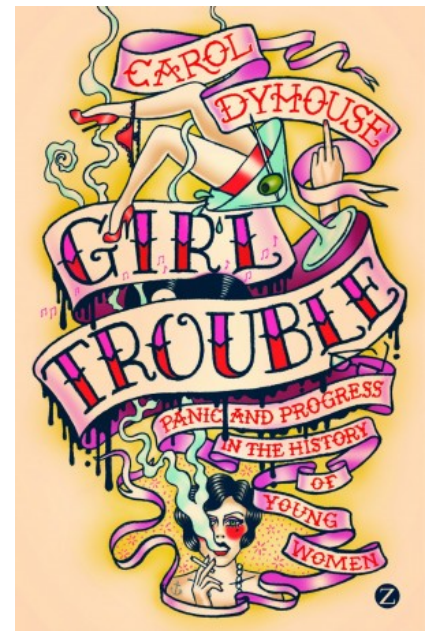
Girl Trouble: Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women. Carol Dyhouse. Zed Books. 2013.

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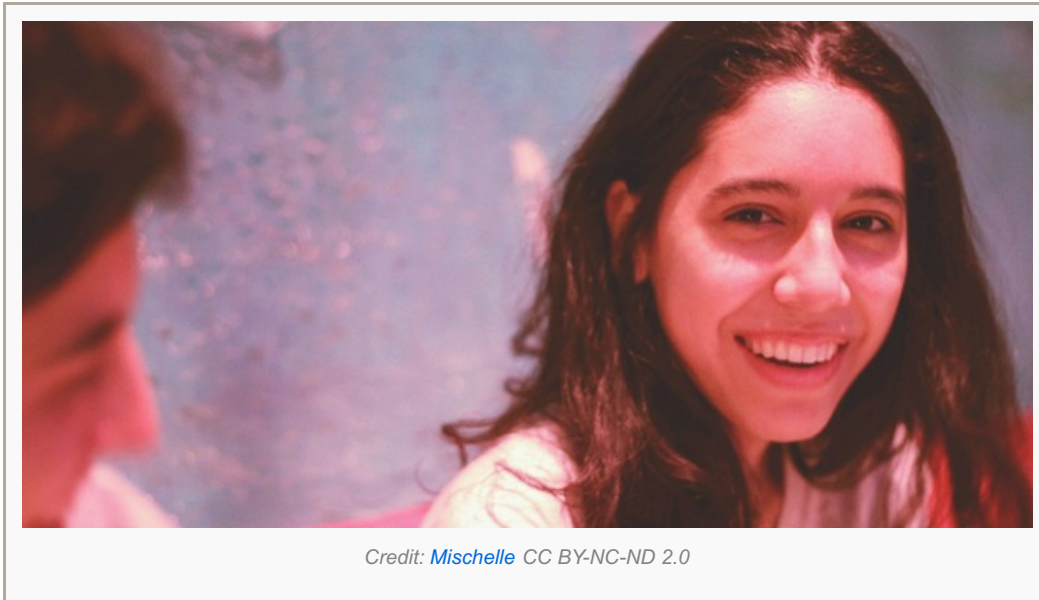
Girl Trouble tells the story of the challenges and opportunities faced by girls growing up amidst the ever-changing social landscape of the twentieth century, and the moral panic that often accompanies their progress to this day. From the Victorian era obsession with innocence and chastity, the plight of the suffragettes, the impact of a growing political consciousness amongst women before WW1 and beyond, to good-time girls, flappers, beat girls, and women's liberation and second wave feminism, no stone is left unturned in [Carol Dyhouse's](#) study of the evolution of young women.

The book's introduction raises an important question: despite girls in the UK having more control over their lives, bodies and sexuality, are they taking their liberties for granted? Girls may have more freedom when it comes to education, employment and the management of their own finances, but they still face the age-old 'double-standards' of sexual morality. Women expressing their sexuality as freely as their male counterparts is still very much taboo, it seems. A disproportionate number of girls suffer more from bullying and sexual violence than boys, and face an ostensibly more insidious threat; a crushing social pressure to be perfect in every way (p. 1). Sexualisation of young girls by mass media outlets is perceived as a real threat to the health and well-being of young people. Girls, it seems, are damned if they do, and damned if they don't. Dyhouse refers to the literature on how the language of 'empowerment' used in an attempt to mobilise young women today is something of a double-edged sword; liberal discourse that promotes 'girl power' and 'choice' is merely a smoke-screen by which deep-seated inequalities and oppressions can be obscured (p. 3).

Chapter 2, 'Unwomanly Types: New Women, Revolting Daughters and Rebel Girls' charts the move from domesticity to education as a means of personal advancement for women. Feminist commentators of the time, such as Alys Pearsall Smith (first wife of philosopher Bertrand Russell), believed that young women were frittering away their lives on trivialities (such as asinine activities like embroidery and flower-pressing) when they could be doing something useful with their lives (p. 43). The Education Act of 1870 ensured that girls from all walks of life received some degree of basic education. Naturally, the education of women was not without its opponents. By the 1890s, a question was raised, did education in fact make women 'unladylike'? (p. 51). A litany of pseudo-science followed, with (male) academics on both sides of the Atlantic alleging that it wasn't 'feminine' to be clever or ambitious. Such ambitions might 'enfeeble' women, and render them unattractive to men; it could lead to all manner of medical ailments (including hysteria, that troublesome woman's condition), and could cause their brains to rot, and leave



them sterile, thus making them absolute failures as women in the eyes of society (p. 54). Lest we forget that such mawkish and inaccurate views were expounded by a respected establishment; in particular, claims that a woman's reproductive organs may atrophy if they insisted on studying were made by none other than the head of the British Medical Association at the time, and esteemed members of the British Gynaecological Society (p. 55). Such claims may seem unbelievable, and a little ridiculous, to girls today, but such views were pervasive well into the 1900's, dogging every step of women's self-advancement, Chapter 2, therefore, grants the reader a valuable insight into the struggle women faced in their fight for education, and universal suffrage; achievements that today's girls may indeed take for granted in their own particular quest for self-discovery.



Chapter 7, 'Body Anxieties, Depressives, Ladettes, and Living Dolls: What Happened to Girl Power?' tells a depressingly familiar story. We have education, employment, the right to political agency, personal and reproductive freedoms unparalleled in the Western world (though often under attack by conservative forces), but do we have the body to mirror our successful transition through the peaks and troughs of the twentieth century? Whilst the achievements that 'New Women' fought for at the turn of the century, as described in Chapter 2, have positively impacted on the lives of girls today to an immeasurable extent, modern girls are arguably fighting a different kind of battle; a battle against their own bodies. Whilst girls may still be consistently out-performing boys in educational league tables, writers such as Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, argue that despite legal and material gains, girls' lives are being ruined by the pressure to conform to idealised standards of beauty (p. 212). Dyhouse contends that despite claims from various US academics that girls in today's society are victims of a 'girl-poisoning' culture (p. 213), it remains hard to detangle the threads of contemporary anxieties (eating disorders, unhappiness, and depression); it is no easy task to separate the hard evidence of the effect of sexualisation on girls from social panic reminiscent of the Victorian era (p. 214). Is society once again trying to protect young women from themselves? Authors, such as Natasha Walter (*Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*) contend that part of the problem, regarding the sexualisation of girls, and their own 'complicity' in raunch culture that offers a false vision of success, stems from the inherent *lack* of choice (p. 232). It seems that young women perceive fewer routes open to them as having the potential for them to progress in life, which may explain the mainstreaming of activities such as lap-dancing, stripping, and glamour modelling as viable career options for young women. Though, as Dyhouse warns, in regards to glamour modelling and the like, judgements of class and taste tend to intrude on seemingly objective discussions regarding this topic (p. 231), thus tangling the threads of contemporary dilemmas faced by girls even further.

For readers today, it may seem unbelievable that some of the opinions observed in *Girl Trouble* regarding girls and their place in society actually gained any popular support. From the view of art critic and social historian John Ruskin that young girls were akin to delicate saplings that needed to be protected from harsh frosts (p. 241), to modern denouncements of girls as booze-chugging slappers obsessed with celebrity culture and fad diets, the progress of

young women has been fraught with many obstacles, not least from a media determined not to let girls get too far above their station.

Girl Trouble, therefore, offers a perfect kickback to the saccharine (and oftentimes, vitriolic) mythologizing of the motivations of girls throughout the twentieth century. Carol Dyhouse offers the reader a compelling, off-beat, and often witty social history that unpacks the issues that faced girls in their respective time periods, and analyses how far modern British society has really come in its acceptance of women as autonomous, ambitious, successful, clever and progressive human beings.

Katherine Williams graduated from Swansea University in 2011 with a BA in German and Politics, and is currently studying for a MA in International Security and Development. Her academic interests include the de/construction of gender in IR, conflict-driven sexual violence, and memory and reconciliation politics. You can follow her on Twitter [@polygluttony](#). [Read more reviews by Katherine](#).

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