

BOOK review: American girls. Social media and the secret lives of teenagers

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*Wendy Grossman reviews American girls, by Nancy Jo Sales, published in 2016 by Alfred A. Knopf. The book asks what is social media culture? And, what it is doing to young girls? Taking a critical stance, Wendy raises concern about the research's methodology and mode of storytelling. Wendy writes about the border wars between cyberspace and real life. She is the 2013 winner of the **Enigma Award** and she has **released** a number of books, articles, and music. [Header image credit: Runs with Scissors CC BY-NC-ND 2.0]*

'Send noodz.' I try to imagine the reaction of my 13-year-old self receiving such a message (on a postcard? relayed by my mother via the family blackboard?). I think I'd have been baffled and dismissive. Would I have had the wit to reply with something like **this**? We'll never know....

Sometime around 2014, Nancy Jo Sales reports in *American girls: Social media and the secret lives of teenagers*, this is the message that confronts 13-year-old Sophia on her way home from school when she checks Instagram on her phone. She consults with her friends. How to respond with a sufficient quantity of 'chill'? Getting huffy or embarrassed invites mockery; sending a personal nude photo risks redistribution (and possibly **prosecution for child pornography**).

In 2013, **37% of US teens had smartphones**; and by the end of 2016 it was **predicted to be at 75%**. In the UK in 2015, **for 16- to 24-year-olds it was 90%**. The heaviest users of social media are teenage girls. So, Sales, a *Vanity Fair* writer, set out to ask in *American girls*, what is social media culture, what is it doing to teen girls, and what is the impact on them of the male-dominated Silicon Valley culture that produces it? If you are a parent or teacher hoping the answers will provide useful advice in guiding teens through adolescence with challenges you never faced, this book will not help you. You would gain greater understanding by asking your secretive teen to walk you through an average phone day, not unlike **Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green's research project**.



Reading this book is a slog; it proves the mathematical principle that 'The plural of anecdote is not data'. It's not just the length – 400 pages compares favourably with the US tax code – it's the endless maze of names and places and repetitive stories. For this book, Sales interviewed more than 200 teens in 10 states. She joined their favourite services, watched what they posted, followed their interactions. She friended them on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Yik-Yak, Snapchat found the 19-year-old cohort's porn sites... Reading it all required me to spend far more time immersed in teenspeak than I ever did when I actually *was* a teen. Unfortunately, by the end, Amanda-Berlany-Freitas-Kelsey blur into one long ramble of kids both obsessed with and dubious about their social media use, punctuated by 'and now for a summary of my background research reading' digressions. A day later, only two girls in the book remain in my mind.

One is the homeless teen in Tucson, Arizona, cited in every review, who's lost all connection to electronic life. The other is Janie, who was cyberbullied when she came out as a lesbian. Fortunately, Sales has included all the girls by first name in an extensive index you can use to refresh your memory, which proved to be essential when she casually refers on page 237 to a throwaway incident mentioned once on page 41.

There are so many questions you wish Sales had tackled. What do the boys these girls share schools with think they're doing with their 'noodz' requests and dick pics? Are these really the only boys these girls know? How did Sales' groups of girls become friends? How do they make decisions about whom to trust? Are there positives to their social media use?

The book's division into chapters for each age group from 13 to 19 doesn't offer many conclusions about how usage changes as the girls get older or more experienced with social media, a distinction Sales ignores, although we see one 19-year-old rely for guidance on her 13-year-old sister. The book desperately needs a demographic breakdown of her interviewees: first names, locations, brief descriptions and ages are no substitute for a simple statistical survey to show whether the overall impression – of predominantly relatively wealthy kids – is correct. Nor do we know how Sales chose her subjects; one group she finds chatting at the mall, for example. However, she stresses that she has both the kids and their parents' permission to quote them. This book is not research like danah boyd's or Sherry Turkle's *Reclaiming conversation*, although it shares the latter's concern about the loss of in-person intimacy.

As for the Silicon Valley effect, no conclusion is possible until we have alternatives designed by others elsewhere. We do know that such services are deliberately designed to be seductive and to keep people coming back for more hits, an aspect Sales ignores.

The book's really big omission is the question about what the rest of the girls' lives are like. Context matters. You couldn't help feeling that the *Washington Post's* Jessica Contrera had missed the point, for example, when studying the obsessive phone usage of 13-year-old Katherine. The girl is a straight-A student, is taking honours algebra online through Johns Hopkins University, is starring in the school production of *The Lion King*, plays on the basketball team, and her mother passed away less than a year ago. She got her first cellphone at 10 because her mother's illness meant social media was her only option for socialising. Give the kid a break!

In the *New York Times*, Anna North calls *American girls* a 'girls in crisis' book – a category in which she includes Mary Pipher's 1996 *Reviving Ophelia* and the supposed 1971 diary of a drug-addicted teenager *Go ask Alice*, widely attributed to its middle-aged purported editor, Beatrice Sparks, as well as Joan Ryan's 2000 expose, *Little girls in pretty boxes*. (A little unfair; Ryan's book highlighted genuine problems in the specific contexts of gymnastics and figure skating; both sports soon afterwards adopted the age restrictions and other changes she called for.) Girls, as North says, are always in some crisis or other; this book reads as though Sales looked for and therefore found one guaranteed to poke moral panic buttons. Teenagers! Sex! On their phones!

Of course today's teens face genuine risks. But in the absence of the greater context, it's hard to draw any useful conclusions from Sales' stories other than – be careful out there!



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