

# CAROL DYHOUSE



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**GIRL  
TROUBLE**

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# **GIRL TROUBLE**

PANIC AND PROGRESS IN THE HISTORY  
OF YOUNG WOMEN

*Carol Dyhouse*



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### **About the author**

Carol Dyhouse is a social historian and currently a research professor of history at the University of Sussex. Her most recent book, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism*, was published by Zed Books in 2010. Longer-term, her research has focused on gender, education and the pattern of women's lives in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. Her books include *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*; *Feminism and the Family in England, 1890–1939*; *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities, 1870–1939*; and *Students: A Gendered History*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Are girls better off today than they were at the beginning of the twentieth century? Conditions vary widely across the globe. In parts of the world girls suffer disproportionately from poverty, lack of education, and appalling levels of sexual violence. But there can be no doubt that in some countries, at least, they have more opportunities, more choices and infinitely more personal freedom than ever before. Does this mean that we can afford to be optimistic about the impact of modernity on girls? Have young women emerged as winners rather than losers in modern history?

These are large questions and beg larger ones. This book is more modest in its remit and focuses primarily on Britain, although it is informed by writing and ideas about girlhood from North America, Australia and Europe. Many of the issues and themes which are dealt with will be familiar to readers outside these regions: controversy about whether girls should be seen as the victims or beneficiaries of 'progress' have had a very wide currency.

In what ways are girls better off in Britain now than they were in Victorian times? Whereas in the past girls were schooled for home duties and pushed into domestic service, they are now educated along much the same lines as boys. And they do extremely well in education, at both school and university levels. As far as work opportunities go, young women have many more options than their mothers had, and certainly vastly more choice than their grandmothers. Many liberties are taken for granted:

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political rights, the freedom to move about the city, to drive cars, to operate bank accounts, to enter into contracts, to take out loans and to manage financial affairs. All this would have been unimaginable in the 1890s, and even in the 1950s and 1960s bank managers (then all male) routinely refused to grant young unmarried women the mortgages that would have allowed them to own their own homes. Up until the 1970s, opportunities for sexual self-expression were limited. Girls were generally assumed to be in pursuit of husbands. They were expected to remain chaste before marriage, and anything else – especially unmarried pregnancy – brought social shame and a prospect of doom. Today, most girls in Britain have much more control over their bodies and their sexuality.

This is not, by any means, to assert that everything in the garden is rosy. Young women today face many problems. Some of these are new, and some are depressingly familiar. There are still ‘double standards’ of sexual morality, for instance. Boys have more licence, and they get away with much more. Young women suffer more than men do from bullying, and from sexual violence. And girls are too often expected to be perfect in every way: at school, in work and behaviour, and in the way they look. Subjected to such pressures, they can turn their anger and a sense of powerlessness, or lack of control inwards, resulting in eating disorders and depression.

A great deal of contemporary writing on girlhood has been gloomy in tone. Young women are represented as the victims of all manner of social trends: of capitalism, of consumerism, of body obsessions, of ‘sexualisation’ and pornography. Girls themselves come under attack for behaving badly: as alcohol-swigging ‘ladettes’ or as narcissistic ‘living dolls’. They may be represented as defenceless innocents or as brainless Barbie-doll

impersonators, floating in a fluffy cloud of self-obsession, sparkly pink, and fake tan. Several academic writers have argued that the language of 'girl power', 'empowerment' and 'choice', often used in accounts of the recent history of girls, has served as a smokescreen, obscuring deep-seated inequalities and oppression. Scholars such as Angela McRobbie, Jessica Ringrose, Anita Harris and Marnina Gonick, for instance, have suggested that a liberal discourse of 'freedom' and 'opportunity' can disguise the fact that realistically, there are far too many girls in even the developed world who enjoy very little of either.<sup>1</sup> There is undoubtedly some truth in this, and the economic uncertainties and widening social divisions of the twenty-first century so far give little cause for complacency. The improvements in young women's lives which became noticeable in Britain, particularly after the 1970s, can never be taken for granted: it isn't difficult to find evidence of the 'backlash' which led so many observers to speak of 'post-feminism'.

This book brings together work I have done throughout a longish academic career. This began in the 1970s, when I first became interested in the ways in which, historically, female education functioned as a battlefield for different constituencies, all convinced that they knew what was best for girls. In Britain, Victorian feminists objected to an education designed to groom girls for the marriage market. Their opponents held that too much intellectualism unsexed young women: at best, it turned them into desiccated spinster types; sometimes, it was claimed, it literally shrivelled up their breasts and ovaries, rendering these women infertile.

If social anxieties surfaced around women's struggle for a decent education in the late nineteenth century, in Britain these anxieties paled in comparison with the agitation generated by

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feminist demands for the vote in the years 1900–1914. The conflicts of this period can realistically be described as a ‘sex war’, in which both sides showed intransigence and extreme reactions. This war between the sexes escalated around the government’s practice of force-feeding suffragettes in prison in 1913. For many women, force-feeding was experienced as torture, or a form of rape.<sup>2</sup> The early twentieth-century panic over ‘white slavery’, and particularly the alleged kidnapping and trafficking of young girls on city streets in Britain and America, reached its height in precisely the same years. This moral panic reflected the fraught situation of antipathy between the sexes. It brought together an unlikely combination of political groups: evangelicals, social purity workers, feminists and staunch opponents of women’s suffrage. Campaigners focused obsessively on the idea of innocent young girls as the defenceless victims of predatory male lust. For some, these stories of white slavery exuded a distinctly erotic appeal.

The book begins with these horror stories about girls being kidnapped on the streets of London. It then moves back in time to trace the ways in which a growth of feminine self-awareness, improvements in education, and a growing political consciousness made their impact upon young women before the First World War. The troubling of social certainties about gender continued through and after the war, as the ‘modern girl’ established herself on the scene. ‘Brazen flappers’ horrified conservatives by blowing cigarette smoke in the face of Victorian ideas of feminine constraint and decorum. Young working-class women’s determination to live more fully and their ambitions for a better life led them to shun domestic service in favour of new opportunities in shops, factories and offices. This created problems for the servant-keeping middle classes, who whinged

incessantly about young girls getting above themselves, and showing too worldly an interest in cheap cosmetics and fur coats. Cinema-going was often blamed for this, in the sense of turning girls' heads. But a shortage of marriageable young men in the aftermath of war also fostered an independent outlook in many single girls. Whether they liked it or not, these young women often had no one else to depend upon.

Respectable society had no answers to many of the predicaments faced by young women, especially those forced to strike out on their own. The Second World War, like its predecessor, proved a catalyst of social change. Chapter 4 shows how, for many people in Britain, the pace of change was itself threatening. Anxieties about young women surfaced in alarm over 'good-time girls', seen as predatory, lusting after foreign men or on the lookout for no one but themselves. There were rumours of these girls batting their eyelids at American servicemen and risking their virtue for nylon stockings. Such concerns carried over into the post-war world. The 1950s was a decade of extraordinary contradictions. The coronation of the young Elizabeth II brought a wave of nostalgia for an idealised past, in which tradition and hierarchy were assumed to have buttressed the British. Dutiful upper-middle-class girls queued to become debutantes, grooming, learning to curtsy, and trussing themselves up for the marriage market. But new conditions were intruding fast, often loudly signalled by American-style consumerism, film and popular music. There was concern lest daughters be seduced by 'crooners', or go after bad boys in leather with slicked hair like Elvis Presley. Then there were Teddy girls, beat girls and Mods.

Harassed fathers were disturbed by the idea of daughters hanging about jukeboxes in coffee bars, or coming across undesirable types in dark and smoky jazz cellars. Would these

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daughters prove wayward, swerving out of control? Runaway marriages or unmarried motherhood would bring shame on a family's good name. Chapter 5 focuses on the 1960s, unsettled by the Profumo scandal and the teenage revolution.<sup>3</sup> Girls were seen to be behaving in ways which challenged traditional authority and standards of propriety. Increasingly well-educated, they were more often answering back, and threatening to leave – if not actually leaving – home. Chapter 6 explores the ways in which controversies over the 'permissive society' were bound up with unease about changing gender roles, and further, stemmed from fears that girls were behaving precociously and promiscuously, without regard for the consequences. There was a minor moral panic about unmarried, teenage motherhood, but those who fretted most about this were often equally uneasy about young women getting access to contraceptives without their parents' consent.

One of the lasting legacies of the teenage revolution of the 1960s in Britain was the redefinition of adulthood: after the Family Law Reform Act of 1969, young people were regarded as 'coming of age' at eighteen rather than at twenty-one. This defused what had often been an explosive situation in both families and educational institutions. Throughout the 1960s, young people of both sexes had regularly challenged what they had increasingly come to see as unwarranted and 'paternalistic' interference in their private lives. After 1969, students in colleges and universities gained a great deal of personal freedom: the authorities were no longer required to act *in loco parentis* towards them, because eighteen-year-olds were no longer considered 'infants' or 'minors'. Young people over the age of eighteen could henceforward marry without the consent of their parents, should they wish to do so. Those who worked to bring about

this reduction in the age of majority had been much influenced by the fact that young people – especially women – were marrying at younger ages than in the past. However, contrary to all expectations, the numbers of teenage brides sharply diminished in the 1970s.

The 1970s in Britain were a watershed. The women's liberation movement, or what became known as 'second-wave feminism', contested almost every aspect of young women's experience. The impact of feminism, and the momentous changes in assumptions about gender and education that characterised the decade are considered in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 moves into the contemporary world. It scrutinises the popular celebration of 'girl power', and asks why so much contemporary writing has represented girls as the casualties, rather than as the beneficiaries, of progress.

This book is first and foremost a history, and while it explores a number of contemporary issues and problems, particularly in the last chapters, it sets out to take a long view. It shows that the history of girlhood in Britain has been deeply troubled. Modern British history has been packed with horror stories about girls. Attention to representations of girlhood in British social history and popular culture shows clearly that the changes in young women's lives since Victorian times have been accompanied by anxiety and social unease. Ideas about femininity, and feminine respectability, have proved a battleground. Expectations about how young women should behave have been contested and uncertain. Settled hierarchies, and often taken-for-granted notions of how men and women should relate to each other, have been regularly disturbed, shaken up, and challenged. For some, this has been a cause for celebration; others have reacted with pessimism or condemnation, anxiety, panic, and even despair.

The Victorian middle class invested heavily in the notion of girlish innocence, holding feminine virtue to be the foundation of a stable home and family life. Social stability was seen to depend on a right ordering of male and female, and on a father's protection of daughters. This protection was envisaged as both moral and economic; it was also, of course, built into politics and sanctioned by the law. Protection was a two-edged sword, and it frequently shaded into control. Feminism, 'new women' and 'modern girls' all challenged patriarchy, and they all brought into question both the efficacy of protection and equally, the need for, and the justice of, control. Girls' demands for greater self-determination and independence spelled trouble. So in each generation, the image of girlhood has been hotly contested, with the 'modern girl' represented at times as a major beneficiary of social change, at other times as symbol, symptom and even the prime agent of social disruption.

In the pages that follow I use the terms 'girl' and 'young woman' interchangeably. 'Girl' was used widely in nineteenth-century Britain, and it was used across class boundaries, unlike 'young lady', which generally excluded the working class. Middle-class writers in the Edwardian era often described girlhood as coming to an end when a young woman first menstruated, or first put up her hair. A decade or so later, girls were more likely to chop off rather than to coil up their tresses. Girlhood was definitely ended by marriage, although colloquially, familiarly (or rudely) women might still be described as 'old girls'. During the twentieth century, even as the age of marriage fell, adult women might refer to themselves as girls – as in 'a night out with the girls'. With the advent of the women's liberation movement there was unease about the term: as applied to young adult women it was widely considered belittling and disrespectful.



Since the last decades of the twentieth century, the term has been reclaimed, somewhat, particularly through discussions of 'girl power'.<sup>4</sup> Adult women were by the 1990s marrying later and later – if they married at all. Reactions to the use of the word 'girl' have often depended on who is using it. I have chosen to use it broadly and affirmatively.