

## **"Second Only to Barbie": Identity, Fiction, and Non-Fiction in the American Girl Collection**

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Due in large part to the tremendous popularity of their line of historical dolls, American Girl has become an American household name – especially if that household includes a tween-aged girl. Founded in 1985, American Girl has sold more than 10 million dolls and more than 100 million copies of the accompanying historical novels.

According to their website, "over 95 percent of girls ages 7 to 12 are familiar with American Girl dolls, which rank second only to Barbie® in the dolls category" ("Fast Facts"). This enormous popularity makes American Girl one of the most socially salient products for girls in today's marketplace. This tremendous social salience demands critical analysis. A spokesperson for the company boasts that American Girl "celebrates girls and create[s] a reflection of who they are right now" (Quoted in Evans 9). However, the relationship between the company and their consumers is far more complicated than this. More than reflecting who girls are right now, the company creates an idealized image of American girlhood past and present. Although the positive corporate image relies on the perception that these dolls and their accompanying stories are empowering for girls, the American Girl line of historical characters sends mixed messages about girls' place in America of yesterday and today.

Girls are getting a lot of attention lately – especially from the consumer marketplace. Current business trends reflect a narrowing focus into ever more specific marketing segments. One emerging segment, once called teeny-boppers, is the group of girls aged about 7 to 12 who are "too old" to be children and "too young" to be adolescents. Recent marketing lingo refers to this age group as "tweens." The increased spending power of this demographic makes them highly attractive to advertisers. Stores like Libby Lu and Limited Too, television shows like Disney's "Lizzie McGuire" and The N Network's "Clueless," as well as motion pictures like "Princess Diaries" (2001), "Freaky Friday" (2003), "Sleep Over" (2004), and "Mean Girls" (2004) all reflect the tween influence on the consumer marketplace. The tween demographic has enormous power to participate in the marketplace. Conversely, the marketplace has enormous power to influence its tween consumer. American Girl taps into this reciprocating power in tremendously successful ways.

Although the American Girl company produces several lines of toys for girls, the company's original and flagship product is the collection of historical American Girls. To date, the American Girl Collection consists of nine characters. A suite of merchandise comprises each character's market identity and includes the doll, accoutrements, and historical novels. According to the American Girls website, Kaya "is an adventurous Nez Perce girl growing up in 1764." Felicity is "a spunky, sprightly girl growing up in Virginia in 1774, just before the Revolutionary War." Josephina "is a girl of heart and hope growing up in New Mexico in 1824." Kirsten is "a pioneer girl of strength and spirit growing up in Minnesota in 1854." Addy is "a proud, courageous girl who escapes from slavery with her mother in 1864." Samantha is "a bright, compassionate girl living with her wealthy grandmother in 1904." Kit is "a clever, resourceful girl growing up in Cincinnati in 1934 during America's Great Depression." Molly is "a lively, lovable schemer and dreamer growing up in 1944." Introduced in July of 2004, the newest American Girl doll is Nellie. The American Girl website calls Nellie "a practical, hardworking girl who was hired to be a servant in the house next door to Samantha." Nellie is the first doll who is not unique to her time-period; instead, she doubles up with another character<sup>1</sup>. Each of the nine characters has an 18-inch doll who arrives dressed in period appropriate costuming (\$84) that corresponds to the illustrations in the first book of the doll's story series. The available accoutrements for each doll include an extensive array of historically accurate clothing (right down to the under clothes), shoes, furniture, and accessories. For instance, one can buy Kit's doll-size typewriter (\$22), Felicity's four-poster bed (\$98), and Kaya's Teepee (\$70).<sup>2</sup> Each character (except Nellie) has six historical novels and

several short stories describing her experiences for a year from the time she is nine years old until just after her tenth birthday. In addition, Pleasant Company publishes American Girl craft books describing historical activities, and books that describe the cultural moment of each character's setting.

The historic American Girl products represent a long-term response to a very personal desire for characters who did not step into line with traditional toys. Pleasant T. Rowland founded the company after a disappointing shopping experience in 1984 for her 8 and 10 year old nieces. She wanted to give them dolls for Christmas, but found her choices limited to Cabbage Patch Dolls or Barbies. She says, "Here I was, in a generation of women at the forefront of redefining women's roles, and yet our daughters were playing with dolls that celebrated being a teen queen or a mommy" (np). The dolls that Rowland created are 18" versions of her target audience. They are neither Barbie dolls for girls to emulate nor baby dolls for girls to nurture. American Girl dolls are meant to be the girl's friend. This implied friendship forms the basis of the company's overwhelmingly successful marketing strategy. However, this friendship also threatens to undermine the American Girl Collection's positive features.

Some critics have recently addressed the American Girl collection. Daniel Hade uses the Kirsten stories to point out the frequent historical factual inaccuracies in the books. He concludes "the books fail in showing an accurate and authentic view of the American past" (162-3) and that "popular culture is being sold under the guise of history and literature" (163). Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy Kreshel consider the ways that the American Girl collection "uses historical fictions, dolls, and historically accurate clothing and accessories to construct a romanticized version of American history" (147). Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel go on to report the results of their interviews of with 21 girls who own American Girl dolls and their mothers. They found that "the girls' conceptualization of what it means to be an American girl seems to be linked, in part, to Pleasant Company's representations" (156). When Carolina Acosta-Alzuru writes with Elizabeth P. Lester Roushazmir they focus their analysis on the catalog as they examine "the ways in which nationality, history, race and ethnicity, consumerism, and gender are immersed in the AG products" (46). Carol Nardone also uses interviews with girls and mothers to construct her analysis. She argues that the American Girl texts "work to support a standard ideology that, in most cases, revolves around the conventional roles of girls and women in American society" (Ways 4). While these critics have offered insightful analysis of the American Girl phenomena, what they have failed to examine is the nexus of these various issues. American Girl offers for consumption a conflicted identity. The Company's rhetoric encourages readers to identify with and emulate the characters in their collection. The line of historic American Girl merchandise encourages traditional behavior in girls that undermines the company's overt message of empowerment. Meanwhile, the company blurs the line between nonfiction and fiction leaving young readers with little foundation upon which to critique the traditional behaviors portrayed. Ultimately, these negative aspects eclipse the positive attributes of the American Girl phenomenon.

The American Girl company fosters their popularity by tapping into some concerns of their target audience. Peer pressure and the desire for a sense of belonging are twin forces in many young girls' lives. The American Girl Company's direct marketing plan successfully draws on both of these forces to increase sales and promote identification between their consumers. With the exception of the books, the American Girl Collection, and the other merchandise from the American Girl company, is only available through their catalog, website, and two retail locations, one along Chicago's Magnificent Mile and the other on New York's Fifth Avenue. This direct marketing to girls creates an extremely attractive mystique of belonging. As Sherri Inness writes, marketing "through catalogues seems only to increase sales by perpetuating the notion of the exclusivity of the American Girls collection, an image the company seeks to maintain given the high costs of its goods" (Anti-Barbies 168). The location of the retail outlets and the pricing of the merchandise further contribute an air of exclusivity to the line. The elite group who can purchase the American Girl merchandise must be, by necessity, of an economically privileged background.

The other side of exclusivity is being a part of the group. Girls who possess an American Girl doll, who peruse the catalog, explore the website, and read the books have the necessary credentials of knowledge to be *included* in the American Girl phenomenon. A colleague of mine compares girls who are familiar with American Girl to a college sorority. Once a part of the group, a young girl familiar with the American Girl line of merchandise has a connection to other girls with the same information. Like a sorority girl from one campus recognizing the pin of a 'sister' at another campus, the tweens familiar with American Girl recognize the other members of this unofficial but exclusive club. This prestige and air of exclusivity exert significant peer pressure for the reader/consumer to become an "American Girl."

American Girl uses their catalog as a proxy for exerting another sort of peer pressure on their consumer. Catalog marketing in general proves a successful strategy for reaching the tween demographic. American Girl catalog often arrives addressed to the tween girl herself. Additionally, the catalog addresses itself directly to the young girl, not her parents. While each catalog begins with a brief message to parents, the remainder of the 100+ page catalog employs second-person narrative to engage the young reader. For example, one page in the Holiday 2003 catalog reads in part, "American Girl Today celebrates all the things you love, from soccer to singing, school to slumber parties" (6). The text repeatedly refers to "your doll" and "your collection." Coconut, a small white stuffed-animal dog is "always happy to see you" (Holiday 28). Headlines are often imperative sentences: "Be Yourself – whoever you are!" (Holiday 7), "Choose your doll" (Holiday 10), "Put on a show!" (Holiday 12), or "Study Hard, play hard!" (Holiday 16). Significantly, the heading on a two-page display of spa essentials for the American Girl of Today dolls offers the suggestion to "Treat Yourself Right!"; however, the page pictures only dolls, not girls (Spring 2004). The page makes the connection that to treat your doll "right" is to treat yourself right. The tone of the catalog and the manner of address imagines a relationship with the tween reader and uses that relationship to exert peer pressure by proxy, encouraging the girl to consume the American Girl identity.

One way to become an American Girl is to be like the characters that the catalog presents. Again, the twin forces of peer pressure and group membership operate to promote identification with the use of visual similarities between the girls pictured and the dolls in the photos. Girls can get matching outfits for themselves and their dolls. Images of girls dressed the same as their dolls on the same pages encourage the visual connections. The book, Doll Hair: Styling Tips and Tricks for Your Dolls has the same lavender background, long brunette hair, and physical grouping of images on the cover as the book Hair: Styling Tips and Tricks for Girls. The photos rarely include girls who are not directly imitating a doll. The encouragement for a girl to look like the characters easily extends to encouraging a girl to behave like the characters. By showing girls wearing the same clothes as the dolls, participating in the same activities as the dolls, the company suggests that the girls should also behave like the characters the dolls represent.

The historical American Girl section of the catalog presents no exception. Readers are encouraged to identify with the historical characters. In the Holiday 2003 catalog, the introductory two-page spread illustrates each historical American Girl character gazing directly out of the page at the reader. The accompanying text explains,

Just like you, each of the American Girls is *unique*. When you read their stories, you'll learn about the friends they made, their struggles and successes, and the fun and adventures they had along the way. You can imagine how different life was for them, but you'll also discover that their feelings, ideas, and dreams are *a lot like yours*. (emphasis added 4)

The Summer 2004 catalog invites the reader to "Meet the American Girls – eight girls of long ago who come alive with beautiful books, dolls, outfits, and accessories – and you'll see that they're a lot like you" (17). The Fall 2004 catalog asserts that when a girl "get[s] to know" the American Girls, "a story from another century becomes so real, it feels as if it could happen to you" (31).

The historic American Girl section of the catalog reinforces and extends the company's rhetoric of identification. However, this encouraged identification presents a danger because of the ways that the merchandise and stories of the historical American Girl Collection undermine and contradict the positive messages of empowerment and individuality the company overtly promotes.

Despite the company's repeated assertion that the American Girls are unique, the merchandise marketed for each historic doll remains strikingly similar. Each character has an accessory package which, with only minor, variations includes a hat, a purse or bag, a "hankie," a necklace, and coin.<sup>3</sup> In addition, each character has a table and chair set, each has a bed, each has a desk,<sup>4</sup> each has several seasonal outfits,<sup>5</sup> and each has her own doll-sized doll (six and a half inches). Historic distinctions do exist in the merchandise. For instance, Molly's table and chair set is chrome and Formica, while Samantha's is wicker, and Felicity's is a tilt-top tea table. Yet, the uniformity of merchandise available overshadows these superficial differences. While each character's merchandise is different, it is not unique. Despite the distinctions of setting and location, the accessories are more the same than they are different. The details may be "authentic" to the time-period of the character settings, but the conformity of the merchandise suggests that all girls like, need, and own the same things.

This standardizing continues with the book sets that accompany each character. Until the release of Kaya in 2002, each of the book sets followed a common template.<sup>6</sup> The first book is Meet [Character's name]. This initial volume introduces the character, her personality, family, and historical setting. The second book, [Character's Name] Learns a Lesson: a school story, illustrates educational practices for girls at the time. The third story is [Character's Name] Surprise: A Christmas Story. Again, save for the Kaya character, this book displays the holiday traditions for each time period. The fourth story, Happy Birthday, [Character's name]: A Springtime Story, describes how each character celebrates her tenth birthday. The fifth book, [Character's name] Saves the Day: A Summer Story, presents each character with a situation that calls for courage and incidentally describes the summertime activities of each time period. The final book in each series is Changes for [Character's Name]: A Winter Story. This book describes an important life change, often someone leaving or joining the family. By having each character go through the same progression of stories, American Girl sends the message that these girls, despite differences in geography and history, are not, as the catalog asserts, unique. Carol Nardone suggests, "the books collectively act as a means of standardizing responses to a variety of social problems" and that the books "identify for readers certain characteristics, ideals, and values that transcend time to construct a collective ideology" (Making Myths 4). One meta-plot is obviously sufficient to tell the story of an "American Girl." This implied message is contrary to the company's assertion that each character and each girl consumer is unique.

The homogenization of experiences across the American Girl texts extends to the behavior of the various characters. Carol Nardone identifies several trans-narrative themes. These themes are: "buying and collecting are good" (Making Myths 122), "the traditional two-parent family is the ideal" (Making Myths 123), "servants are commonplace within American lifestyles" (Making Myths 123), "that girls are schemers who fall into the Lucy/Ethel personas" (Making Myths 123-4), and that "appearance and clothing are paramount to the type of person we are and to what others will think of us" (Making Myths 124). Furthermore, Nardone identifies the prevalent expectations of traditionally feminine behavior in the books and contends that these stories teach girls "to be feminine is to be docile, dependent, and meek" (Ways 11). In addition to what Nardone identifies, several other themes to support traditionally feminine behavior develop across the texts. These themes include a focus on the home, women-done housework, taking care of others, preparing for marriage and children, and denial or hiding one's feelings. The portrayal of these behaviors as desirable and appropriate feminine conduct can be disempowering for young readers.

The American Girl books are only the most recent of texts which follow a pattern narrating a young girl's transition from childhood to adolescence. Like their literary foremothers Caddie

Woodlawn of Carol Ryrie Brink's novel of the same name, and Jo March of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, the American Girls often begin their stories with a spirit of rebelliousness against the feminine expectations of their society. Felicity sneaks out of the house each morning in borrowed breaches to rescue the horse, Penny, from a cruel owner (Meet Felicity). Samantha rips her stockings while climbing a tree (Meet Samantha). Kaya races the boys on her Appaloosa pony, Steps High (Meet Kaya). Unfortunately, also like their literary foremothers, the characters of the American Girl books succumb to their cultures' expectations of femininity by the end of their narratives. Felicity leaves behind much of her rebellious spirit as childish behavior in favor of her blue dancing gown and tea lessons (Felicity's Surprise). Samantha learns to be a "proper" young lady with her grandmother's guidance. Kaya, in turn, learns that "you must think of others before yourself" (Meet Kaya 26). Each girl, by the end of her series, learns to conform to *traditional* young womanhood, a womanhood which is often disempowering.

The American Girl stories' historical settings foster the portrayal of these traditional gender expectations, but do not *necessitate* it. In order to navigate successfully their respective historical moments, each of the American Girl characters would have had to learn the behavior acceptable to women of their time. Gender expectations are not static; they fluctuate over time. Consequently, the gender messages embedded in the American Girl texts should fluctuate similarly, but they do not. They remain more or less consistent across the eight series of the collection. The fact that the same gender expectations prevail throughout the collection's 180-year time span nullifies any argument that the historical accuracy justifies the traditional behavior. Little in the books, catalogs, or website suggests that these traditional behaviors and expectations differ for girls today. On the contrary, the insidious encouragement for tweens to identify with and behave like an "American Girl" becomes an implicit expectation that girls will subscribe to the same expectations. Like Samantha, the reader should wait to be spoken to even when the message is important; like Kirsten, work hard at home and help your mother even if it means forgoing an education; like Addy and Kit, no matter how poor you are, help someone else even if you need help too. The message becomes that girls today should continue what the website calls these "timeless traditions of growing up a girl in America" (About American Girl).

Contributing to the confusion is the company's failure to establish a firm line between the fictions they create and the facts of the historical time-period. Each book concludes with a 5 – 7 page section called "A Peek into the Past," which supposedly provides the factual context for the preceding story. This section uses historical photographs when available to illustrate a narrative of historical practices or events during the time that the story takes place. However, this section blurs the line between what the author imagines could have happened and what actually occurred at that historical moment. The use of photographs can confuse rather than clarify the historical accuracy of the story. Inness asserts that the use of photographs make "the entire story seem more realistic" (Anti-Barbies 176). Furthermore, the mention of the American Girl characters in the non-fiction "Peek into the Past" makes the characters appear to be historical figures rather than fictional characters. For example, in Changes for Samantha: A Winter Story, the sixth Samantha book, the reader learns from the "Peek into the Past" section that "[b]y the time Samantha was nineteen years old, the Ford Motor Company had built over a million cars – all of them black" (62); that the airplane "wasn't really used for passengers until Samantha was forty years old" (63); and that "by the time Samantha was old enough to work, people's attitudes [about women in the workforce] had begun to change" (64). Many of the other characters' fictitious presence appears in the supposedly factual "Peek into the Past" section. Tweens read that "as Kirsten grew up, more and more people traveled west across America to start new farms" (Changes 60); that "When Addy was growing up, American cities were growing, too" (Saves the Day 62); and that "by the time Josephina was raising her own children, she might have had glass windows, wallpaper, and some American style furniture, all brought to New Mexico by traders from the United States" (Collection 391). Each encourages the reader to blend the character's story with the historical "facts" in these contextual pages. If something happened when Samantha was 40 years old, then her story did not end with the books. She continued to live, but she did

not. Samantha, like each of the other American Girl characters, is the figment of an author's imagination.

Repeating and reinforcing this same confusion are the purportedly non-fiction books that the company published to accompany each series. The dust jackets of these books assert that readers will "love this richly illustrated nonfiction book" (Welcome to Molly's World). These books extend the "Peek into the Past" sections of the novels. Each book includes lavish illustrations, photographs, and narrative. Molly's book includes a variety of two-page layouts which describe things like the world at war during the 1940s, a supposedly typical home of the time, a layout called "Victory Style" describing the way fashions reflected the military efforts, and a description of toys popular during the 1940s. Despite the fact that the introduction page reminds readers that "Molly McIntire is a fictional character" (1), illustrations from the Molly book series appear throughout this "nonfiction" text. This pattern repeats across the eight available Welcome books. The introduction to the Welcome to Felicity's World book includes the reminder that Felicity is a fictional character, but also states that in the book the reader "will meet real people who lived in the American colonies and hear their true stories" (1). A few page turns later and one finds an illustration from the novels with a caption reading in part, "Young ladies like Felicity went about their chores" (8). While the Welcome books contain beautiful layouts and offer the contemporary reader an historical context for the stories in the novels, the Welcome books further fail to differentiate historical facts from the American Girl fictions.

The catalog and website again blur the lines between non-fiction and fiction. The portrayal of the dolls in realistic situations foregrounds the perception of the dolls as active characters. The overwhelming majority of the photographs are of the dolls in tableaux vivants. In the Holiday 2003 catalog, for instance, each doll with a full layout (again except Kaya) appears amidst her collection of birthday merchandise and across the page from a grouping of the doll with her school merchandise. Each grouping appears against a watercolor background to complete the setting. A watercolor of a flower-filled yard backgrounds Kit's birthday scene. Molly's school ensemble is set against a depiction of a classroom blackboard complete with homework assignments written on the board. Although the tableaux attractively display the available merchandise, their extraordinary attention to detail and the "real-life" settings foreground the authenticity of the American Girls' stories but deemphasize their status as fictional creations.

In addition to the texts and the catalog, the teacher guides available through Pleasant Company Publications are also troubling. The titles themselves indicate that they blur the lines between non-fiction and fiction. The guide for the Kirsten books, for instance, is Kirsten 1854: Teacher's Guide to Six Books About Pioneer America for Boys and Girls. The accompanying text on the cover reads, "What was life like in 1854? Students will love discovering the answer by reading the Kirsten books, using the picture map of her world, and doing the fresh, fun activities in this guide." The assertion that a student can learn what life was like in 1854 by reading the Kirsten books is misleading at best given the historical inaccuracies of the books (c.f. Hade). By marketing the texts to teachers for use in history lessons, the company co-opts the authority of history and uses that authority to obfuscate further the fact that these characters are fictional creations.

The line between non-fiction and fiction blurs to nearly indistinguishable at the American Girl Place in Chicago. Along the lower level wall are life sized (re)creations of a scene from each of the characters' stories. One can glimpse the inside of Kaya's teepee, Josephina's outdoor oven, Kirsten's local general store, Addy's fair, Samantha's summer cabin retreat, Kit's attic bedroom, and Molly's summer camp tent. Each display is roughly four feet wide, from floor to ceiling, and encased behind a plexi-glass barrier. Affixed to the plexi-glass is a narrative explaining the display. These narratives – just like the "Peek into the Past" sections of the novels -- fail to establish the fictional quality of the world they portray. Consider, for instance, the narrative on the Molly display,

Lot's of things about Camp Gowonagain reminded Molly of the Army and her dad, who was serving in World War Two. Campers shared tents and ate in a mess hall, just as soldiers did. Molly wore a uniform and polished her saddle shoes every day for inspection. Early each morning, a bugle call woke the campers, and it sounded "Taps" as they went to sleep each night. (AG Place)

This narrative does not refer to the novel, or Molly's status as a fictional character. She just is. When she went to Camp Gowonagain, Molly missed her father, polished her shoes, and ate in a mess hall. The exhibit's museum-like feel reinforces this vagueness. Museums often contain artifacts of time gone by – real things that real people who existed in a real past used. This display consists of things created to illustrate a fictional story; thereby it leaves the difference between non-fiction and fiction nearly indistinguishable.

A most disturbing moment that reflects the blending of fiction and history occurred during my visit to the American Girl Place while I observed another very museum-like exhibit of some large paintings that eventually became illustrations for the novels. While I stood there, a young girl, about 7 or 8, dragged her mother to the display insisting loudly, "I told you they were real! I told you!" Her mother, just like the American Girl company, did nothing to dissuade this child's conviction. This persistent failure to distinguish the fictive nature of the American Girl characters lends the authority of historical "truth" to the narratives. If the reader does not remember that these stories are fiction, and if the reader believes that these characters actually existed during the history of America, then there is no platform from which the reader can critique their behavior. The characters' behavior is no longer the author's projection, but how they really behaved. The representations of traditionally feminine behavior become historical "truth" that seems above questioning. The American Girl narratives superimpose themselves upon and in many ways supercede their historical moments.

The American Girl company projects high standards. They assure parents that "American Girl offers thoughtful alternatives" (Holiday 2003 cover). They assert in their catalog that they "began nearly 20 year ago with a single mission: to enrich the lives of girls with quality products and experiences that *educate and entertain*" (emphasis in original, Summer 2004, 3). They promise "a seamless blending of learning and play – what [they] call 'putting vitamins in the chocolate cake'" (Summer 2004, 16). The ethnographic work of Nardone and Acosta-Azluru, et al indicates that parents embrace this message with little questioning. Nardone reports that parents believe that American Girl "is a good business that cares for its customers" (Making Myths 10). Similarly, Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel indicate that the mothers in their survey perceive that "the company's products foster good values" (158). This positive image and pervasive acceptance of the company's ideology requires careful scrutiny.

Young girls are reading the American Girl books in amazing numbers. This popularity and the salience of the American Girl line in the tween demographic justify further study. Possible areas of future research might include establishing an understanding of how girls themselves interpret the story lines. Do they understand any separation between fact and fiction? It would be interesting to know if contemporary readers accept the traditional gender messages, or do they, as Ana Garner suggests girls often do, practice a resistance in their reading focusing on the more empowering behaviors? The American Girl books' place in the broader history of fiction for children needs to be determined. It would be informative to understand the ways girls maintain or controvert the books' stories when playing with the dolls and accoutrements. Further ethnographic research can help to answer these questions. Additionally, since the American Girl books have been in print nearly twenty years, adult women who were familiar with the texts as children occupy a unique position from which to observe and reflect on their experiences with the texts. Finally, the text of American Girl is ever changing and evolving. Each additional doll, book, or new accessory enlarges and modifies the company's presence. This developing meta-text demands diligent attention.

At the same time, the ever-changing nature of the American Girl product line presents continuing opportunities to realize the potential of the products to both present an accurate history of American girlhood and include empowering messages for the modern reader. Perhaps the company will introduce other characters, like Nellie, who can present multiple perspectives on American girlhood. Until then, the Company's homogenous representation of both contemporary and historical girlhood undermines their positive messages of empowerment. While the American Girl dolls currently exert their distinctive peer-pressure to encourage girls to conform to traditionally feminine behaviors, they could, as the company boasts, protect girls "individuality, intellectual curiosity, and imagination" (Our Promise). In this way, each young reader could become her own unique version of an American Girl.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The American Girl Company's development of Nellie as a character will be interesting to observe. Since she is introduced as the "friend" of an existing character, her identity is the only which does not stand independently, but relies on another's narration. Whether the company creates a separate identity for Nellie remains a question.

<sup>2</sup> To purchase just one doll and all of her accoutrements costs more than \$1,000.

<sup>3</sup> Addy's Accessories include a "kerchief" in place of a hankie and purse. Kaya's accessories include a "belt pouch" rather than a hankie. Josefina has a fringed shawl rather than a hat, and Kirsten has a spoon bag and wooden spoon rather than a purse.

<sup>4</sup> Except for Kaya.

<sup>5</sup> Again, also except for Kaya.

<sup>6</sup> Kaya's differences from the rest of the American Girl collection are worthy of their own analysis, but that is beyond the scope of this current project. It does not appear that Nellie's story cycle will follow the earlier characters either.

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**Lise Mae Schlosser** is a PhD student in the English Department and Women's Studies Program at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. This article was inspired by her niece's sudden absorption into the American Girl culture and a trip the two shared to the American Girl Place on Chicago's Michigan Avenue.

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