

Book review

GIRL TROUBLE: PANIC AND PROGRESS IN THE HISTORY OF YOUNG WOMEN

Carol Dyhouse

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British social historian Carol Dyhouse stays away from the word ‘backlash’ until the end of her latest book. *Girl Trouble* is a broad, synthesising and sweeping history of girls growing up in Britain through the twentieth century. Her sources are mainly drawn from the media and literature, emphasising well-known historical people and events. Dyhouse concludes that while her ‘long view’ reveals clear signs of progress, it also ‘demonstrates the ever-present possibilities of backlash, reaction and new oppressive forces’ (p. 255). This relationship between panic and progress is the major theme of her study. The research has led Dyhouse to argue that young women still need feminism to enable them to live full lives. While the focus is clearly on Britain, New Zealand readers will identify some familiar themes, especially regarding popular culture and the relationship with the United States of America.

Dyhouse focuses on revealing the aspirations of, and opportunities and advances for, British girls. She then covers the accompanying public fear and controversy. She reveals an enduring pattern that when girls spoke up for themselves a likely reaction involved hysteria, horror, accusations of scandal, and moral panic. Throughout the twentieth century, the media whipped up public outrage at perceived bad behaviour. It circulated a progression of labels for groups of girls that captured each successive wave of ‘trouble’. Stories of flappers, beat girls, dolly birds and ladettes each had their time in the media spotlight. In contrast, Dyhouse attempts to use the term ‘girl’ ‘widely and affirmatively’ (p. 9). Her approach makes for fascinating and revelatory reading. With a strong background in women’s history, especially in the history of women’s education, she is able to offer sage comment on major themes of importance in women’s twentieth-century lives. For example, were girls the winners of a new modernity?

The seven major chapters proceed roughly chronologically. Chapter one, ‘White Slavery and the Seduction of Innocents’, unpacks the huge volume of early twentieth-century literature on ‘White slavery’, which was advanced as a great social evil of the day. Sources include pamphlets, exposés, government and official inquiries, novels, plays and films. Recruiters for the supposed White slave trade were feared to be lurking in cinema foyers, bars and dance halls. Dyhouse argues that the daily reality was a new liberalism in attitudes towards women’s sexuality. She posits that as women became stronger and more politically assertive, girls were represented as frightened and oppressed victims.

Chapter two, ‘Unwomanly Types: New Women, Revolting Daughters and Rebel Girls’, centres on the women’s suffrage movement. It is easy to understand the sensible suffragettes’ frustration in the face of psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall, who referred to girls as wild

fish with ‘a charming gamey flavour’ (p. 66). Chapter three, ‘Brazen Flappers, Bright Young Things and “Miss Modern”’ continues with the perils and pleasures of cinemas, contraception, bathing suits and modernity.

Chapter four, ‘Good-time Girls, Baby Dolls and Teenage Brides’, draws upon the mass observation study to ground the scandal-themed media stories. In this chapter, Dyhouse is at her strongest, focusing on the part that education played in girls’ lives and drawing upon the biography of literary scholar Lorna Sage. Chapter five, ‘Coming of Age in the 1960s: Beat Girls and Dolly Birds’, interprets and contextualises the 1959 film *Beat Girl*. It discusses the Profumo Affair and suggests that the identification of the victim can become a murky area, as with the 1990s Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton scandal.

Chapter six, ‘Taking Liberties: Panic Over Permissiveness and Women’s Liberation’, explores how some people thought that the ideas and changes that took place in the 1960s had gone too far. The pill, AIDS, Germaine Greer, *Jackie* magazine and girls doing better at school are all covered. Chapter seven, ‘Body Anxieties, Depressives, Ladettes and Living Dolls: What Happened to Girl Power?’, enters the territory of eating disorders, the Lolita Effect, Kate Moss and Katie Price and the SlutWalk.

In the final chapter, Dyhouse makes a number of conclusions about girls’ progress since Victorian times. She considers the 1970s to be watershed years and highlights the importance of feminism in bringing about change for girls. The book ends with a consideration of class and the presence of influential inequality in society.

Significantly, where racial stereotypes and purported dangers posed by ‘foreign men’ are included in her earlier pages, Dyhouse shies away from including late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century incidents of sexual abuse. It appears to be too uncomfortable for her to extend analysis beyond representations of White girls, to the multicultural realities of postcolonial Britain. Furthermore, since the publication of her book, new allegations of historic child sex abuse have emerged, with New Zealand’s Judge Lowell Goddard currently leading an independent inquiry. Is there more truth and justice for girls in Britain today than in the past? Dyhouse’s call for the enduring importance of feminism rings true.

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