Naughtiest Girls, Go Girls, and Glitterbombs

Exploding Schoolgirl Fictions

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ABSTRACT

In this article I consider the white British and Australian schoolgirl through a notionally comparative study of Enid Blyton’s *The Naughtiest Girl in the School* (1940–1952) series and the contemporary *Go Girl* (2005–2012) series, texts spanning my lived experience as girl, mother, and teacher. Through incendiary fragments of memory and media, I, as researcher and writer, seek the girl addressed by these texts and consider the struggles, denials, and ambivalences that produce and are produced by reading the schoolgirl. This girl resists historical determinism, coalescing as contemporaneous past, present, and future as the reader performs her own girlhood through reading and writing. This creative analytical article notices the visual and physical manifestations of texts, as well as their linguistic discourses. Through this work, we perceive postfeminist entanglement in the ongoing re-configuration of the schoolgirl, with implications for policy and practice in education and for cultural and girlhood studies.

KEYWORDS

heteroglossia, memory work, narrative inquiry, popular culture, postfeminism, reading

Schoolgirl and Title Girl

Schoolgirl, as a term, is an oxymoron. The negative charge between metaphoric tenor and vehicle provides the frisson that sustains this trope. The word schoolboy is redundant, rarely used; school and boy go together so naturally that the adjective is unnecessary. Schoolgirl retains an element of surprise, and reminds the reader subliminally that girls did/do not always go to school. The word girl in any title offers this same frisson: a whole book about a girl? Really? A journal called *Girlhood Studies*? This contradiction in terms, that girl is important, salient on the cover in the title font, and yet culturally understood as something much less, is readily demon-
strated when the reader makes the switch and substitutes boy in a popular title, like that of the *Go Girl* series.

We do not need to say, “Go boy!”; boys inherently go, they move, they travel, they can appear and disappear at will—sons running out to play unsupervised in the park after school, or husbands racing out the door to work. “Go boy,” used as verbal incitement to action or attitude is a metaphor with no energy for human males; titles excite when they provide the reader with that contradiction in terms, that mental hook of intrigue and unexplored im/possibility. *Embroider Boy* might be such a title, but may have limited appeal for publishers in markets with fiercely heteronormative pedagogies.

This article responds to the call to consider how girls are represented in works with girl in their titles and takes as a starting point this heteroglossic friction within the word schoolgirl and in the very notion of a protagonist being a girl. To explore this concept, I take an autoethnographic and narrative approach, drawing on the trans-generational and trans-genred collection of books found in my own house with girl in their titles: two volumes in Enid Blyton’s *Naughtiest Girl in the School* (1940–1952) series; contemporary tween sensation *Go Girl: Brilliant Besties* (Badger 2013); Valerie Walkerdine’s academic *Schoolgirl Fictions* (1990), and my recently completed and bound thesis, *The Glitterbomb: Designing Curriculum and Identity with Girls’ Popular Culture* (2014). These books in my bookshelves as a white, Anglo middle-class Australian are about schoolgirls and I draw on my lived experience as girl, mother, stepmother, and teacher to both perform and move beyond a comparison of the girls’ fiction titles found there.

In the process, I am in dialogue with Walkerdine’s *Schoolgirl Fictions* (1990) and complicate notions of reading the girl. Yet I would not want to stop in a girls’ studies ghetto, and, as in my other work (McKnight 2015a, 2015b), seek to use concepts and insights of girls’ studies for broader impact; I intend this article to be a discussion of reading that is also in dialogue with theory around reading and teaching texts, such as key literary works by Stanley Fish (1980) and Louise Rosenblatt (1968) on notions of pinning down and releasing meaning.

**Key Concepts, Inspiration, and Research Design**

By using the word heteroglossic in relation to metaphor, I refer to Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) guiding philosophical trope of heteroglossia, a continual life struggle between centrifugal forces spinning meaning apart and cen-
tripetal forces that cohere. The compound noun schoolgirl comes together on the line, the intimate kerning between letters pulling them together. Yet schoolgirl simultaneously breaks apart, with a crack like the gunshot that wounded Malala Yousafzai. School is not necessarily a place where girls belong. My work has demonstrated that this is also conceivable in my own cultural and geographical contexts (McKnight 2014, 2015a, 2015b).

In the recession of the 1990s, parents at the school in suburban Melbourne where I was teaching began withdrawing their girls, claiming that they could afford private education for their sons but not for their daughters. The schoolgirl is a modern and tenuous phenomenon, a novelty. The schoolgirl must still be described and defined by the adjective school, a word associated but not assumed, so that agentic school and vulnerable girl are only contingently linked. Borrowing from Walkerdine (1990), we might perceive that the girl makes a phallic claim to learning, or indeed to the power of being in a title, yet has no phallus.

Through this article I contemplate the girl represented and addressed by the texts discussed, and the struggles, denials, and ambivalences that produce and are produced by reading the protagonist schoolgirl of these titles as an ongoing material and discursive reconfiguration simultaneously invested with capacity and girlied into helplessness. In doing this work, I am indebted to a number of feminist thinkers and writers, including Walkerdine (1990), Frigga Haug and Others (1987), Frigga Haug (2000), Madeleine Grumet (1976), Claudia Mitchell (2016), Claudia Mitchell and Sandra Weber (1999), Dorothy Smith (1987), Judith Butler (1997), Angela McRobbie (2009), Patricia Williams (1991), and Susanne Gannon and Bronwyn Davies (2006). I seek first to describe their influence through explaining and then enacting the creative research design developed during my doctoral work to explore representations of schoolgirls.

My study involved working with a group of female teachers to design curriculum around girls’ popular culture, with a focus on the stories we, as co-researchers, tell during our collaboration, rather than on a curricular end product. This is an approach advocated by curriculum theorist Grumet (1976), who encourages us to think about how teachers experience themselves in their work, rather than the teaching plans they produce.

A progressive concept when proposed, this idea is experienced today as even more radical in a neoliberal educational imaginary obsessed with outcomes (Reid 2010); eschewing outcomes also fits with Dorothy Smith’s (1987) feminist advice to find standpoints outside of dominant discourse for sociological research. The study contemplates how curriculum design
occurs in the context of broader media culture and involves the performance of gendered identities—coercively gendered yet with this very coercion providing opportunities for speaking back, as Judith Butler (1997) suggests—as researchers conjure past, present, and future simultaneously as we professional adult women continue to negotiate our identities as schoolgirls, as always already girlwomen, in another oxymoronic formulation. We are all grown up, but like the girl in the title of the book we read and the film we watch, we are always girled. We are always becoming girls, even as we are always becoming teachers (Mitchell and Weber 1999) through an ideological maelstrom of cohering and disintegrating discourse (Bakhtin 1981).

I also wrote narrative vignettes linking my own and my young daughter’s consumption of popular media texts to our design work and shared these with teacher co-researchers, who wrote back with their own stories. Through this collegial memory work (Haug and Others 1987; Haug 2000; Gannon and Davies 2006) we enmesh professional dialogue and personal anecdote with fiction and with the political social commentary of the news media with which we engage, and forge ways of imagining our girl selves and girl-students outside of dominant linear curricular discourses (Smith 1987), as well as seeking productive ways to read girls in the texts we teach.

Models for Collecting and Writing

Walkerdine’s Schoolgirl Fictions (1990) provided invaluable inspiration for this work. She uses an eclectic collection of chapters both critical and creative to explore alternative and multiple constructions of schoolgirl identities. Using poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory, she desires to “blow apart the fictions through which we have come to understand ourselves” (1990: xiv); this informed my own guiding metaphor of the glitter bomb, the girly intervention both effete and powerful, with fragments of stories, meeting transcripts, illustrations, photographs, screen captures, and theory detonating traditional thesis chapter (and article) structure in a heteroglossic orgy of delight and dismay.

As with Walkerdine’s montages, Walter Benjamin’s strategy for writing vignettes is, according to John Hughes, “to dip in and take a quotation out of context, mount it into a dialectical image and see what sparks fly” (1992: n.p.), further heteroglossic work of synthesis and release that proved generative for my study. Patricia Williams (1991) also achieves an alchemical forging of anecdote, story, and legal discourse in her work, bringing together professional legal debate and personal fury at injustice.
Troubling Neoliberal Curriculum and Reading as Comprehension

So, as naughtiest girl researcher I sought to undermine neoliberal certainties of curriculum, and as go girl mother of young children, to obtain a doctorate and return to the workforce by using concepts from a marginalized field to do mainstream critique. In doing this, I also drew on the work of Rosenblatt (1968) and Fish (1980) to trouble the very notion of finding and studying a girl in any text. There is a particular urgency in returning to these theorists in a contemporary context. In Australia, conservative forces behind a new national curriculum have re-framed the senior study of literature into what teachers involved in my study described as a tick-box meeting of requirements (McKnight 2015a, 2015b). New Victorian interpretations of this curriculum insist that students draw on literary theorists in their exam responses, raising fears of an ever more prescribed regurgitation of taught responses.

Rosenblatt, while reading now as profoundly and problematically humanist, not to mention dismissive of popular culture, reminds teachers that “the literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text” (1968: 25), not in the text reified by new criticism, or even solely in the reader’s mind. Fish (1980) goes so far as to suggest that a text is made anew by every reader in the context of membership of interpretive communities. These perspectives serve to destabilize the study of literature as comprehension, or teacher-licensed explication of theoretical positions, yet they still fall short. A circuit is too neat. Interpretive communities are based on flawed assumptions of sameness (Eagleton 1983).

If we borrow the electricity of Rosenblatt’s circuit, and the creativity of Fish’s invention of the text, and bring these along with awareness of Bakhtin’s combustible competing forces of heteroglossia to reading or making the girl in the text, we can get started. Add in Benjamin’s synthesis of past, present, and future into fragmented flash (described in Hughes 1992), Butler’s (1997) performative and iterative identity, and McRobbie’s (2009) heteroglossic compression of post-feminism into hyperfeminized top girl, isolated, diminished, and simultaneously enabled, and we have the theoretical components of a glitterbomb, an intervention into conventional understandings of how we frame and interpret a given girl text, or any text, in fact. The contradictory components of the glitterbomb exemplify the concept of post-feminist discursive complexity (Gill 2007) and trouble easy renderings of representation.
I turn now to the popular texts that participate in shaping the schoolgirl, providing background to their contexts that may resonate with readers’ own memories and imaginings.

The Girls in and on the Texts

While I was writing my thesis on creating curriculum around girls’ popular culture and reading Walkerdine (1990), I was also reading girls’ fiction, as a pre-service Literacy teacher educator and as a mother of a girl who was four when I began and seven by the time I had finished writing my thesis. I have these books on our shelves, yet when the editor of this special issue asked me for the publication details of the particular works I would be citing I found these difficult to provide. I had re-read two of prolific post-war British author Enid Blyton’s Naughtiest Girl books: The Naughtiest Girl is a Monitor ([1945]1997), in an Enid Blyton centenary edition from a second-hand shop, and The Naughtiest Girl Again ([1942]1987), a yellow-paged edition handed down from Amy’s much older step-sister. I had read the compilation edition Go Girl: Brilliant Besties (2013).

Yet the writing I would do around these texts, about the girls conjured up by them would not be confined by these editions; I am working also with remembered and storied editions and girls. It is impossible to read The Naughtiest Girl in 2016 without experiencing my own childhood readings and re-readings over many years. As I read, I am also aware of my mother’s love of these books and my visceral memories of other Enid Blytons with pen and ink illustrations coloured by her own careful schoolgirl hand, and of our conversations about the books and shared thrill at the naughtiest girl’s exploits. If this sounds as though I am waxing nostalgic, the reader may be reassured by Mitchell and Weber’s assertion that nostalgia can be used purposefully to claim a history, or territory (1999). Fiction books with girl in the title were rare in my experience and there was enormous delight in this protagonist who was like a girl from a girls’ annual story luxuriously developed as a proper, novel-length character. Then, of course, there was the frisson, for us as good girls, of the naughtiest girl, the girl who makes trouble.

The covers of my lost childhood editions are easily found online. Looking at the cover art highlights the nature of these works as both written and graphic. The naughtiest girl of the 1970s is wild, dirty, and fun, rendered in brilliant primary colours, with her ratty hair and slouchy socks. The naughtiest girl of the 1980s in my step-daughter’s edition is more androgynous
and muted. The naughtiest girl of the centenary edition is retro, in a plaid dressing gown and beside a fancy gold centenary medallion. The 1980s edition contains apparently original illustrations of 1940s schoolgirls contrasting incongruously with the cover. The 1990s edition has retro-style drawings that cannot quite replicate the perfect marcel waves of 1940s school girl hair, the hair of my grandmother’s 1941 wedding photo.

My grandmother married a man she did not love since her father would not let her break off her engagement. He would not allow her to make trouble. This stylised, sinuous marcel line invites me to segue into story, into embodied forms of knowledge (Weber 2008) and into the crafting of my glitterbomb, the securing of meaning even as it exceeds my intentions.

First, I will introduce briefly the Go Girl series. Go Girl is published in Australia but is a global phenomenon, and has so-called headquarters online; a mock embroidered logo has tabs for games and glitter. The series of over 40 books can be purchased as individual books, or as chunky sets, such as our Brilliant Besties (2013), which contains five short novels as chapters: Sleepover (McAuley 2013a); Birthday Girl (Badger 2013); Secret’s Out (Perry 2013a); Music Mad (McAuley 2013b), and Flower Girl (Perry 2013b).

I read these books as teacher/researcher/mother/girl and as I read I am simultaneously feeling the hundreds of button and loop fastenings on my silk bodice closing me into my 1985 bridesmaid’s dress; wondering what my daughter will make of the cool girl who lies; estimating a reading level for the book; and noticing that every single one of the 83 illustrations shows the go girl on her own and often miserable, unlike the more social and happy illustrations in the Naughtiest Girl books. The schoolgirl in the text, the naughtiest girl, go girl, Walkerdine girl, thesis-writing girl is always in the making, always juxtaposed, always shot through with other words (Bakhtin 1981) and images, intertextually linked by visual line and printed word, coming into focus and blurring even more.

In the following section, I seek to create a glitterbomb around the notion of the girls in these texts, a playful collection of fragments packed tightly that simultaneously explodes meaning, with identities pulled this way and that via competing heteroglossic addresses; this is not always comfortable for the reader who experiences these contradictory forces by re-making these images in further fragmented formulations. The white space here is vital to allow room for this discomfiture and resonance.

What forms, for readers identifying as women, from the following prompts? What memories flash up, superimposed, in the instant, with imaginations of our present young daughters, nieces, friends, and students, and
the hopes or fears we have for their futures? In reading we perform suppression, projection, identification, and resistance, with bedtime story and political debate enmeshed.

The Glitterbomb

‘Hallo, Kath! What are you so busy about? Let’s see.’
She bent over Kathleen’s work. ‘My goodness!’ she said. “What tiny stitches – and how nicely you’ve worked the roses! I wish I could sew like that. I want a handkerchief case.’ (Blyton [1942]1987: 127)

The next morning before school, Casey spent ages on the computer making pretty invitations. She put daisies all around the border, just like the daisies that decorated Tamsin’s peg at school. (Perry 2013: 236)

1984: English Literature was my favourite school subject. We met Keats etcetera, but one of our set texts was Women and Fiction, a collection of short stories by and about women. Was this actually the first time I had read something at school written by a woman? I remember Tolkien, Hardy, Hartley, Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Barstow, Bradbury, Brecht… wait, there was Harper Lee. But I thought she was a man anyway. I do think Jane Austen was there in Year 11 but I have only a fleeting memory of empire line bodices on a fuzzy old television adaptation, probably of Pride and Prejudice. Just writing those male authors’ names tows me back to the twentieth century, all tweed and pipes, and even further, to coal fires and gas lamps lit by maids. (Personal thesis vignette, “The Winding Sheet” (2012), remembering 1984)

A judge who was verbally abused by a defendant reciprocated at a court hearing where he was being sentenced for breaching an antisocial behaviour order. John Hennigan, 50, who had breached the order by using racist language towards a black woman and her two children told Chelmsford crown court judge Patricia Lynch QC that she was ‘a bit of a cunt.’ And Judge Lynch replied: ‘You are a bit of a cunt yourself.’ (The Guardian, 11 August 2016)

‘No quarrels with anyone – no bad tempers – no silly flare-ups!’ said Elizabeth to herself. She knew her own faults very well. (Blyton [1997]1945: 3)

The children are making constructions from Lego; we are concerned here with the actions of three children: a three-year-old girl, Annie, and two four-year-old boys, Sean and Terry. The teacher’s name is Miss Baxter. The sequence begins when Annie takes a piece of Lego to add on to a construction she is building. Terry tries to take it away from her to use himself, and he resists…

Terry: You’re a stupid cunt, Annie. (Walkerdine 1990: 4)

‘Our girls are demure,’ said the principal smugly, with a tight smile. (Diary note 2015 from tour of a prospective school for my daughter)

The moment Iris stepped out from behind the curtain and into the light her nerves vanished. (McAuley 2013b: 359)
This will be my first job interview in ten years or so since I had my children. The role is Head of Senior School, with some English teaching, and they want someone with a deep understanding of curriculum theory. My grandmother taught at this school. On the website, leaves fall softly from an ancient tree, history realised in a dreamy animation carpeting a private girls’ grammar school world. Motto: Educating Tomorrow’s Woman. The girls in the photographs are in smart knee length plaid, with clean skeletal traceries of white bordering their navy blazers. In Years 7 to 9 they all pursue the SHINE Award. (Personal thesis vignette, “Shine” 2013)

There was another outburst of cheering and clapping. ‘Good old Elizabeth!’ shouted somebody. ‘Trust her to ask something for the school, and not for herself.’ (Blyton [1942]1987: 213)

She will shine. (Extract from print advertisement for private girls’ school, 2012)

In the 1940s, starting secondary school and her period, my mother had to wear an elastic belt around her waist, with dangling straps front and rear, to which she secured a chafing wedge of sanitary napkin. Above that she wore a suspender belt to hold up her twisty stockings, then enormous bloomers, and then an itchy woollen tunic with further belt. Under her tunic she wore a shirt with a starchy collar that cut a raw line in her skin, and a tie. My mother still cannot wear any garment that touches her neck. She is still that girl, wrestling with the trappings of schoolgirlhood. (Diary notes, 2016)

Girls are victims of cruelty, but they rise above their circumstances by servicing and being sensitive to others—selflessness. (Walkerdine 1990: 98)

[Reflecting on lesson re girls’ magazines that do not take a feminist stance.] I try to imagine the gap between my private world and my teacher persona that might facilitate this silence in my pedagogy. What is in that gap? What feelings? What desires? What fears? The words that come to me—I test them out and write them here—are these: I do not want to make trouble. (Personal thesis vignette, “Lesson Plan” 2012)

Naughtiness in young children, for example, is to be expected, validated and associated with masculinity. (Walkerdine 1990: 49)

[On giving a talk at a school.] Students flood in and seize the chairs; many have to sit on the floor around the edges of the room, where they cannot even see the screen. A beautiful girl sits right at my feet, and raises her hand keenly at every question, despite the restless tide behind her, the boys ignoring the rhythmic shhing of Jess and Rachel [teachers], who hover at the back. The girl’s hand is often the only one, and I work hard to elicit more from the others, but she shines through, her golden corkscrew curls bobbing—a tween Shirley Temple. (Personal thesis vignette, “What They Did to Her” 2013)

The staffroom is full of women eating cottage cheese or grapefruit. Each of them knows about diet and eating and sexuality. They are willing to talk about these, caught inside what they are: the unique combination of worker and woman, dependent and independent, free and trapped. (Walkerdine 1990: 29)
Sign across driveway of co-educational school: Tradesmen’s Entrance. Two girls out of twenty in woodworking class. (Diary note from tour of prospective school 2015)

‘Let’s visit the Party Princess website. She might be able to help.’ Seconds later a girl appeared on the screen wearing a tiara and holding a present. ‘That’s the Party Princess,’ explained Sophie. ‘She knows everything there is to know about parties.’ Sophie clicked on the WHAT’S HOT section.

Party Princess

WHAT’S HOT RIGHT NOW? MOCKTAIL PARTIES!

• Wear your best clothes
• Serve brightly coloured soft drinks and juices in tall glasses
• Offer unusual snacks on silver trays
• Play croquet

Annabelle grinned. ‘That’s it!’ she said. ‘I’ll have a mocktail party!’ (Badger 2013: 101)

Melbourne mother angry girl can’t wear pants as part of school uniform. (Woods 2016) (Diary note of newspaper headline)

[On attending a symposium] At the end of the long day, a very senior academic in our faculty says of a couple of his doctoral colleague co-presenters, ‘Well, the girls have kept us on track.’.... I know that whatever else I might wish to be, I do not wish to be a girl. (Personal thesis vignette, “The Girls” 2012)

Being a girl isn’t what it used to be. IT’S BETTER. (Barbie I Can Be Facebook app. Mattel 2012)

Back to the job interview. First question. ‘Where did you go to school?’ asks the Principal. It’s not something that, at 46, I put on my CV. I answer, naming an academic private girls’ school. The Principal and Vice Principal, both women slightly older than me, look at each other and smile. ‘Yes. You look like a Presbyterian Ladies’ College girl.’ My face falls into dismay, they misunderstand, and attempt to reassure me. ‘Don’t worry, it’s a compliment.’ Next question. I am wasting their time, with my shades of grey, in a navy and white world. (Personal thesis vignette, “Shine” 2013)

I’m in control
I broke the mould
The girl you see
Is up to me. (“Here I Am” song lyrics from Barbie the Princess and the Popstar (2011))

‘That girl will drive me mad,’ thought Mam’zelle to herself, ‘with her spots and her greasy hair and her pale face. How she whines!’ (Blyton [1987]1942: 44)

Rachel (teacher co-researcher, from meeting transcript, 2012):
There’s one of mine, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she was still sitting there playing with her little dolls. She’s gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous … but she’s very young.

Lucinda is poised to write an excellent thesis. She has completed a full draft which has been read by [her] supervisors. We are all in agreement that the thesis has the
potential to address the issues with which Lucinda is concerned in a startlingly fresh and original way. It breaks the mould of theses as they are traditionally done in Education. (Supervisor's response, Higher Degree by Research Annual Review, 2014)

‘Oh, I do feel so happy, Julian.’
‘You’ve a right to,’ said Julian. ‘Funny person, aren’t you? Naughtiest Girl in the School—and Best Girl in the School!’ (Blyton [1945]1997: 214)

The increased prominence of the colour pink and other ‘girly girl’ characteristics will likely be a key influencer of Millennial women’s consumer behaviour throughout their lifespan. (Young and Hinesly 2012: 7)

I enter the classroom. GOOD MORNING GOBLINS AND PRINCESSES announces the whiteboard in a chunky font. CLICK AND DRAG YOUR ICON TO MARK THE ROLL. On one side of the screen, an army of boy goblins waits, while princesses preen on the other, separated by a large castle. Battle lines are drawn. Maybe they will fight it out over the chores when they get inside the castle, like the rest of us. Even the teacher has an identical princess icon with her name on it. (Personal thesis vignette, “Goblins and Princesses” 2013 written after taking my daughter to school)

Rachel (teacher co-researcher):
Some of the Year 9 girls who went up to City Band, they wore suits. Half of them going up dressed like they were going to a disco, then a couple of them—there was just this sort of ‘I’m not going to participate in this’—wore suits. So I think you’d have quite a few who think that this is something they don’t relate to.

On the school tour we follow the familiar pattern of various lectures in a hall followed by a walk around led by some photogenic and charming senior students. It all goes smoothly until we reach the gym. Here we pause in a dark breezeway; we cannot see the gym because dark paper has been stuck all over the windows. We ask why. The students tell us: ‘We had to do this because the girls didn’t feel comfortable using the gym without it. The boys were looking through the windows and hassling them. So we’re trying to get more girls in.’ (Diary notes from school tour 2012)

‘Such a nasty woman.’ US presidential candidate Donald Trump on his opponent, Hillary Clinton, in their third and final televised debate. (NBC News, 19 October 2016)

Complaints have been made against a judge who verbally abused a defendant in a retaliatory exchange after he launched a foul-mouthed tirade at her from the dock, the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office (JCIO) has said. Judge Patricia Lynch QC was sentencing John Hennigan at Chelmsford crown court for his ninth breach of an antisocial behaviour order in 11 years when the exchange took place. Lynch’s withering comments came when Hennigan, 50, told her she was ‘a bit of a cunt,’ to which she retorted: ‘You are a bit of a cunt yourself. Being offensive to me does not help.’ After Hennigan shouted back ‘Go fuck yourself,’ she replied: ‘You too.’ (Davies 2016)

The complaints to the School Meeting were so serious that the two judges and the Jury took a long time to discuss them. In the meantime, the rest of the
children also discussed the matter among themselves. Not many of them were for Robert, for he was not liked, but on the other hand most of the boys and girls felt that Elizabeth had no right to lose her temper so fiercely.

‘And after all,’ whispered one child to another, ‘she was the naughtiest girl in the school last term, you know.’ (Blyton [1942]1987: 30)

What if a girl wanted to be a goblin? What if a boy wanted to be a princess? Heaven forbid. I am dying to ask if Amy could have been a goblin, but I don’t want to be the troublesome teacher mum doing a PhD in education who spoils all the lovely fun everyone is having. Must be a nice supportive mummy princess too, and slide my icon back home to my ivory tower… The other mothers are probably thrilled about the new roll call. Many of them have long blonde hair. They don’t need a grey-brown goblin mother with her grimaces upsetting all the loveliness. This PhD is turning me into a goblin, though: I am grumpy all the time. (Personal thesis vignette, “Goblins and Princesses” 2013)

Lola let her eyes wander back up to her mum’s face. Her cheeks were brushed lightly with rouge, and her eyelashes looked longer and darker than normal. With her hair up and wispy, she looked …

‘Mum…’ Lola breathed, ‘You look, you look…’

‘Like a princess. A big princess!’ Tess finished for her. (Perry 2013b: 436)

Fragments of Glitter

The girl in the text, the girl made by any arrangement of drawn lines and letter signifiers, is a flimsy typographic stencil layered into a much more elaborate collage, always in formation. The elements of this collage are always calling each other into being, always relational, struggling to assert diachronic depth and linearity, and flatter synchronic juxtaposition so that we can make meaning even as multiplicity spins meaning away.

Conclusion

This article complicates, rather than complies with, the notion of the girl in the text as an entity that readers can identify, study, and compare. My daughter is addicted to Blyton’s cliff-hangers and experiences the static, conversation-focused, individualized go girls as unbearably dull. Blyton’s covers suggest camaraderie, rebellion, and adventure while the go girls stand stiffly on their own, in glossy pink gear, on a glossy pink background of shiny pink hearts. Blyton’s girls see boys as friends. The go girls see them as boyfriends. There are myriad points for textual comparison that lead us only to historical
determinism and conclusions such as girls were different back then or girls are hyperfeminized today.

Instead I put these titles to work differently to demonstrate how, for readers identifying as girls or women, reading about any girl is to participate in the ongoing negotiation of our own schoolgirl fictions in the moment. I propose that this negotiation takes the form of competing discourses and materially realised memories of both restraint and loss of control, of flyaway hair, and shame at the spreading flower of blood on the skirt of our school uniform; of being a good girl, and yet having the capacity to call a man a cunt.

Walkerdine quotes Catherine Clement, whose emancipatory story echoes her own:

“As I found my own voice in analysis, droning on day after day, it gradually took the place occupied for so long by the schools. One day it was inevitable that I should cease to be a schoolgirl” (1990: xi).

In contrast, informed by my writing and arranging to inquire, I propose that women readers never cease to be schoolgirls. We are always the girl in our own title, the protagonist in our own story who must act inside the oxymoron of claiming agency despite broader contexts that deny it. We are yesterday’s, today’s and tomorrow’s woman (girl) all at once. We can never detach ourselves from how she is represented; we are still becoming her, making her as we think, write, and speak. In relation to education and the study of literature, we can never deliver her as the answer to a comprehension question, or as a dispassionate reading that does not recognize this ongoing and difficult coalescence.

If negotiation is understood also as tension, then we can connect with the rage Walkerdine (1990) finds in the gap between socialization and capacity, a heteroglossic space. Between what pulls in and what spins out, friction creates an incendiary spark. My daughter suddenly tells me she can no longer play on the playground equipment at school because boys are looking up her uniform skirt. I buy her five pairs of short leggings to wear under it. Within a week a notice comes home from school telling us leggings under uniforms are banned. I imagine Amy, with her leg hooked over the playground bar, spinning and spinning as she loves to do, a Catherine Wheel spinning off a spark that could burn down the school.

I hope this writing and the constellation of theory invoked here might spark other scholars to incorporate these ideas into their own formulations, work with them in further artful collecting and collaging to think about the process of figuring the girl. By taking up any of these rhetorical prompts
into their own assemblages, other writers can expand the parameters of my own lived experience as a white, cis-gendered, middle class girl and bring other heteroglossic, or oxymoronic tensions to bear.

Where, decades after Walkerdine’s *Schoolgirl Fictions* (1990), are the other flashes of anger at always being girled, always tied to what is most designated as most abject in culture (Weber and Mitchell 1995)? Where are the other girls simultaneously empowered by a title, by the monitor’s badge, the doctoral trencher, the judge’s gavel, or even leadership of the so-called free world? These schoolgirl stories continue to detonate, for example in the work of Melissa Wolfe (2016), whose filmed accounts of school uniform shame resonate with my own descriptions. It would be exciting to collect and juxtapose more contradictory stories and fragments, to explore how the girl in the text is also and always figured by the girl in the world.

**Note**

1. I have used pseudonyms for my daughter and co-researcher teachers.

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