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# Consumerism-Driven History: The American Girl Brand as Publisher and Arbiter of Girlhood Identity

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Consumerism-Driven History:  
The American Girl Brand as Publisher and  
Arbiter of Girlhood Identity

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*Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Book Publishing*



## *Abstract*

American Girl is a highly recognizable brand that wears several hats: publisher, dollmaker, and purported educator. Yet many researchers point out a disconnect between merchandise-driven aspects of the company and its educational qualities, as well as the set of cultural values suggested in material consumption versus the brand literature's stated representation of girlhood. This paper outlines research pertaining to these issues before engaging in a close reading analysis of one of the historical character's book series, ascertaining how the aforementioned concepts play out in the text itself. Assessment of American Girl consumption practices further draw from the brand's website and features of its flagship brandstores. This paper concludes that there is indeed a disparity in experience between an American Girl *consumer* and an American Girl *reader*; moreover, young readers are presented with a harmfully simplified version of US history as to not impede the brand's ability to create an identity in girls that lends itself to specific purchasing practices. This research thus illustrates the importance of looking beyond a brand's claimed values, and indicates more responsible approaches to children's historical fiction for those publishers looking to connect with readers in a more genuine way.

## *Keywords*

American Girl, historical fiction, children's historical fiction, children's literature, branding, branded fiction, marketing, close reading analysis, textual/literary analysis, marketing, education, bookstores, retail, dolls, cultural pedagogy

## *Introduction*

In the publishing world, American Girl is an outlier. Most readers tend to be more familiar with specific authors and book series than publishers, but such is not the case for this company that combines books, dolls, and a host of other products and experiences under one identity. Royle et al. observe that "many consumers still do not identify with the publisher when buying a book, as they would identify with the brand, or product name, when buying other consumer goods."<sup>1</sup> Yet for American Girl, the categories of brand and book are irrevocably intertwined. It is nearly

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Royle, Louise Cooper, and Rosemary Stockdale, "The Use of Branding by Trade Publishers: An Investigation into Marketing the Book as a Brand Name Product," *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Winter 1999-2000, 3.

impossible to engage with books from the company without being aware of the world they occupy, and AG's ability to attract consumers is clear: the brand has been consistently popular since the 1980s and, as of 2017, has sold over 147 million books and 25 million dolls. It earns more than 400 million dollars annually and is recognizable to more than ninety percent of girls in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

But AG's success has also invited critique around its impact on young girls. Although the company presents itself as an educational source that has inspired countless girls to learn about American history, many scholars argue this is a façade. They point to what they perceive as misleading representations of history in AG publications, and an unhealthy focus on the accrument of expensive merchandise that contradicts the values-based messaging the brand ascribes to its identity. This paper explores the idea that American Girl is an example of a brand that has "constructed an image of childhood to be adopted through consumption."<sup>3</sup> In doing so, I explore the brand's dueling dynamic between entertainment and education, with emphasis on a comparison between their merchandise, its associated values, and the historical book series. I investigate how AG has inspired generations of consumers to develop a loyalty so deep as to consider their interaction with the brand an identity that "satisfies social and psychological needs."<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, I address these primary questions:

*As a brand that offers historical fiction series for children as well as an extensive line of dolls and merchandise unrelated to historical fiction, what are the primary characteristics of these two 'arms' of the brand? In terms of the overall cultural values and sense of history the AG brand communicates, in what ways are the books and other merchandise similar, and how are they different? What is the impact of this on young reader experience and their understanding of the past?*

<sup>2</sup> Sami Schalk, "BeForever?: Disability in American Girl Historical Fiction," *Children's Literature* 45 (2017): 165, Project Muse.

<sup>3</sup> Diane Carver Sekeres, "The Market Child and Branded Fiction: A Synergism of Children's Literature, Consumer Culture, and New Literacies," *Reading Research Quarterly* 44 (2009): 409.

<sup>4</sup> Jo Royle, Louise Cooper, and Rosemary Stockdale, "The Use of Branding by Trade Publishers: An Investigation into Marketing the Book as a Brand Name Product," *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Winter 1999-2000, 5.

## *Part One*

### *History of American Girl*

American Girl is the brainchild of Pleasant Rowland, a former teacher and children's textbook author who, as the origin story goes, conceived of the idea while struggling to find suitable Christmas presents for her young nieces.<sup>5</sup> Frustrated by the lack of options beyond Cabbage Patch Kids and Barbies, Rowland reflected on a recent trip to Colonial Williamsburg and conceptualized a doll that was rooted in history and could serve as a 'best friend' figure for young girls, rather than something to mother or imagine in an adult world. With the idea to combine education with play, Rowland founded the Pleasant Company and American Girl in 1986 to "prolong and protect those fleeting years of childhood when girls are old enough to read and still love to play ... [and] give girls an understanding of their past and a sense of pride in the traditions they share with girls of yesterday."<sup>6</sup>

American Girl initially released three eighteen-inch historical dolls representing specific periods in US history, accompanied by a semi-illustrated book series of six stories about the character's life between the ages of nine and ten. Kirsten, a Swedish immigrant, settled in Minnesota with her family in 1854. Samantha, a wealthy orphan taken in by her grandmother, lived in 1904 Victorian New York. Molly represented the WWII home front experience, with a father away at war in 1944. The books' titles were identical save for the substitution of each character's name into the format, and included a "Peek into the Past" section in the back matter

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<sup>5</sup> Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Elizabeth P. Lester Roushanzamir, "Everything We Do Is A Celebration of You!: Pleasant Company Constructs American Girlhood," *The Communication Review*, 2003, 46, doi:10.1080/10714420309433.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Hade, "Lies My Children's Books Taught Me: History Meets Popular Culture in 'The American Girls' Books," in *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1999), 155-6.

intended to give further historical context to the story. Rowland said, “The books are at the core of the collection, but what we want to create is an entire world for readers.”<sup>7</sup>

This world included period outfits and accessories for the dolls, as well as “historical paraphernalia” like writing slates and lunch buckets.<sup>8</sup> Parents and children flocked to the brand; the former seizing upon its ostensible educational qualities and wholesomeness in contrast to the ‘maturity’ of Barbies, and the former enchanted by the elegantly presented dolls with an array of trappings to pine for in the glossy pages of the AG catalog—the only method of purchasing AG products for many years. This system, by design, created an air of exclusivity among brand goods. Prospective customers would not find American Girl dolls displayed haphazardly on a shelf in a Toys “R” Us, but presented only as the company intended. This perception of the brand was necessary to justify the dolls’ price tags: \$68 in 1986, with suggested accessories adding up quickly.<sup>9</sup> But, Rowland insisted in a 1994 press release, there were no other high-quality toys based on positive values for young girls available.<sup>10</sup> Parents latched onto Rowland’s idea that the books and dolls could help delay “a whole generation of young girls” from being “rushed headlong into adolescence.”<sup>11</sup> Ironically given Rowland’s initial positing of AG dolls in contrast to Barbies, she made a \$700 million deal with Mattel in 1998. The toy giant bought the Pleasant Company and gave Rowland the position of Mattel vice chair and allowed AG to retain autonomy in a separate Wisconsin headquarters.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “New Company to Launch Collection of Girls’ Historical Fiction and Toy Reproductions,” *Publishers Weekly*, August 22, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Persad, “Look How Much American Girl Dolls Have Changed Since You Were A Kid,” *Huffington Post*, December 15, 2015, accessed February 14, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y2pbpu2a>.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Susina, “American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 131, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1170>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy J. Kreshel, “‘I’m an American Girl . . . Whatever *That* Means’: Girls Consuming Pleasant Company’s American Girl Identity,” *Journal of Communication*, March 2002, 141.

The 1990s saw the introduction of Felicity (1774, American Revolution), Addy (1864, Civil War), Josefina (1824, then-unincorporated New Mexico), and Kit (1934, Great Depression). AG later added characters representing eras and cultures from the Nez Perce in 1764 to 1974 San Francisco. Beyond the historical characters, AG has developed myriad other doll product lines. There are dolls meant to match their young owner, with a variety of skin tones and hairstyles available; a Bitty Baby collection; a line of fourteen-inch dolls called WellieWishers; and a contemporary Girl of the Year line. In 2014, AG revamped their historical collection, rebranding it as BeForever. Six pre-structured books per series became two books with independent titles, and AG added mystery and choose-your-own-adventure books for the characters. There are also AG movies, flagship brandstores, clothing lines, board games, and general logo-adorned merchandise. Their publishing line features advice books, activity/craft books, cookbooks, journals, and general fiction for children and tweens. “The American Girl brand,” asserts Borghini et al., “is simultaneously a toy, a library of texts, and a set of values.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Brand Messaging: A Contradiction*

While American Girl has found success in building a multifaceted brand with strong associated identity and values, many scholars critique the company’s messaging as disingenuous. Rowland said about the function of the brand in 1998 on the Pleasant Company website,<sup>14</sup>

We give girls chocolate cake with vitamins. Our books are exciting, our magazine is fun, and our dolls are pretty. But most importantly, they all give girls a sense of self and an understanding of where they came from and who they are today.

<sup>13</sup> Stefania Borghini et al., “Why Are Themed Brandstores So Powerful? Retail Brand Ideology at American Girl Place,” *Journal of Retailing* 85, no. 3 (2009): 365, doi:10.1016/j.jretai.2009.05.003.

<sup>14</sup> Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy J. Kreshel, “‘I’m an American Girl . . . Whatever *That* Means’: Girls Consuming Pleasant Company’s American Girl Identity,” *Journal of Communication*, March 2002, 139.

AG espouses this idea of “chocolate cake with vitamins” in various iterations across its merchandising, indicating that their products are not only enjoyable for girls but contribute to their education and development. Their website includes a page detailing what it means to be an American Girl: “Now, more than ever, it’s time to focus on how our girls are growing up. At American Girl, we believe character is everything.”<sup>15</sup> The use of “our girls” is reflective of a brand that presents itself as something of a co-parent; a compassionate vehicle for offering positive role models. “Through the joy of play and the lessons of relatable characters set throughout American history to modern day,” the website continues, “your daughter will test herself by discovering who she is.”<sup>16</sup>

This message is repeated across their product lines, including the historical books. The more recent historical characters’ webpages include a section entitled “Guidance for girls today” highlighting key modern takeaways from the series at hand. Lessons from Melody in 1964 include “courage in the face of conflict,” explaining, “After a church bombing in Alabama, Melody must summon all her strength to perform a tribute in front of her own congregation.”<sup>17</sup> Nanea from 1941 Honolulu supports diversity: “Even though suspicion rises about those of Japanese descent on the island, Nanea is loyal to her friends and defends their patriotism.”<sup>18</sup>

The characters “who will encourage your girl to become a strong, empowered young woman ready to change the world”<sup>19</sup> come at a hefty price tag, however. Today, a doll and her first book ring up at \$115, and additional outfits, accessories, and furniture rapidly add cost. To

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<sup>15</sup> “What Does It Mean to Be an American Girl?” American Girl, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/character-matters>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “Lift Your Voice in the Fight for Fairness and Freedom: Melody’s Story,” American Girl, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.americangirl.com/discover/meet-melody>.

<sup>18</sup> “When Fear Strikes, Let the Aloha Spirit Be Your Guide: Nanea’s Story,” American Girl, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.americangirl.com/discover/meet-nanea>.

<sup>19</sup> “What Does It Mean to Be an American Girl?” American Girl, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/character-matters>.

help Melody “summon her strength” and perform, one is encouraged to purchase a \$250 recording studio, a \$38 microphone, and a \$48 electric piano.<sup>20 21 22</sup> To even partially recreate Nanea’s world with a luau set and dress, bed, a shave ice shop, and her family’s market would total \$562.<sup>23</sup>

Studies that conducted interviews with former doll owners, now women in their twenties and thirties, underscore this emphasis on expensive items and the pressure to have certain products to fully engage with the characters’ worlds. In a study by Elizabeth Marshall, a respondent reflects, “I would read something in the book and they would be talking about the bedroom ... and I’d get out the catalogue and I could look at all the stuff and see what I could get to recreate what was going on in the story.”<sup>24</sup> Although participants in this study also note that the books are “all really about strong girls ... overcoming something at some point in time,” the perceived importance of merchandise is strong. One woman says, “I remember liking Samantha because [she] had so much extra stuff that came with [her] and not a lot of girls I knew had them.”<sup>25</sup>

In another interview-based study, Molly Brookfield affirms that most respondents related to the brand via material culture: “The majority of the responses mentioned specific merchandise, and the dolls and accessories, rather than the books, tended to evoke more passionate nostalgic recollections.” One woman reminisces, “It was a Big Deal to have the doll ... [and] if you had multiple outfits and accessories (including the furniture), you were a god among

<sup>20</sup> “Melody’s Recording Studio,” American Girl, accessed April 28, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y2mmzupz>.

<sup>21</sup> “Melody’s Microphone Set,” American Girl, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y6tnkfzq>.

<sup>22</sup> “Melody’s Electric Piano,” American Girl, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yxk7y3mk>.

<sup>23</sup> “When Fear Strikes, Let the Aloha Spirit Be Your Guide: Nanea’s Story,” American Girl, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.americangirl.com/discover/meet-nanea>.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Marshall, “Consuming Girlhood: Young Women, Femininities, and American Girl,” *Girlhood Studies* 2 (Summer 2009): 101.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-2.

the girls.”<sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> In this study, girls also tended to select dolls based on appearance rather than attachment to a particular historical story. Another states, “I really liked Samantha [because] she was pretty and had girly clothes and I’m pretty sure this was 90% of her appeal.”<sup>28</sup>

A further widespread critique of the brand’s ultimate focus on materialism over character-building plays out in AG’s flagship brandstores. The first American Girl Place opened in Chicago in 1998. (The company added a New York City location in 2004 and now has seventeen locations nationwide.) AGP includes not only boutiques to sell dolls and a bookstore for their publications, but a restaurant and salon.<sup>29</sup> Kozinets et al. define a themed flagship brand store as one where consumers visit to engage in personally relevant, company-staged experiences that revolve around an established brand.<sup>30</sup> AGP is a prime example of this; it presents a carefully cultivated fusion of entertainment and an immersive brand experience “where the two [are] so closely intertwined as to be indistinguishable from one another.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus, AGP is a shopping experience not focused solely on the final product of purchases themselves, but the memories and sense of brand connection visitors build along the way. Many factors contribute to AGP’s status as a destination more than a store. At the semi-formal restaurant, dolls (AG-brand only) are included at the table in specially-designed booster seats, and at the salon, dolls can be pampered with services like ear piercing, hairstyling, and spa packages that include a kit with a faux-face mask and cucumber stickers for their eyes.<sup>32</sup> AGP

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<sup>26</sup> Molly Brookfield, “From American Girls into American Women: A Discussion of American Girl Doll Nostalgia,” *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5 (Summer 2012): 67, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/10.3167/ghs.2012.050105>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy J. Kreshel, “‘I’m an American Girl . . . Whatever *That* Means’: Girls Consuming Pleasant Company’s American Girl Identity,” *Journal of Communication*, March 2002, 141.

<sup>30</sup> Kozinets, R.V., J.F. Sherry Jr., B. DeBerry-Spence, A. Duhachek, K. Nuttavuthisit and D. Storm (2002), “Themed Flagship Brand Stores in New Millennium: Theory, Practice, Prospects,” *Journal of Retailing*, 78 (1), 17–29.

<sup>31</sup> Stefania Borghini et al., “Why Are Themed Brandstores So Powerful? Retail Brand Ideology at American Girl Place,” *Journal of Retailing* 85, no. 3 (2009): 363, doi:10.1016/j.jretai.2009.05.003.

<sup>32</sup> “American Girl Store (Water Tower Place),” American Girl, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://www.americangirl.com/retail/chicago.html>.

also hosts social gatherings. In Chicago, upcoming events for summer 2019 include hair salon parties, a double-decker bus tour of the city, tea parties, fireworks on Lake Michigan, beginner's ballet, and morning yoga, where girls can learn poses for themselves and their doll.<sup>33</sup>

In American Girl's emphasis on material items and exclusive rituals only available through association with the brand, many feel AG has prioritized these revenue-generating ventures over positive value-affirming literature and responsible representations of history. Scholars argue that the books are oversimplified, neglect to show characters participating in societal-level change, and portray demonstrations of empowerment for girls unrealistic for the given time periods. Angela Hubler explains that "the substitution of an ahistorical conception of female voice for the representation of female historical experience [is] particularly problematic."<sup>34</sup> For many, this belief drives their rejection of AG's historical fiction.

### *Ahistorical Historical Fiction and Reader Impact*

Historical fiction is an invaluable resource for children, providing them with "a vicarious experience for places and people they could otherwise never know."<sup>35</sup> However, many criticize American Girl's interpretation of the genre. Daniel Hade, for example, details five factual errors in a single paragraph of *Meet Kirsten's* "Peek into the Past." Kirsten's name is spelled incorrectly (coming from Sweden, her name would be spelled Kersten Larsson rather than Kirsten Larson; Kirsten is the Danish/Norwegian spelling). The passage states that Kirsten would never have seen the ocean nor a train had she not emigrated, but Sweden is surrounded on three sides by

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<sup>33</sup> "American Girl Store (Water Tower Place)," American Girl, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://www.americangirl.com/retail/chicago.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Angela E. Hubler, "Girl Power and History in the Dear America Series Books," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 99, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1657>.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Taylor Rycik and Brenda Rosier, "The Return of Historical Fiction," *The Reading Teacher* 63, no. 2 (October 2009): 163, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40347667>.

large bodies of water, and did have trains at this time. The paragraph also claims that Kirsten would never have traveled more than twenty miles from her home had she stayed in Sweden, but this notion is unsupported by historical trends. Finally, the route Kirsten's family is described as traveling to the US wasn't available until the twentieth century, nearly fifty years after her story takes place.<sup>36</sup> Inaccurate details like this add up and have a cumulative effect.

In Samantha's series, her friendship with a poverty-stricken girl, Nellie—who is later adopted by Samantha's wealthy family—features heavily in the storyline. Hade argues that the books downplay the labor hardships and tenement living conditions that children like Nellie experienced, and misrepresent the era's lack of labor laws in the Samantha's "Peek into the Past."<sup>37</sup> Readers learn about Nellie's misfortunes, but Hade criticizes the fact that while poor children vastly outnumbered rich ones like Samantha, "it is not [children in poverty] that the Pleasant Company holds up for contemporary American girls to study, connect with, and feel a sense of pride in past accomplishment ...[but] rather the life of a very privileged, wealthy girl of leisure..."<sup>38</sup> It is not a coincidence that American Girl made Samantha, rather than Nellie, the character to represent 1904 New York. And when AG released a (later disbanded) line of dolls that were companion characters to the main girls, it was a post-adoption version of Nellie in a fancy blue dress they put forth, with a fur-trimmed coat and silky pajamas also available for purchase.

Others argue that children's historical literature should not be held to adult standards of accuracy. Historian Fred Nielsen claims that "children that young do not need, and probably

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Hade, "Lies My Children's Books Taught Me: History Meets Popular Culture in 'The American Girls' Books," in *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1999), 155-7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

should not have, unexpurgated history.”<sup>39</sup> Social critic Neil Postman contends that modern childhood is disappearing as kids learn too much and too early about global violence.<sup>40</sup> Children’s literature scholars Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel, conversely, say that “Neither children nor literature for them can be extricated from politics.”<sup>41</sup> Sami Schalk argues that there is an increasing shift in scholarship to “address more diverse, difficult, and controversial issues of both the past and present,”<sup>42</sup> and another children’s literature specialist, Kenneth B. Kidd, agrees: “Subjects previously thought too upsetting for children are now deemed appropriate and even necessary.”<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, American Girl should be held to high historical standards because the brand presents *itself* as an esteemed educational source. The original dolls and books came with teaching materials, and they offered an “America at School” curriculum in 1994 used by more than two thousand classes that year.<sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> Today, their website features BeForever Teacher’s Guides that tout correlations to state Common Core standards.<sup>46</sup> AG’s marketing also endorses the brand as accurate and thorough history. Their webpage about Nanea includes the headline “Authentic from the start,” going on to describe extensive efforts undertaken to realistically portray a girl’s life in 1941 Honolulu—an advisory board of experts who were consulted about “language, heritage, dress, and more,” plus the author’s own research of archival materials from

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<sup>39</sup> Fred Nielsen, “American History through the Eyes of the American Girls,” *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, December 15, 2003, 90, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/1542-734X.00014>.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Sami Schalk, “BeForever?: Disability in American Girl Historical Fiction,” *Children’s Literature* 45 (2017): 179, Project Muse.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth B. Kidd, “‘A’ Is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the ‘Children’s Literature of Atrocity.’” *Children’s Literature* 33.1, 2005, 120–49.

<sup>44</sup> Diane Carver Sekeres, “The Market Child and Branded Fiction: A Synergism of Children’s Literature, Consumer Culture, and New Literacies,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 44 (2009): 407.

<sup>45</sup> Jan Susina, “American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 131, <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1170>.

<sup>46</sup> Pat Scales, “BeForever, Samantha 1904: A Teacher’s Guide to Manners and Mischief,” American Girl, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yyo6xkyl>.

the time. The site quotes board member Dorinda Makanaonalani Nicholson, credited as a Hawaiian native and Pearl Harbor eyewitness: “I came away with a deep appreciation that American Girl has for ‘getting it right’ for the history and for the culture.”<sup>47</sup> If AG holds itself to this standard of legitimacy, it is fair to question their avoidance of more unpleasant aspects of history.

The impact of sanitizing history is significant. Lisa Marcus explains, “in their erasure of conflict, oppression, and resistance, [the books] also fail to offer models for confronting justice in a complex world.”<sup>48</sup> If AG is to claim, for instance, that a lesson to be taken from Melody’s story is “courage in the face of conflict” after an event as tragic as the Birmingham church bombing, they should portray the characters engaging in dialogue and actions befitting of the gravity and intricacy of that political situation as appropriate for the target age group of 8–12. Yet this dynamic is lacking across their publications, and it limits young readers’ ability to apply historical lessons to modern-day problems. Not only do the books tend to erase conflict, but they often present overly simplistic solutions to serious issues, or narratives with an “...emphasis on overcoming through proper positive attitude.”<sup>49</sup> Characters struggle, but always reach a tidy solution, even when their real-life equivalent would have been unable to achieve that outcome with the same resources. Kim Wilson argues, “bestowing ... a voice on those who were denied it is, by and in that act, ahistorical.”<sup>50</sup> Further, unrealistic portrayals trivialize the struggles of real

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<sup>47</sup> When Fear Strikes, Let the Aloha Spirit Be Your Guide: Nanea’s Story, "American Girl, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.americangirl.com/discover/meet-nanea>.

<sup>48</sup> Lisa Marcus, "Dolling Up History: Fictions of Jewish American Girlhood," *Girlhood Studies* 5 (Summer 2012): 32, doi:10.3167/ghs.2012.050103.

<sup>49</sup> Sami Schalk, "BeForever?: Disability in American Girl Historical Fiction," *Children’s Literature* 45 (2017): 174, Project Muse.

<sup>50</sup> Kim Wilson, "'Are They Telling Us the Truth?': Constructing National Character in the Scholastic Press Historical Journal Series," *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 138-9, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2007.0035>.

people, and “intimates ... that rights and freedoms are easily won, making a mockery of those who suffered and endured (and by implication did not have the courage to take a stand).”<sup>51</sup>

Certainly, even writers and publishers with the best of intentions struggle to find balance between realism and age-appropriateness in children’s historical fiction. But most publishers do not have a product wholly dependent upon stories set in living conditions that translate to covetable toys. Most publishers do not have a business model that fiercely relies on readers identifying with book characters as friends who are, essentially, just like them; friends whose created world they will then seek to engage with in a highly prescribed monetary way. Rosner expands, “Once this attachment [between girl and doll] is established, purchasing the objects presented within the text of the book ... becomes a way of holding on to the emotional experiences.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, AG “[recasts] the past deliberately through an emotional lens that promotes purchasable Products.”<sup>53</sup>

## *Part Two*

### *Methods*

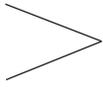
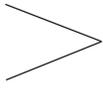
To explore the concepts detailed in part one, I engaged in a close reading of one character’s entire book collection. I selected Samantha to represent the longest time span and widest breadth of publication; her books range from 1986 to 2016, and she has more titles in her collection than Molly. (Kirsten, the final character published in 1986, is ‘retired’ and her merchandise no longer sold.) Reading a series spanning a thirty-year period allowed for the narrative to potentially

<sup>51</sup> Kim Wilson, “‘Are They Telling Us the Truth?’: Constructing National Character in the Scholastic Press Historical Journal Series,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 139, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2007.0035>.

<sup>52</sup> Molly Rosner, “The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children’s Consumer Culture,” *Young People, Texts, Cultures* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 44, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1353/jeu.2014.0019>.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

change over time in response to cultural shifts and/or public critique. I analyzed the following books:

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|--|---|---|
| <p><i>Meet Samantha</i> (1986), Susan Adler<br/> <i>Samantha Learns a Lesson</i> (1986), Susan Adler<br/> <i>Samantha's Surprise</i> (1986), Maxine Rose Schur</p> |  | <p><i>Manners and Mischief: A Samantha Classic Volume 1</i> (2014), Adler and Schur</p> |
| <p><i>Happy Birthday, Samantha!</i> (1987), Valerie Tripp<br/> <i>Samantha Saves the Day</i> (1988), Tripp<br/> <i>Changes for Samantha</i> (1988), Tripp</p>      |  | <p><i>Lost and Found: A Samantha Classic Volume 2</i> (2014), Tripp</p>                 |
- Samantha's Short Story Collection* (2006), Tripp and Sarah Masters Buckley
- The Curse of Ravenscourt: A Samantha Mystery* (2005), Buckley  
*The Cry of the Loon: A Samantha Mystery* (2009), Barbara Steiner  
*Clue in the Castle Tower: A Samantha Mystery* (2011), Buckley  
*Danger in Paris: A Samantha Mystery* (2015), Buckley  
*The Stolen Sapphire: A Samantha Mystery* (2016), Buckley
- The Lilac Tunnel: My Journey with Samantha* (2014), Erin Falligant
- Nellie's Promise* (2004), Tripp

In reading, I focused on these primary questions based on the above literature review:

- What are the main characters' primary values? What behavior do they endorse in their thoughts and actions?
- What is the relationship between the characters themselves and consumerism?
- What issues do the characters care most about? How do they resolve conflicts around these issues?
- What is the impact of supplemental materials (components of the books beyond the main body of the text), and do they change over time?

There are inherent limitations to my textual approach, the most obvious being that any one character is only a sliver of the American Girl brand. AG has published hundreds of books, of which I only evaluated sixteen. Other series could have prompted different conclusions about the

relationship between education and consumerism in the books. And although I analyzed Samantha for the thirty-year time frame of publication to track potential changes in tone and approach, more recent books were bound by the established framework for the character. It would be unrealistic to expect AG to change Samantha's entire background of privilege in recent additions to her story.

Further, my interpretation of these questions as applied to Samantha's world are subject to the unwitting bias of my own experiences and past observations, as well as the literature I had access to in researching. And while I discuss ideas around historical accuracy, this work is not a deep historical analysis rooted in comparison between AG literature and historical archives, primary source documents, et cetera; it is instead a subjective interpretation of the above questions. Finally, my impressions of American Girl as a company are limited to what is observable from the outside; I do not have access to internal decision-making processes that could shed light on key aspects of brand development, or conversations they had with authors about character and storyline development.

### *Findings and Analysis*

"Beforever is about making connections. It's about exploring the past, finding your place in the present, and thinking about the possibilities your future can bring. And it's about seeing the common thread that ties girls from all times together. The inspiring characters you will meet stand up for what they care about most: Helping others. Protecting the earth. Overcoming injustice. Through their courageous stories, discover how staying true to your own beliefs will help make your world better today—and tomorrow."

This inscription precedes all stories in the BeForever book series, and summarizes the moral standards American Girl purports to represent in their historical publications. Samantha's books

endorse these values as well: most of the characters exemplify kindness and compassion, are deeply loyal to friends and family, and stand up for others. Samantha is always sincere, as are the main figures in her life: her congenial Uncle Gard, who calls her Sam and invites her to ride in his new automobile and go sledding; his wife Cornelia, a suffragist who shows Samantha how to have fun while still remaining “ladylike”; and even her grandmother, who is portrayed as old-fashioned but ultimately always compromises her conservatism around issues Samantha—and modern readers—care about.

Although the character of Samantha largely prioritizes people over things, her stories display elements of consumerism in her fixation on dolls. “Did you see the doll in Schofield’s shop?” Samantha asks her grandmother in *Meet Samantha*. “Isn’t she beautiful?”<sup>54</sup> After receiving the doll, she picks it up gently and “hug[s] her very close.”<sup>55</sup> Samantha ultimately re-gifts this doll to Nellie, but becomes infatuated with another in *Samantha’s Surprise*: “Samantha sighed. ‘What I really want is the doll I saw at Schofield’s Toy Store,’ she said. ‘I want that doll more than anything in the world!’”<sup>56</sup> A later interaction with Cornelia endorses this sentiment.<sup>57</sup>

Just then a hand reached into the display and picked up the beautiful Nutcracker doll. “Oh, look at this doll! Isn’t it exquisite?” Samantha was startled. She hadn’t heard anyone come up behind her. She turned to find Cornelia.  
 “And look at the tiny Nutcracker in her arms,” Cornelia exclaimed. “This is the most wonderful doll in the store. Don’t you think so, Samantha?”  
 “Oh, yes,” Samantha agreed out loud. To herself she said, *Cornelia understands. She knows what’s special.*

<sup>54</sup> Susan Adler, *Meet Samantha* (American Girl Publishing, 1986), 14.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>56</sup> Maxine Rose Schur, *Samantha’s Surprise* (American Girl Publishing, 1986), 2-3.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

Samantha gets the doll for Christmas and declares, “I love her. I love her more than any other doll in the whole world.”<sup>58</sup> While it is realistic for a nine-year-old to enjoy dolls, this repeated praise of the toy seems less than coincidental. It supports Molly Rosner’s argument that although the books downplay the main characters’ materialistic drive, “the plots focus often on a longing for material goods that have been imbued with sentimental value”<sup>59</sup>—particularly when the goods in questions are the brand’s most visible product.

In addition to this American Girl-version of product placement, I found the critique levied against the books regarding historical oversimplification playing out as scholars described in the Samantha series, although with some improvement in later stories for a slightly older audience. The two central historical issues in the series are the role of women (suffrage and Victorian cultural notions of appropriate female behavior) and its depiction of child labor and poverty. The characters of Cornelia and Grandmary typically stimulate discussion around the former topic, with Cornelia representing a new generation of women seeking greater autonomy, and Grandmary a foil with a more traditional perspective:<sup>60</sup>

“[Grandmary] shook her head. ‘In my opinion, ladies should not gather in public places. Especially not to carry on about this voting nonsense.’  
 ‘Nonsense?’ Aunt Cornelia asked. Her voice rose ever so slightly.  
 ‘Of course,’ said Grandmary. ‘Voting is not a lady’s concern. It never has been. I see no reason to change things now. Those suffragists are making spectacles of themselves. They should stay at home where ladies belong.’”

In another book, a male character laments his female relative’s desire to pursue a newspaper career. Grandmary responds in kind. “Times are changing so fast ... Some girls from the best

<sup>58</sup> Maxine Rose Schur, *Samantha's Surprise* (American Girl Publishing, 1986), 57.

<sup>59</sup> Molly Rosner, “The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children’s Consumer Culture,” *Young People, Texts, Cultures* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jeu.2014.0019>.

<sup>60</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Happy Birthday, Samantha!* (American Girl Publishing, 1987), 31.

families want to get a job these days, just as if they were men.”<sup>61</sup> And when Gard and Cornelia bring Samantha a bicycle, Samantha has to beg to keep it, knowing her grandmother considers bikes “not proper for young ladies.”<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, the character of Nellie exposes Samantha to child labor, tenement houses, and societal ills outside Samantha’s life of privilege. When Samantha prepares a speech for school about recent societal advancements, including new technology in factories, Nellie educates her on actual factory conditions. “If your hair was long the machines could catch it and pull it right out,” she explains. “Once I saw that happen to a girl ... suddenly she was screaming and half her head was bleeding.”<sup>63</sup> Later, Samantha attempts to find Nellie in a poor part of New York, and compares the conditions she witnesses to her own background.<sup>64</sup>

It was more crowded than any room Samantha had ever seen. It was everything at once. One part was a kitchen. There were beds, and chairs pushed together to make beds, in each corner. In the middle of the room there was a wooden table where six children sat. They were making flowers out of paper. They all looked up shyly at Samantha, but their fingers never stopped twisting the colorful paper onto wire stems.

Newer books—specifically, the mystery and choose-your-own-adventure chapter books, as well as a one-off book focusing on Nellie—go into more detail about such living conditions, perhaps indicating *American Girl* seeks to quell criticism of the nature described in part one, and/or an acknowledgement of a reading level a step above *Meet Samantha* et al. Visiting a derelict apartment building in the mystery book *The Curse of Ravenscourt*, Samantha viscerally notes its squalor: “The stairway smelled of urine and unwashed bodies, and she tried to breathe as little as

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Masters Buckley, *Clue in the Castle Tower: A Samantha Mystery* (American Girl Publishing, 2011), 22-3.

<sup>62</sup> Valerie Tripp and Sarah Masters Buckley, *Samantha's Short Story Collection* (American Girl Publishing, 2006), 125.

<sup>63</sup> Susan Adler, *Samantha Learns a Lesson* (American Girl Publishing, 1986), 48.

<sup>64</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Changes for Samantha* (American Girl Publishing, 1988), 19-20.

possible.”<sup>65</sup> She makes a connection with one of the building’s young residents, only to recoil upon the realization that the child’s scalp was “covered in sores, and there were lice the size of sesame seeds crawling through her hair.”<sup>66</sup>

While such examples likely expose readers to new aspects of history, I contend the books do not go far enough to reflect the educational qualities the brand claims to impress upon these young readers, and ultimately offer naïve solutions to deeply ingrained societal problems.

Grandmary, a representative of traditional values, always amends her position without much strife. She quickly comes around on voting:<sup>67</sup>

“When I saw you up on the platform, Cornelia, I thought perhaps I ought to stay and listen.” Grandmary took Cornelia's hand. "I must admit that what I saw and what I heard gave me a bit of a surprise. I've always said that I'm too old to change my ways, but I've changed my mind today. You and the other ladies who spoke today were simply saying that women should stand up for what they think is right. That's exactly what I believe, too. And if that's what voting will give us a chance to do, then I think when *should* vote. The time for change *has* come.”

Grandmary also initially denounced women who donned bloomer pants to ride bicycles, but once she realizes Samantha values the opportunity to ride with her aunt and uncle, she quickly buys Samantha a pair. Cornelia is astonished, but Grandmary, it seems, has completely reversed her viewpoint. “Grandmary’s eyes twinkled. ‘A lady is a lady no matter what she’s wearing,’” she asserts, repeating a statement Cornelia said earlier in defense of bloomers.<sup>68</sup> The idea that individuals change long-held perspectives when gently confronted by more open-minded people is an earnest but unreliable one that underscores Marcus’s point about AG historical fiction presenting a weak model for confronting justice in a complex world.

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Masters Buckley, *The Curse of Ravenscourt: A Samantha Mystery* (American Girl Publishing, 2005), 97.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>67</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Happy Birthday, Samantha!* (American Girl Publishing, 1987), 55-6.

<sup>68</sup> Valerie Tripp and Sarah Masters Buckley, *Samantha's Short Story Collection* (American Girl Publishing, 2006), 146.

Regarding class issues, although I observed improvement in terms of more direct confrontation of the reality of urban poverty, later plotlines still present a model of change that only requires a heartfelt conversation between young girl and adult. After Nellie explains conditions in a tenement to the daughter of its notoriously cruel landlord in *The Curse of Ravenscourt*, for example, the woman convinces her father to change course. “[We] had a long talk, and I told him how I’d visited one of his tenements ... At first he was angry, but he finally forgave me. I’ve asked him to use the money ... to make his buildings decent places to live.”<sup>69</sup> I am not advocating against stories that present girls as agents of change, but rather ones that are unrealistic even in the context of children’s literature—and in this case, as part of a brand that touts its educational prowess.

Still, the improvements should be acknowledged. A significant flaw in the original six-book series was that the only ‘solution’ presented to widespread poverty was Samantha’s family adopting Nellie, something that solved the character’s problem on an individual scale but is not replicable for most, and did not acknowledge the issue at the societal level. But in *Nellie’s Promise*—the single book featuring her name released with the temporary line of AG secondary characters—Cornelia begins volunteering regularly at a settlement house. “I think the work that is done there to educate women is so important, and I’d like to help, if I can.”<sup>70</sup> This is one instance, at least, of replicable action for modern readers that can enrich their reading experience.

Finally, in terms of supplemental material, the nonfiction “Peek into the Past” sections theoretically function to legitimize the educational arm of the AG brand, but are lacking in this regard. Some offer a more balanced perspective in contrasting wealthy versus servant life, but

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<sup>69</sup> Sarah Masters Buckley, *The Curse of Ravenscourt: A Samantha Mystery* (American Girl Publishing, 2005), 165.

<sup>70</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Nellie’s Promise* (American Girl Publishing, 2004), 19.

many avoid referencing class altogether by framing descriptions of leisurely or high-brow pursuits as “girls like Samantha” or “families like Samantha’s” would \_\_\_\_\_. Middle-class families tend to be ignored altogether. Some of these sections further peddle a sanitized version of American life, like one description of the immigrant experience that counters negative experiences by simply saying, “...immigrants still found opportunities in this country. They worked hard to learn a new language, get better jobs, and earn more money. Soon they enjoyed a good life in their new land and became proud and respected Americans.”<sup>71</sup> Writers do not need to go into graphic detail about or cite age-inappropriate references to factual immigrant discrimination to communicate fundamental information about the immense struggles immigrants have faced settling in the US.

The most reprehensible “Peek into the Past” describes vaudeville entertainment and blackface in this way:<sup>72</sup>

Some African Americans found success in vaudeville, like comedian Bert Williams. He performed in *blackface*, makeup once worn by white performers to imitate black people. Black performers were required to wear blackface, too, because that was what white audiences expected to see. With his shabby suit and hat and oversized shoes, Williams poked fun not at his own race but at situations that everyone could relate to. He quickly became a star, and he paved the way for other black performers as well.

In failing to communicate even basic concepts around blackface’s harrowing history, AG misses an obvious opportunity to educate readers. Moreover, the more recent BeForever books reduce the length of this section, and relegate it to text-only status. “Peek into the Past” thus goes from six pages with photographs and illustrations to two pages of sterile description. This demonstrates a clear pivot from historical edification in recent years despite contemporary insistence on its importance communicated on Melody and Nanea’s webpages.

<sup>71</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Changes for Samantha* (American Girl Publishing, 1988), 63-4.

<sup>72</sup> Valerie Tripp and Sarah Masters Buckley, *Samantha’s Short Story Collection* (American Girl Publishing, 2006).

## *Recommendations/Conclusion*

American Girl, as part of a revenue-generating company, has little motivation to revamp their current approach to their product lines, at least in the sense of embracing recommendations to focus more on history and less on girls buying their merchandise. Scholarly critique will not change that. At the same time, it is always important to explore what organizations and products *are* in practice as opposed to what they claim to be on paper, and the impact of that dynamic, particularly on impressionable populations. Furthermore, it provides examples of patterns to avoid for publishers looking to take a more responsible role in developing children's historical fiction. Researchers can also point to better representations of the genre. For example, Hubler recommends select authors from the Dear America books, another historical fiction series for girls of the American Girl age, citing Kathryn Lasky (*Dreams in the Golden Country*) and Patricia McKissack (*A Picture of Freedom*) as writers with a more careful approach to history. Kim Chuppa-Cornell offers *Little House on the Prairie* as a superior alternative to the Kirsten narrative.<sup>73</sup> Future researchers might develop a model around the idea of children's historical fiction, defining the various textual qualities and visual representations associated with accurate representations of the past. Responsible historical fiction may not see the kind of profit of a company like American Girl, and will undoubtedly not inspire the same level of brand connection—but will do far more to inform children about the past, and protect them from unhelpful messages about material consumption.

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<sup>73</sup> Kim Chuppa-Cornell, "When Fact Is Stranger than Fiction: Hair in American Girl Stories and Dolls," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 37, no. 2 (April 2013): 73, Project Muse.

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