

Review

Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence.

Julie Pfeiffer.

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Julie Pfeiffer's *Transforming Girls* possesses the best (and most fitting) cover art I have seen on an academic book. As a methodical and quietly persuasive text, it also possesses something rather more important to the study of children's and young adult literature: the potential to disrupt standard concepts of both the nineteenth-century girls' book and models of adolescence. That it does so while gesturing toward an expanded history of adolescent literature, and while gently making a case for more comparative studies, underscores the significance of this text within the fields of children's and young adult literature criticism.

In *Transforming Girls*, Pfeiffer examines nineteenth-century adolescence through the lens of eight novels – four American and four German – written between 1853 and 1885, and representative of the neglected 'Backfisch book'. While most Anglo-American literary critics place the classic 'girls' book' into categories of the moral tale, the family story, and the orphan girl novel, Pfeiffer suggests that these categories are incomplete: "What is missing [...] is a group of best-selling books that originate in the mid-nineteenth century before both

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the family story and the orphan girl novel and that foreground adolescence as a category of identity” (10-11). By employing a German-American lens, Pfeiffer reveals a distinct subgenre of the girls’ book known as the *Backfischliteratur*, which focuses on the liminal figure of the Backfisch, “a girl in her teens who is herself uncertain about her identity and appears to lack power over her social conditions” (13).

Transforming Girls is organized logically, starting with a helpful overview-style contextualization of Pfeiffer’s main arguments, articulated within the Introduction, and progressing through the expansion and detailed support of these ideas within the remaining five chapters and brief Conclusion. The Introduction covers wide territory, from the girls’ book genre to a primer on the Backfisch and the Backfisch book, historical context regarding the relationship between American and German literature, a summary of the American concept of adolescence (and how the Backfisch disrupts it), and preliminary examples of Backfisch books. It also introduces Pfeiffer’s writing style, which is lucid and clear; and her structure, which is well organized and scaffolded. Indeed, the book reads as if Pfeiffer is teaching as she writes, helpfully providing her audience with appropriate detail and background necessary to understand her argument. On a note of personal writerly admiration, Pfeiffer accomplishes all this while delivering beautifully sharp topic sentences that I hope graduate students in my adolescent literature class will emulate when I assign Pfeiffer’s Introduction to them.

Since, at its heart, *Transforming Girls* is an analysis of female adolescence as it is presented in the Backfisch book, Pfeiffer devotes the first chapter to defining the Backfisch. She does so by emphasizing the Backfisch’s liminal position: as an adolescent character, she “exists in a state of anticipation, uncertainty, and shifting responsibilities” (61-62) for which she requires helpful mentors and education. The Backfisch is endearing but physically and socially awkward – traits that cause her embarrassment and shame – yet, importantly, she possesses agency over her own self-transformation. She is allowed to explore her adolescence rather than being forced into maturation and marriage.

Together, the Introduction and first chapter establish one of the key arguments that Pfeiffer will continue to explore and support within the rest of the text: the Backfisch as a new model of female adolescence that is not predicated on the alienation implicit in models of male adolescence built on G. Stanley Hall’s work. Instead, the Backfisch embodies a model of transformation and opportunity. As Pfeiffer summarizes, “[i]f we assume adolescence is characterized by alienation and independence, it appears to be a category incompatible with the successful performance of femininity. By looking at descriptions of adolescent girlhood in literary texts, an alternate and more positive model of adolescence emerges” (24). This alternate model, which emphasizes fluidity and exploration rather than fixed identity, is why the Backfisch feels surprisingly contemporary, and why *Transforming Girls* may be of interest not only to scholars of nineteenth-century literature, but to scholars of current young adult literature – a connection Pfeiffer also makes apparent in the Conclusion.

Pfeiffer uses her second chapter to examine the mentoring of the Backfisch by nonbiological mother figures who, borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins' analysis of Black mothering, Pfeiffer calls "othermothers" (69). These mentors may be independent single women (spinsters and widows), the Backfisch herself, or, at a meta-level, the narrator, who mentors her adolescent readers. Here, I appreciate how Pfeiffer uses the "othermother" term as an attempt to fulfill Evelyn Nakano Glenn's call to center the mothering practices of women of color. At the same time, I remain unsure about using a term that describes Black mothering practices and activism to refer to fictional nineteenth-century communities of White women. Perhaps future editions of this important text could clarify the situation by including slightly more contextual information regarding othermothers. The concept of such nonbiological mothering and mentoring is certainly important in the Backfisch book, particularly in regard to the emotional closure of these texts. Such closure is not found in a protagonist's engagement or marriage – after all, the male lovers in these texts tend to be shadowy, peripheral figures – but when she successfully becomes an othermother herself. As such, Pfeiffer provides an almost Adrienne Rich-style declaration that "the 'romance' that illuminates these texts is not a heterosexual romance or a Christian romance, but a romance of othermothering, as girl readers are led into a fantasy of female communities and intimate friendships without the distractions of husbands or children" (90). This finding is exciting while also providing the potential for a fascinating queer reading of these female communities that I hope Pfeiffer (or another scholar) will explore in future scholarship.

While the Introduction and first two chapters will be of interest to scholars of girls' books or the history of adolescent literature generally, the literary and historical contextualization embedded in the remaining three chapters will be particularly intriguing to scholars of nineteenth-century texts. In Chapter Three, Pfeiffer uses gender theory as a lens through which to examine the Backfisch's transition into womanhood as a labor-based conversion experience. Thus, the Backfisch's invisible labor – which she must deliberately choose – is equated with her virtuousness, and such virtue is equated with successful gender performance. Chapter Four parallels the work of transforming into womanhood with the work of fostering citizenship. It examines how the structure of the Backfisch narrative provides a model for both nation-building and teaching whiteness. Chapter Five turns to homesickness, but Pfeiffer stresses that Backfisch homesickness is used differently than in the family story or orphan girl novel. The Backfisch novel refuses homesickness as a symptom of adult nostalgia for childhood, and instead portrays it as a childish emotion that the secure, well-mentored Backfisch must overcome in order to grow into her womanly, mature self. Pfeiffer ends the chapter by demonstrating how Johanna Spyri's extremely popular *Heidi* (1880-1881) both appropriates and breaks with Backfisch tropes (such as homesickness) to "[establish] a formula so compelling that for many critics, this version of the girls' book would become a defining one" (161).

Pfeiffer's analysis of *Heidi* against the background of the Backfisch book highlights why *Transforming Girls* is so important to the study of the girls' book genre: namely, it disrupts the scholarly narrative that tracks the evolution of the girls' book as a positive, one-directional progression toward less sexist narratives. Instead, Pfeiffer suggests that from *Heidi* onward the girls' book undergoes a fundamental shift away from the self-reliance and agency of the Backfisch, and towards the passivity and sentimentality of later girls' books. In her terms, "[t]he girls' book regresses" (163). The consequences of this pronouncement are myriad: obviously, it complicates any straightforward history of the girls' book while also signaling the alternate mode of female adolescence that Pfeiffer explains within the Introduction and first chapter (and further expands and supports within each subsequent chapter). In my view, it also prompts us to rethink the history of adolescent literature more generally, particularly if a defining component of that literature may be a focus on the period and fluidity of adolescence itself (as it is for the Backfisch, and as it may be for later twentieth-century junior novels, the texts of New Realism, and contemporary young adult literature). Lastly, in an era of struggling comparative literature departments, Pfeiffer's analysis of the Backfisch and the Backfisch novel also makes an important methodological case for more comparative cross-national and cross-language studies of children's and young adult literature.

Pfeiffer's beautifully-written *Transforming Girls* cracks open the canon of the girls' book to present the neglected German-American Backfisch book as a vibrant genre focused on active, well-mentored adolescent girl protagonists. It presents an alternative, fluid model of adolescent girlhood within the nineteenth-century United States and emphasizes womanhood as a transformational process requiring hard work and perseverance. Perhaps most significantly, *Transforming Girls* provides a model both for examining neglected genres, and for the scholarly willingness to research and write against academic narratives we perceive as set or standard.