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ABSTRACT

The Girls' Books in Series collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Jackson Library contains over 1850 volumes, with publication dates ranging from the mid-1800s to the 1980s. The library's list currently contains approximately 511 different series. The library owns all the titles for 85 of the series. For 167 of the series, the library does not have any titles, and for the remaining 259, the library owns at least one (and sometimes most) of the titles. The volumes in these series depict a wide range of settings, environments, and situations in which the young heroines act. These books, aimed at a pre-teen and teen audience, both reflected and perhaps molded the lives of girls over the course of a century. They serve as either descriptive or prescriptive views of behaviors deemed normal, exceptional, or acceptable. An area of possible interest concerns images of college life, particularly the freshman year experience. By linking fictional accounts of what it meant to be a female freshman to the actual and evolving status of young women in higher education, it might be possible to ascertain a relationship between teenagers' reading materials and their aspirations to higher education. Another question concerns the quality of children's book series and their role in, and effect on, children's reading behavior. (NKA)

Girls' Series Books: A view of times past

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Girls' Series Books: A view of times past

As an institution for the higher education of women for the first 72 years of its existence, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and its Jackson Library, value that rich heritage. The Special Collections and Archives Division of the Library contains, among several important collections of interest to scholars, a major collection related to women, primarily printed books dating from the early 16th to the early 20th centuries. Within that general rubric, among other materials, are found the Women's Detective Fiction collection and Girls' Books in Series collection.

This latter collection, while nowhere near complete (however we might define that term), now contains over 1850 volumes, with publication dates ranging from the mid- 1800's to the 1980's. We developed our want [and have] list from a standard checklist done by the University of Minnesota Libraries in 1978, and revised, vastly enlarged, and updated in 1992 by Deidre Johnson and others. Our list currently contains approximately 511 different series. A recent count I did show that for 85 of the series we own all the titles,

for 167 series we do not yet have any titles, and for the remaining 259 series, we own at least one (and sometimes most) of the titles. It is interesting to note that many of the series for which we as yet lack examples are post- World War II series; others, however, are among the earliest on our list. Some of our titles are quite scarce, at least according to OCLC. For instance, Nancy Blake, copywriter, from1942, is held by only 7 of the 18,000 libraries in the OCLC online system. Similarly, The Curlytops and their pets (1921), Dorothy Dale's Queer Holidays (1910) show 8 and 4 libraries respectively, while Glenloch girls club (1911) is only held by UNCG.

According to information provided by my colleague, Carolyn Shankle, who is in charge of maintaining the Girls Books in Series collection, it appears that we began to build this collection about 20 years ago, when we acquired about 200 volumes published between 1900 and 1930. Even then we recognized that, due in part to their mode of production, often by syndicates of writers, this form of children's literature was marginal. The 1980-81 Annual Report of the Friends of the Library [reporting on activities of Special Collections], drew the parallel between these series books and modern-day television as modes of escape for young people. Two years later, in 1982-83, we added another 200 volumes from duplicates in the Baldwin Collection at the University of Florida. Referring to the rapidly growing collection the following year, the annual report comments: "These works of earlier decades provide unique social and cultural insights into the position of girls and women the early twentieth century." The volumes in these series depict a wide range of settings, environments and situations in which the young heroines act. From the widely famous—Nancy Drew, Cherry Ames, and the Bobbsey Twins—to the quite

obscure, such as the Jack-in-the-box series from 1921 or the Marty series of the 1950's, these books, aimed at a pre-teen and teen audience, both reflected and perhaps molded the lives of girls over the course of a century. They therefore serve as either descriptive or prescriptive views of a variety of behaviors deemed normal, exceptional, or acceptable.

A fair number of the books are topical, relating in particular to World Wars I and II. The Red Cross Girls on the French firing line and Grace Harlowe with the Marines at Chateau- Thierry, written in 1916 and 1920 respectively, present the wartime role of young women, as do the (Nurse) Susan Merton books, which see her during World War II both in the Pacific and on the Russian front, according to titles in the series. In the 1960's, Kathy Martin, another nurse heroine, became a Peace Corps nurse.

I myself became involved in the collection development aspect of this collection several years ago, (although I don't now remember exactly how!). Since then have scoured secondhand book stores, flea markets and antique malls for these items, carrying with me a 103-page list of titles both currently owned and wanted. Over the years, I have probably found somewhere between 250 and 400 titles to add to our collection. (Fortunately, most titles are not expensive.) Increasingly, I, and my colleagues in Special Collections, find that the Internet has become a useful source for such acquisitions, as we search auction sites like Ebay and antiquarian bookseller sites like Alibris and Bibliofind.

These works offer many avenues for exploration. For example, an interest of mine concerns images of college life. In particular, I hope (one day!!) to examine the

freshman-year experience as described in several novels: Betsy Wales, freshman (1904), Grace Harlowe's first year at Overton College (1914), Marjorie Dean, college freshman (1922), Betty Lee, freshman (1931). . Added into the research mix are manuals aimed at female college students, such as the 1914 volume by Helen Dawes Brown, "Talks to Freshman Girls." By linking fictional accounts of what it meant to be a female freshman to the actual and evolving status of young women in higher education, we could perhaps ascertain a relationship between teenagers' reading materials and their aspirations to higher education Indeed, this study might apply to both boys' and girls' series.

There has, of course, been research done in this area, particularly in the 1990's. A number of scholars in the popular culture field, whom many of you probably know, have examined one aspect or another of these volumes: Paul Holsinger, Sherrie Inness, Robbie Ann Mason, Kathleen Chamberlain and Mary Welek Atwell, just to mention a few. Some studies have involved examination of a single series, such as the Judy Bolton stories, for themes and character development. Others have examined a broader theme, such as autonomy and mobility, across several different series within a certain time frame. Despite these studies, however, Inness could speak in 1997 of the "paucity of research" on girls series books.

Another area of research and discussion, of less interest to those who study popular culture perhaps, has taken place within the educational and library community: the question of the quality of children's series books and their role in, and effect on, children's reading behavior. Writers such as Catherine Ross Sheldrick, Dianne Monson,

and Ruth Cline have explored the negative image that teachers and librarians have held of these series books (coming right up to the "Baby Sitters Club" and R. L. Stine's "Goosebumps" series so popular today.) While the sometimes formulaic plots and pedestrian style of series books do not match up to certain children's "classics", these scholars have found that they in fact draw children to reading and provide the starting point for developing reading skills and interest in many young people. Popular culture scholars have, in fact, been aware of the issue of writing quality in series books. Holsinger, for instance, in his article dealing with the "Fighters for Freedom" series, describes the works as "banal," "ludicrous," and "unbelievably silly." Of the writers, he says they are "hacks" and that they "peddle what little talent they had."

Another interesting point I have come across is that a number of researchers have a long-standing and very personal interest in this area of study. In some instances, interest in a particular heroine seems to have grown out of a personal reading encounter with a series as a child. Thus we find remarks such as: "What I chiefly remember about my own early reading of the Nancy Drew . . . series" and "From the shelves of books I read as a young girl, [a] statement by Judy Bolton's father has remained with me for decades." The cover of a recent re-issue of Bobbie Ann Mason's "The Girl Sleuth" portrays the author as a girl of 6 or 7 reading [presumably] a series book. And while theory is increasingly informing the study of these books, we are still a long way from Foucauldian or Derridean analyses of structures of power within discourse which we encounter in other areas of literary scholarship, particularly in Europe and certain American academies.

In addition to the areas of study mentioned above, social scientists and literary scholars can find other topics to interest them in such a collection. Sociolinguists, for instance, such as Deborah Tannen, might examine gender differences in the conversational styles of various characters in these works. Historians of publishing could attempt to learn why some series live forever (like the Nancy Drew stories, not only reissued but also rewritten to better mirror the ethos of the 1950's), and other disappeared after a few titles. One could examine another subset of these books, the volumes set in the past, such as Amanda Douglas's "A Little Girl in Old (Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Quebec)" series, for historical accuracy or narrative technique. Does the recounting of an historical tale require, or elicit, additional elements not found in contemporary settings? Additionally, students of the book arts might also study the physical appearance of the works, to see how book covers and book jackets portrayed girls/female heroines throughout the period. In these ways and others I have yet to think of, the Girls' Books in Series collection at UNCG's Jackson Library is a rich resource for a wide variety of researchers.

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