We're Not Little Babies Anymore': A Cultural History of Small Girls in America, 1920-1945

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Abstract
The appearance of high-profile girl characters in popular culture media of all types soared between the years from 1924, when Little Orphan Annie first appeared in the comic section of newspapers, to 1945, when teenage girls replaced their younger sisters in the spotlight. As such, girl culture of the 1920s through the 1940s experienced a boon in popularity never before witnessed. And yet, despite substantial evidence that point to the impact preadolescent girls had on society during this time, surprisingly scholars have left the experiences of these girls and their depictions in popular entertainment unexplored. For historians, this raises a number of questions. Why were young girls so ubiquitous within popular media during this time? Why have they been ignored until now? And more to the point, what purpose(s) did their characterizations serve and for whom?

"We're Not Little Babies Anymore: A Cultural History of Small Girls in America, 1920-1945," explores these questions within an historical context and utilizes a different medium of popular culture for each era. Thus, in the 1920s, comic strips of the newspapers are explored; in the 1930s, it is actresses in film. Finally, in the 1940s, voice actresses in children's radio programming.

As the first true "case study" of my dissertation, chapter two, "Closing the Gaps: Little Orphan Annie in the 1920s and 1930s," is a close analysis of Little Orphan Annie in her many incarnations. As Americans grappled with significant and growing tensions between the worlds of the adult and of the child, between rural versus urban living, and between traditional views of women and children and of modern ones, Annie provided one solution to their anxieties: she helped bridge the gap between such tensions. As such, girl culture of the 1920s through the 1940s experienced a boon in popularity never before witnessed. And yet, despite substantial evidence that point to the impact preadolescent girls had on society during this time, surprisingly scholars have left the experiences of these girls and their depictions in popular entertainment unexplored. For historians, this raises a number of questions. Why were young girls so ubiquitous within popular media during this time? Why have they been ignored until now? And more to the point, what purpose(s) did their characterizations serve and for whom?

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Shirley Temple, the most famous child actress of the era, is the focus of chapter three, "Daddy's Girl and Mommy's Rival: Shirley Temple and the Answer to the 1930s Gender Crisis." Actresses such as Shirley Temple became society's solution to a growing gender crisis that was exacerbated by Depression. This chapter shows how Shirley Temple provided the answer to a growing tension between men and women. In her films and public persona, Temple gave men a purpose. At the same time, she deflated the burgeoning power women enjoyed in the earlier years of the financial crisis. Thus, Temple helped to restore the "traditional" balance of power between men and women that was threatened by Depression.

Chapter four, "Supporter, Soldier, Shopper, and Sidekick: Girls on the Home Front," is a close examination of the small girl in the medium of radio. As the cheapest and most accessible form of entertainment during the war, radio democratized news and entertainment like no other medium before it. Programs geared for children, such as
Jack Armstrong--The All American Boy and Terry and the Pirates, engaged children in the war effort. They also entertained new models of behavior and roles for young girls. Girls, during this time period, helped Americans endure war and envision a future of peace.

Ultimately, the research indicates that generators of popular culture, as well as their audiences, used the pre-adolescent girl as a visual representation on which to project their fears and hopes of today and tomorrow. Society championed the image of a strong female character, albeit in the form of a little girl, which demonstrates that Americans wanted to afford all (white) women the opportunity to grow beyond the Victorian feminine ideal. That being said, they chose to promote the image of the "small" girl because she would always be subordinated to the patriarchy. Despite her rise in depictions and the power she enjoyed because of it, in the end, the preadolescent girl was still just a little girl and at most, she would only grow up to be a member of yet another marginalized group in America: that of women. Thus, unlike a little boy, a little girl's power had limits and always would. With her perceived physical, mental, and emotional limitations, she could never grow up to truly challenge the adult man and thus, the patriarchal status quo.

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