

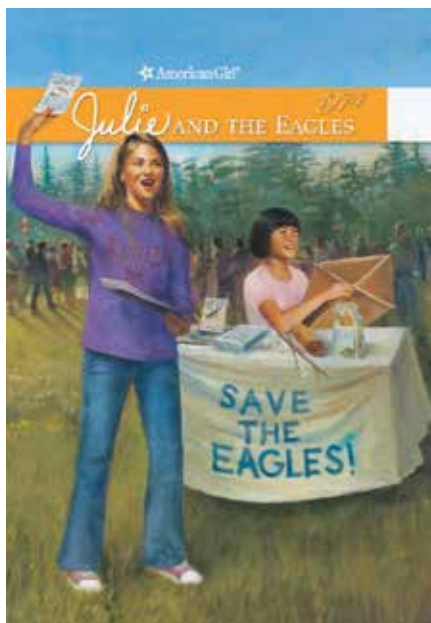
Girls Like Us: Looking at History through the American Girl Series

Sarah Lewis Philpott

I was among the first generation of young readers who read the American Girl books; I was intrigued from the beginning. When I started teaching third grade, I was once again reminded of the series. The young girls in my class devoured all things American Girl. I decided to read *Meet Addy* aloud to my class, about 20 minutes a day over the course of a week.¹ As my students listened to the harrowing scene where Addy, an escaped slave, encounters a group of Confederate soldiers, one seemingly gruff little boy held his breath throughout the entire encounter until tears poured from his eyes. We were all so engrossed in the book that we lost track of time; it was only when Coach Lane knocked on our door that we realized the students were late for gym.

Students' reactions to the book made me wonder about the impact of the series on young readers. I wanted to better understand what happens when elementary readers read this series. Do they think about history, or do they overlook the historical content and are they more interested in the fanciness of the clothing, the adventures of the heroine, or the corresponding dolls they can purchase that go along with the books? I decided to design and conduct a study.² My intent was to gain insight into how fourth grade readers transact with history and historical fiction, specifically, the American Girl series.

As part of my doctoral studies in education, I worked in a Title I school for over a month where, as a participant-observer, I led a book group whose focus was the American Girl series. I worked daily with a group of seven fourth grade girls of mixed reading ability. My aim was to explore if and how the readers transacted with history (their own understanding of history as well as historical resources) while reading the books. Although boys in the class enjoyed the reading of American Girl books, for the purposes of my study I decided to record data only about girls' behaviors.



Reporter and educator Pleasant Rowland created the American Girl enterprise to honor a shared female heritage and to nurture the period of girlhood. This article details how the American Girl series sparked students' curiosity, prompted them to ask questions about history, and motivated them to read more historical works, as well as how it enabled me to design lessons around social history and controversial issues that nurtured students' historical thinking skills.

A Brief History of the Series

In the 1980s, the first three American Girl books and their corresponding dolls debuted in the U.S. marketplace. Through the stories of nine-year-old fictional heroines, the American Girl series aims to

provide young readers “with ‘girl-sized’ views of significant events that helped shape our country and...bring history alive for millions of children.”³ Since its introduction, the series has sold over 135 million books, over 21 million dolls, and received awards from multiple organizations, including the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council.

Each book in the historical collection features the adventures of a strong pre-teen female heroine as she grows up during a different time period in American history. To date, twelve different time periods between 1774 and 1974 have been spotlighted. Authors of the books work with a team of advisors (including historians) to ensure their historical accuracy.

Despite its current popularity, the series almost did not make it to the public sector. Launching the American Girl enterprise proved challenging for founder and former educator, Pleasant Rowland. Her vision of creating well-written historical fiction books and producing high-quality dolls was plagued with challenges, including her lack of business experience and the reluctance, among men in particular, to take her and her ideas seriously. Rowland was once told by a successful businessman,

“Pleasant, it sounds like you want to start General Motors. You’re talking about the direct mail business, you’re talking about the publishing business, you’re talking about special events, you’re talking about entertainment, you’re talking about being in the doll business, the book business, the clothing business. Get real!”⁴

Rowland persevered; she brought together a team of talented (mostly female) artisans to bring to life her vision. In 1986, the first American Girl characters, Molly, Kristen, and Samantha, were introduced to America via mail order catalog. American Girl (originally named Pleasant Company) quickly grew into an economic powerhouse that now includes books, dolls, and flagship stores that offer hands-on events. In 1998, Mattel purchased Pleasant Company for \$700 million dollars, but the brand continues to promote the original mission of its founder: to celebrate girls.

Each book series tells a story that parallels a major event in U.S. history. The Addy series is set during the Civil War; the stories represent what it might have been like for a family to be torn apart within the social and political context of a divided United States. Set during World War II, Molly learns the concept of sacrifice and self-sufficiency, while the world around her erupts in Victory Gardens and scrap-metal drives.⁵ The Julie series⁶ reflects the upheavals that took place in American society in the 1970s. Against the backdrop of change at the national level, Julie confronts change on a personal level, as she navigates the divorce of her parents and moving to a new school.

Benefits to Using Historical Fiction

Quality historical fiction enables readers to imagine what life might have been like for a variety of people, particularly those not typically written about in history texts. Social history of an era is often of particular interest to young students.⁷ In addition, studying social history helps elementary students make sense of and retain historical information.⁸ While working with the book club, I found that, even in the absence of the dolls and all of their accoutrements, the books resonated with and thrilled elementary readers. The powerful stories excited girls about history and led them to ask meaningful questions about life during different historical periods.

“I didn’t think they had schools back then,” said a surprised Leigh. She also wondered, “Why would they only have one-room as a school?” The girls in the book club speculated that one-room school houses might have been the norm in the 1860s because of finances, or the number of children attending schools, and perhaps that, in the agrarian society, education wasn’t that important to many people.

The Theme of Discrimination v. Inclusion

We had just read *Addy Learns a Lesson*,⁹ which details the experiences of a young African American girl who attends school in Philadelphia in the 1860s. The story provided a springboard for a meaningful discussion about schooling, segregation, and discrimination.

Set in 1974, the Julie series allowed us to explore the time

period of Title IX. Julie, a young girl who moves to San Francisco, has to fight for the right to play on the boys’ basketball team. The book gives readers a glimpse of this time period through the eyes of a young girl. Her voice full of pride, Rae dramatically retold her favorite parts of the Julie series, “Coach Manley said Julie couldn’t play on the boys’ team. But Julie said, “It is the LAW!” Rae also recounted the part of the book when Julie realizes that she is legally allowed to play on the basketball team. Rae’s enthusiasm for the character and story illustrate how a strong fictional character can help elementary-aged students understand the impact of Title IX legislation for a young girl during the 1970s. The book counteracts stereotypes by showing that some girls and women of the era did not passively allow injustices to occur; rather, some fought for their civil rights in an organized fashion. “I love that Julie is about to stand up for herself and put her foot down!” said one student. Readers admired Julie and seemed to look to her as a role model. Several girls remarked, “Julie is so brave!”

The stereotype that girls do not enjoy sports or aren’t good enough to play with their male counterparts is also addressed in the Julie series. Reading *Meet Julie* helped students uncover and discuss gender stereotypes that the students in the book club also held. When speculating as to why Julie couldn’t play on the boys’ basketball team, some readers categorized sports as “boy sports” and “girl sports.” Mary felt that volleyball and soccer are “more girls’ sports.” With the leadership of a teacher, comments such as Mary’s can lead to a discussion that recognizes, unpacks, and debunks gender stereotypes that continue to permeate society.

Throughout the book, students questioned why “Coach Manley is not letting her play.” It was hard to understand because these students *do* have the opportunity to play intramural sports and do not face resistance because of their gender. Students described Julie as being “brave” because she stood up for her beliefs by creating a petition and presenting it to the coach. Students began to realize that, in American history, women were often excluded from sports; students talked about how their own modern lives are vastly different in terms of gender equality.¹⁰

The Theme of Family

Family is another theme in the Julie series; Julie is the child of newly divorced parents. She and her sister struggle with the effects that divorce has upon their family. Five of the seven students in the book group expressed personal connections to the character and experiences of Julie. “I think that it is wrong that Tracy doesn’t want to go see her dad,” said Kendyl. “I know. I thought that was pretty bad. Like every time I get the opportunity to see my momma—every other weekend—I go,” agreed Mary. Students recognized that, although their modern lives are different from Julie’s life in the 1970s, many facets of life are similar, including some family issues. Taryn, a below-grade-level reader and an introvert, bravely shared with the group her personal connection with Julie: “I like Julie because she is going through the same thing I am, because I got

to go live with my mom and then my dad.” After Taryn shared her family history, other girls in the group began sharing their personal stories as well. Rae contributed, “Me? No sisters. Two brothers that died. One is in foster home, and my other brother is in jail. And I’m having to go back and forth between my dad’s and mom’s.”

Students seemed to find comfort in the fact that Julie faced a reality similar to their own with regard to divorce and family dynamics; they realized that many people share similar experiences and emotions. Taryn explained, “I want to read about Julie because I’m going through a big change in my life.” The personal connection readers that students made with Julie helped draw them into the story and into history. *Meet Julie*, and other American Girl books helped students see commonalities with girls living in other eras and helped provide them with connections between past and present.¹¹

Learning Activities

The Julie series is written on a 4.5 reading level; it is a good choice for a read aloud, but can also be read in small groups or individually. My research showed that the two strategies listed below can be used to help further students’ understanding of the historical time period by promoting group discussion, encouraging historical inquiry, and enhancing students’ historical thinking skills.

ACTIVITY: Capture “Wow!” and “I Wonder?” Factors about the 1970s

Because most students live primarily in the moment of “now,” I wanted to ascertain students’ levels of background knowledge. While reading *Meet Julie*, I provided students with the “Wows and Wonderings” graphic organizer (FIGURE 1). This chart is designed to capture some of the students’ inner thoughts about new information they glean from the book, information that they are surprised to read, and questions that the book raises for them. When we discuss the books we have read, students often open conversations by saying, “I have ‘a wow,’” and “I wonder.”

After reading the Julie book, one student “voiced a wow,” saying, “I’m a really sporty girl. I like to go play soccer. I like to go play basketball. I even like to play football. I don’t think I’d really like that time period [the 1970s].” She was happy that she lived in a time period where girls have the same rights as boys when it comes to playing school sports. She was also elated that Julie defied stereotypes and was finally awarded the same opportunities as her male classmates. Using this graphic organizer helped students articulate their thoughts and provided many opportunities to enhance social studies instruction.

I also used the “Wows and Wondering” graphic organizer (FIGURE 1) when we read books from the Addy series, which takes place during the Civil War. Some of the students’ questions included: “Why did people in the North not want slavery to continue?” “Why did Abraham Lincoln end slavery?” and “Why were slaves that escaped brutally beat[en]?” This exercise provided evidence that students were thinking about history

while reading the American Girl books.¹²

WOW! Write down any information that makes you say “wow!” This is surprising!	I WONDER What questions do you have while reading? Write down anything that makes you say, “I wonder.”

In addition, I found evidence that they were using the historical thinking skill of corroboration. When discussing a character in *Meet Addy*, Leigh, who is a below-level reader, said, “The woman that helped them from the safe house, to take them to Philadelphia, I think that woman might be like Harriet Tubman.” Leigh indicated that the character in *Meet Addy* reminded her of information that she had read in her social studies book. Leigh was corroborating information from the American Girl books with her social studies text. I found that reading historical fiction frequently leads to this type of historical thinking, as students compare material from fictional sources with material in social studies textbooks or the informational “Looking Back” section at the end of the American Girl books. Firsthand accounts can also be used to corroborate information.

ACTIVITY: Engaging in Historical Inquiry through the Interview

“Maybe we could look it up on the internet!” “I could make a PowerPoint!” Can we do a project on this?” The girls were all talking excitedly about conducting research! One of the strengths of the American Girl series is the “Looking Back” section of each book. This is the “the place where,” according to Jenna, “you actually see the real stuff.” This informational section, which follows the fictional story, includes photographs and artifacts from the time period that is the focus of the book.

The “Looking Back” section of *Meet Julie* includes information about America in the 1970s., including information about Title IX legislation, and Congresswoman Edith Green, who played an instrumental role in the creation of the legislation. It also gives readers a look at the “Battle of the Sexes” tennis match between Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King. Gender inequality in the workplace and home is addressed as well. For example, the “Looking Back” section features an actual classified ad from the Washington Post, showing that job listings were separated by gender and that women were paid much less than their male counterparts. The book also explains that American citizens had differing opinions concerning important issues such as President

Richard Nixon's resignation, Watergate, and the Vietnam War.

When we read the *Meet Kit* series¹³ about a girl who lived during the Depression, Jenna said she would check the "Looking Back" section to see if "people really turned their homes into boarding houses during the Great Depression." Readers used this section to gather more information about the historical time period.

"Look," Jenna said to the group, "when you read the 'Looking Back' in [Meet] Felicity,¹⁴ it answers Rae's question from yesterday—if they had slavery [during the time period of the American Revolution]." "What page are you on?" Mary asked, hurriedly. "I'm not really surprised," Jenna contributed, after looking at the page, "because, in social studies, we have been talking a lot about slavery and that it [slavery] was even after the colonial times and even after America was a country." I was excited by the spirit of inquiry and talk about history that seemed contagious in the group.

The link between the fiction and non-fiction sections helps elementary students see the broader socio-cultural context for events in the book. Mary pointed out, "My dad was alive in the 1970s." A simple statement like this reveals that Mary was beginning to see her family members as part of history. Without any prodding from me, students would go home and ask questions of family members. Kendyl was excited about what she termed this "first-hand knowledge." Rae shared with other members of the book club what her mother had told her about the 1970s: "She said it was bad because some of the women had to stay home, even though some women actually wanted to work outside of the home."

Students were motivated by the historical fiction to pursue further inquiry.¹⁵ If I were to teach this unit again, I would include an assignment that formalized this information gathering from women who lived through the 1970s. Students would interview three women of different ages, deepening students' sources of information and perspectives about the time period.

Conclusion

When I first met the girls who would be part of my research project, I confronted very negative attitudes about social studies. "I hate social studies," Mary told me. Taryn concurred, "I don't like social studies; it is so hard." It was amazing to see the transformation of the girls' attitudes about social studies over the course of the month that I was with them. I found that, even in the absence of American Girl dolls, the stores, and the clothing, the books resonated with elementary readers. Indeed, in the words of nine-year-old Jenna, "American Girl books are a fun version of our social studies books!"

Author Pleasant Rowland once said that injecting history with exciting stories for girls was like "putting the vitamins in the chocolate cake."¹⁶ Fixtures of popular culture today, American Girl books have the potential to excite students about reading and social studies, as well as enhance their skills of historical inquiry with a range of different people and time periods. After a rigorous inductive data analysis, I found that the American

Girl series is a worthy addition to classrooms.¹⁷

Author of the Addy series, Connie Porter, is often asked what drew her to the series. Thinking of the girls who are the protagonists of the historical fiction series, she answers, "to have a chance to give a voice to someone who had never had a voice."¹⁸ Using the American Girl series with the elementary students in my book group allowed me to do the same. 🌟

Notes

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15. Philpott, 2013; Nancy Roser and Susan Keehn, "Fostering thought, talk, and inquiry: Linking literature and social studies," *Reading Teacher* 55, no.5, (2002) 416-426; Tonia Villano, "Should Social Studies Textbooks become History? A Look at Alternative Methods to Activate Schema in the Intermediate Classroom," *Reading Teacher* 59, no.2, (2005) 122-130.
16. Morgenson, 1997, 125.
17. Philpott, 2013.
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Ancillary teacher materials

"Julie: Learning Guide. Learn about Equality, Protecting the Environment, and Facing Change through the Stories of Julie, a Girl Growing up During the 1970s," *American Girl*, 2013, www.americangirl.com/corp/pdfs/Julie_OnlineCurric.pdf

Karen Blumenthall, *Let Me Play: The Story of Title IX: The Law That Changed the Future of Girls in America* (New York, N.Y.: Atheneum, 2005)

"The impact of Title IX," The Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History, 2013, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/seventies/essays/impact-title-ix