

# **In Celebration of Girls: Girlhood, History, and Identity in American Girl**

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## INTRODUCTION

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For many girls, birthdays and Christmases weren't surrounded by wishes for ponies, puppies, or bikes. Rather, girls awaited the prospect of unwrapping their present and being greeted with the smiling face of an American Girl doll. Accompanied by a new friend, girls could imagine and play. Meanwhile, the doll's bundled book educated, inspired, and empowered the reader. For thirty-seven years, American Girl (AG) has been a trusted partner for girls. American Girl considered itself more than a doll brand, but rather in the "business of little girls."<sup>1</sup> Girlhood was placed at the core of the brand, celebrating and commemorating the greatness and power of whole generations of girls.

The story of American Girl centres on its founder, Pleasant T. Rowland (1941-). A former educator, Rowland's plans for American Girl was inspired by a visit to Colonial Williamsburg and a Christmas shopping trip.<sup>2</sup> During her 1984 trip to Colonial Williamsburg, Rowland secured a contract with the living history museum to develop a children's informational packet.<sup>3</sup> That same year, during a Christmas shopping trip, Rowland took note of the doll options for little girls. The toy aisles were dominated by the glamorous Barbie and baby doll Cabbage Patch Kids. The shelves revealed to Rowland a niche yet to be fulfilled by any toy or toy company. Rather than celebrate being a "teen queen or mommy," Rowland wanted to celebrate young girls in their current state, not prepare them for their teenage years or possible motherhood.<sup>4</sup> Rowland aimed to empower and educate, provide girls with same-aged role

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<sup>1</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 18.

<sup>2</sup> "Our Story," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>3</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 15.

models disguised as friends, and inform them of girl-centred history. With this goal in mind, Rowland began to design a comprehensive doll line.

Each doll would represent its own individual era of American history with its own unique adversities and story. The doll would be coupled with a *Meet Book* that introduced the doll's historical era, personality, and narrative. The items outlined in the books would be made tangible in the doll's collections or as extra items. The dolls and their narrative-based items would be sold exclusively through American Girl owned catalogues.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the books would be available outside of the catalogues. The books would be available at toy stores, book stores, libraries, and even book fairs. The books would not only be cheaper but the internalized product placement would invoke the reader's desire to own their own American Girl doll. Rowland's comprehensive plan coalesced into a doll line known as the Historical Characters.

Over the brand's thirty-seven years, the Historical Characters have been dubbed with various names including American Girls and BeForever. I chose Historical Characters as it most thoroughly represents the line's employment of history. Launched in 1986, the Historical Characters debuted with three characters. The line was hugely successful, inspiring living history exhibitions, theatre kits, and even a magazine. In 1991, the line expanded with Felicity Merriman and again in 1993 and 1997 with Addy and Josefina.<sup>6</sup> In 1995, the Historical Characters were joined by Truly Me and Bitty Baby.<sup>7</sup> In 1998, American Girl Place opened in Chicago which finally allowed girls to purchase AG dolls and products in person.<sup>8</sup> The same

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<sup>5</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> "Historical Characters," American Girl, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

<sup>7</sup> "Our Story," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>8</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

year marked a drastic turn for the brand when Rowland retired and sold AG to their competitor, Mattel, for \$700 million.<sup>9</sup> The multimedia conglomerate introduced new products, more characters, and the American Girl Website. Despite new ownership, Mattel remained loyal to Rowlands vision and continued to release educational and empowered characters.<sup>10</sup> American Girl was more than a doll brand, for nearly four decades it granted girls role models packaged as friends. More so than its intent to educate and empower, American Girl was instilling vital characteristics and manufacturing a cohort of neoliberal ideal subjects.

American Girl emerged in an era characterized by an increase in state concern for citizen's sexual, conjugal, and domestic lives. Family values, the rise and crime and poverty, and national morality had become primary issues for the Reagan Administration (1981-1989).<sup>11</sup> United States President Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) utilized neoliberalism to assert agency over societal morality, successfully pinning the blame for America's issues on "bad" families rather than the state.<sup>12</sup> Neoliberalism was more than an economic policy but it became entrenched in the lives of all within its purview. The philosophy concentrated on creating individual, self-made entrepreneurs loyal to capitalism, aka ideal subjects.<sup>13</sup> Neoliberalism coalesced with emergence of another cultural philosophy, post-feminism. On the backboard of second-wave feminism,

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<sup>9</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 22.

<sup>10</sup> "Our Story," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, "Introduction," *New Femininities: Post Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Elain Tyler May, "Family Values: The Uses and Abuses of American Family History," *Revue Française D'Etudes Américaines*, (Cairn, 2003). <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2003-3-page-7.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Shelley Budgeon, "The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Post-feminism, and 'New' Femininities," *New Femininities: Post Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 284.

post-feminism was partly established by the popularity of neoliberal sentiments.<sup>14</sup> Both ideologies favoured the same ideal subject but post-feminism allowed for its ideal subjects to appear empowered.<sup>15</sup> As post-feminism circulated, it became increasingly synonymous with young women. Empowerment was a gift to girls by the state as it unintentionally emboldened girls to organize their own concepts of girlhood, empowerment, and political agency.

Girl power presented a model of non-conformity, individual expression, and active dissemination of desires to a larger collective of peers.<sup>16</sup> Girl power was for girls by girls. The slogan dismantled the stereotypes that girls were vapid and vain.<sup>17</sup> The movement was pro-sex, pro-contraceptives, brash, self-stylized, and inherent political. Girl power represented all girls regardless of race, economic class, sexual preference, gender identity, or anatomy.<sup>18</sup> As girl power proliferated through print and visual media, the state reattached their gaze on girlhood.

The state observed girl power as a threat and an area for potential mass profit. It was a way for the state to reinsert their societal agenda and profit off an emerging consumer group. Girl power was co-opted and bedazzled, stripped of sex, violence, and politics. Commercialized girl power favoured risk-taking and confidence but remained loyal to narcissistic stereotypes.<sup>19</sup> American Girl, unlike its counterparts, remained loyal to the political nature of girl power. Although the brand retained the glitzy, glamourized version of girl power engineered by the state

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<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, "Introduction," *New Femininities: Post Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Gill and Scharff, "Introduction", 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," *Feminist Studies*, (College Park: Feminist Studies, Inc, 2000), 158.

<sup>17</sup> Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style!", 143.

<sup>18</sup> Anita Harris, "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls In Late Modernity," *Feminist Review*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 40.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines," 40.



and economic institutions, Rowland placed girlhood at the brand's core.<sup>20</sup> Rowland understood that girlhood was more than nurturing instincts, beauty, boys, and gossip but that it held power and agency. The Historical Characters were meant to be assertive political agents, outspoken rebels, and caring companions.

Felicity Merriman was the first doll released after AG's initial launch in 1986. The character was released in 1991 with an eight-day tea party in Colonial Williamsburg commemorating the event.<sup>21</sup> Representing the American Revolution, Felicity displayed the birth of American nationality. Commemorating Rowland's relationship with the living history museum, Felicity was set in Colonial Williamsburg in 1774. In *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, readers are introduced to a nine-year old Felicity who desperately wants to save Penny, a horse owned by the tanner Jiggy Nye.<sup>22</sup> To free Penny from her demise, Felicity steals her father's assistant, Ben's breeches. Along the way, the reader discovers the reality of 18th-century girlhood is not so different than contemporary girlhood. Although at her core Felicity is a product to be consumed, she adopted a special role for American Girl. Felicity, like the rest of the Historical Characters, was Rowland's tool to display and endorse the ideal American girlhood. As a result, Felicity's accurate 18<sup>th</sup>-century narrative was compromised to better represent the ideals of empowered girlhood favoured by Rowland.

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<sup>20</sup> Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Victoria P. Lantz, "Staging American Girlhood The Pleasant Way: Centering Girls in History and Performance with the American Girl Theatre Kits," *Youth Theatre Journal*, (2020), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Felicity Evans, "Focus; American Girls to Treasure: Dolls, History, & Dresses for the Well-Padded Purse," *The Washington Post*, (Washington D.C.), August 27, 1991. <https://ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/focus-american-girls-treasure-dolls-history/docview/307433854/se-2>.

<sup>22</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin; Pleasant Company, 1991).

Felicity displayed 18th-century girlhood while simultaneously personifying American Girl's values and 20<sup>th</sup>-century girlhood. As a result, Felicity is more outspoken, active, and rebellious than colonial society would have allowed. Empirical society, akin to the Reagan Administration, was obsessed with the lives of its' citizens. Colonists and citizens alike could participate in only western, Anglo-European culture and values.<sup>23</sup> This meant clothing, sex, marriage, employment, and morality had to align with the values installed by colonial power. As a result, girlhood was confined. Girls were subordinate to their mothers, fathers, the domestics, and their gender.<sup>24</sup> As a colonist of the British Empire, Felicity was defined and determined by Empire. Oriented with American Girl values, Felicity was an active dissenter and rejected empirically-defined girlhood.

In *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, Felicity rebels through her gender expression, roles, and expectations. Her gender rebellion is best represented by her rejection of female clothing. Clothing is where gender is most actively, communicated, and questioned.<sup>25</sup> The 18th-century female presentation was defined by petticoats, gowns, and stays. Although boys wore stays and shifts until age eight, they were inevitably liberated through a "breeching" ceremony.<sup>26</sup> Boys were granted breeches and freed from subordination.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, girls never experienced the coming of age-ceremony. Felicity is actively jailed by her petticoats and stays, commonly complaining about her garments. Unlike her female counterparts, Felicity undergoes her own,

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<sup>23</sup> Kathleen Wilson, "Empire, Gender, and Modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century," *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, "Empire, Gender, and Modernity," *Gender and Empire*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Fiona Martin, "Fashion and Gender," SOSA 2044: Fashion, Selves, and Social Worlds (class lecture, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, February 7, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Rhiannon O'Neil, "'Clothes Make Men': Clothing and the Embodiment of Gender in Virginia, 1750-1775, *Electronic Thesis and Dissertations 2021*, (University of Central Florida, 2021), 58.

<sup>27</sup> O'Neil, "Clothes Make Men," 59.

private breeching ceremony. In the middle of the night, Felicity steals away with Ben's breeches. Held aloft by a rope, Felicity declares her independence from Empire and gender.

Felicity operates on two planes: doll and literary character. The doll presented a friend to be played with and a marker of mass profits. As a literary character, Felicity communicates American Girl's empowerment and educational message. Felicity's duality is supplemented further by her true role as a product and purveyor of Rowland's ideal subject. First and foremost, Felicity is a product. Created to be consumed and played with, Felicity spurred on the sale of accessories, furniture, and garments described in her books. Additionally, Felicity is a tool created by Rowland meant to advertise American Girl's girl power. Through her narrative, Felicity inspires girls to become confident, kind, resilient subjects.

I was drawn to this topic as American Girl was my introduction to history, delighting and inspiring me to major in the subject. Instead of brutal statistics, fluke accidents, or bloody battles, American Girl specialized in the ordinary. Dress, food, furniture, and chores were made exciting and engaging by dolls and books. American Girl showcased aspects of history repeatedly overlooked and allowed girls to locate themselves in times gone by. Instead of false fairy tales where princesses awaited their prince charming in a tower, the girls were active objectors. Rowland grasped the power of girlhood and the vital understanding that girls were more than makeup, boys, and drama. Through characters and publications, American Girl highlighted the power of voice, the weight of rebellion, and most importantly girlhood's limitless potential.

In truth, this thesis originally adopted a different approach, calculating the accuracy of the Historical Character's costumes. As I began to research, the thesis developed into a cultural analysis; of how politics and economics can worm their way into cultural hegemony and affect how history is presented. Neoliberalism and post feminism, whether consciously or not, crawled

into American Girl's message and intentions. Through this thesis, I aim to outline how neoliberal principles shaped not only the American Girl brand and its creation but the girl power history displayed by the Historical Characters.

## **Historiography**

The historical analysis of American Girl is relatively new but surprisingly well-studied. Essays and articles like Molly Brookfield's "From American Girls to American Women: A Discussion of American Girl Nostalgia" examine the brand while others like "Staging American Girlhood the Pleasant Way: Centering Girls in History and Performance with the American Girl Theatre Kits" by Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Victoria P. Lantz focus on specific AG products. The most expansive and thorough analysis of American Girl is Emilie Zaslow's 2017 book, *Playing with American Girl: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*. A Professor of Communications at Pace University, Zaslow explores what the books and dolls communicate about nationality, femininity, and racial identity. She thoroughly outlines the development of American Girl before analyzing the Historical Characters collection. Combined with archival information and textual analysis, Zaslow interviewed a variety of subjects including former and current consumers and their parents and former and current employees. The book's utilization of qualitative research supplements a well-rounded contemporary analysis of the beloved doll brand. The work guided my research while providing valuable information into how the dolls were made, dates, key figures in the company, and quotes from consumers and Rowland herself. Likewise, the book revealed the subtext of neoliberalism and empowerment central to the American Girl brand and Historical Characters.

## Methodology

For my analysis of American Girl, I employed a combination of archival, primary, and secondary research. While an official American Girl archive is yet to be made public, public digitized collections have emerged. The largest and thorough collection is by Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables. Launched in 2021, the virtual museum's inaugural exhibit *American Girl: 35 Years of Strong Characters* showcased Blake Changnon's private collection of Historical Characters. The most valuable exhibit for my research was *Childhood Nostalgia: A Collection of Pleasant Company and American Girl Catalogues* which displayed the founder's catalogue collection, scanned and digitized for the public. Although the museum does not have every issue, select catalogues from the 1980s until 2023 are exhibited. The second archive provides digitized and scanned issues of *American Girl Magazine*. Provided by archivist Jason Scott on Internet Archive, the collection features the premiere 1992 issue. Although the archive does not have every issue published, nearly every year of the magazine's twenty-seven year run is featured.

My archival research was supplemented by various primary sources ranging from the American Girl Website, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, and a Felicity Merriman Doll to newspaper articles. The American Girl Website was a valuable tool for defining the company's message, intent, and personal history. Likewise, contemporary products, prices, and state of the Historical Character line were conceptualized. *Meet Felicity: An American Girl* and Felicity Merriman Doll were integral to the analysis of the character. Various newspaper articles like "Felicity's Elegant Tea Party," "American Girl Says Farewell to Felicity Merriman," and "The Enduring Nostalgia of American Girl Dolls" provided an inside look at critical reviews and perceptions of the brand. Manuals from the 18th-century were utilized to conceptualize 18th-

century girlhood and gender. *The Whole Duty of Women* by William Kenrick and *Sermons to Young Women* by James Fordyce revealed the cultural attitudes imported into the colonies.

Outside of primary sources, secondary sources were necessary to supplement the archival information. The sources range from works on neoliberalism and girl power to 18th-century empire and gender. Chapter one utilizes Emilie Zaslow's *Playing with American Girl* to thoroughly outline American Girl. The second chapter involves sociological, feminist, and economic theories to analyze America's sociopolitical cultural impact on girlhood and how it affected American Girl. The third chapter employs secondary sources centred on the 18th-century and the 21st century to analyze the Historical Character Felicity Merriman. Philippa Levine's *Gender and Empire* and T.H. Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution* conceptualize 1770s Virginia colonial culture.

## Overview

Chapter one, "From Pleasant Rowland to Mattel: A History of American Girl" serves as a comprehensive introduction to all things American Girl. This chapter introduces the brand, its founder, the products, and the mechanics of the products from its inception to 2022. I try to explain that the story of American Girl is the story of Pleasant Rowland. This section serves to outline the mechanics of the Historical Characters, new characters, and new products. An important aspect of chapter one is communicating the magic and popularity of American Girl, efficiently displaying how the brand grew into a household name. Archival research was supplemented by Emilie Zaslow's *Playing with American Girl*.

Chapter two diverges with the employment of feminist, sociological, and economic to analyze American Girl and the Historical Characters. I aim to conceptualize 1980s American

sociopolitical culture and how it affected girlhood, the intent of American Girl, and the brand's products. Drawing from Christiana Scharff and Rosalind Gill's *New Femininities: Post feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity* and David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, I outline how post feminism and neoliberalism operated culturally within America. My definitions of girl power were sourced by two sociological articles, Ednie Garrison's "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub) Cultures and the Technologicals of the Third Wave" and "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls in Late Modernity" by Anita Harris. Both articles outline the history of girl power and its sociological effects on girlhood and state.

The third and final chapter operates as a case study of one of American Girl's most iconic dolls, Felicity Merriman. I aim to analyze Felicity's depiction of 18<sup>th</sup>-century girlhood and her role in creating Rowland's ideal subjects. I observe Felicity as two beings, a doll and a literary character. The methodology of this chapter is more akin to a literary analysis, meticulously picking apart *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*. The analysis of Felicity as an agent of Rowland's neoliberal ideologies utilizes the theory and information outlined in chapter two. Phillipa Levine's *Gender and Empire* locates Empire's role in assigning and maintaining gender roles and how it affected girlhood. Felicity as a doll, along with her products, was done through The Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables' scanned catalogs.

## CHAPTER ONE

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### From Pleasant Rowland to Mattel: A History of American Girl

“We’re not in the doll business, we’re in the business of little girls.” –Pleasant T. Rowland<sup>1</sup>

In 1986, a new niche of dolls entered the American consumer sphere, capturing the market and enamouring girls with gorgeous dolls and engaging educational books. The American Girls Historical Characters attempted to, “bring the past to life with inspirational, girl-sized stories”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately a celebration of girlhood, Pleasant Rowland established the American Girl brand (AG) to help girls recognize that girlhood transcended time, class, ethnicity, race, and religion. The Historical Characters were meant to empower young girls, instilling key values such as confidence and kindness all while educating them on American history. Characters range from the pre-colonial era to as contemporary as the 1990s. The brand was not limited to dolls as it released magazines, stores, and even films. Over the span of thirty-six years, American Girl has proliferated into the mainstream, inspiring millions of girls, and instilling important values. The brand has inspired knock-offs including Canada’s own, Maplelea Girls. Despite its commercial success, the brand was not without its flaws. The featured item, the dolls, were expensive and commonly only available for upper-class girls. Likewise, the company was critiqued for its historical veneer, lack of diversity, and lack of sensitivity regarding race in American history. The story of American Girl the story of its founder, who’s voice is entangled in the brand’s message, intent, and products.

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<sup>1</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 18.

<sup>2</sup> “Historical Characters,” American Girl, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.



## Pleasant Rowland

American Girl was the brainchild of American children’s textbook writer and entrepreneur: Pleasant T. Rowland.<sup>3</sup> The daughter of a Chicago advertising executive, Rowland attended Wells College in New York where she graduated in 1962.<sup>4</sup> Rowland had an array of careers including a brief stint as an ABC reporter before entering the doll business at age forty-five.<sup>5</sup> The concept for American Girl was the amalgamation of two inspirations, a visit to Colonial Williamsburg and her frustration with children’s toys while holiday shopping.<sup>6</sup> In the summer of 1984, Rowland visited the largest living history museum in America: Colonial Williamsburg.<sup>7</sup> Located in Virginia, restored buildings and costumed employees immerse visitors in the daily life of a southern colonial town on the brink of revolution. Enraptured with Colonial Williamsburg, Rowland proposed the development of a children’s informational packet and secured a contract with the museum.<sup>8</sup> The contract established a decades-long relationship between Rowland and Colonial Williamsburg. In the same year, Rowland found herself frustrated with the options for children’s toys while Christmas shopping.<sup>9</sup> She encountered the fashionable Barbie and popular baby doll, Cabbage Patch Kids to which she later recounted, “Here I was, in a generation of women at the forefront of redefining women’s roles and yet our daughters were playing with dolls that celebrated being a teen queen or mommy.”<sup>10</sup> Betwixt the

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<sup>3</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> “Our Story,” American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>7</sup> “Our Story”, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>8</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 15.

imposing austere standards of Barbie and the matriarchic-affirming fad Cabbage Patch Kids, Rowland detected a hole that no product filled and, “the concept [of American Girl] literally exploded her in brain.”<sup>11</sup>

Two years after her inspiring holiday shopping trip, Rowland established the Pleasant Company without backers; purely with the \$1.2 million she had saved from textbook royalties.<sup>12</sup> Rowland began the plans for a line of dolls that would operate symbiotically with a personal character book set in significant American historical eras. She aimed to provide modern girls with appropriate role models disguised as friends while challenging the traditional representations of American girlhood and history.<sup>13</sup> Her plans coalesced into a concept for three dolls: the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century European immigrant pioneer, Kristen Larson; early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Progressive Era orphan, Samantha Parkington; and late World War II’s Molly McIntire.<sup>14</sup> Alongside plans for the dolls’ historical narratives, Rowland constructed a business plan consisting of retail stores, musical theatre programs, and mock-ups for matching girls’ clothing.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Rowland enlisted author Valerie Tripp to write the dolls’ introductory *Meet Books*.<sup>16</sup> With an initial concept for her dolls and a crude business plan, Rowland began her search for the design of the American Girl doll.

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<sup>11</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Fred Nielson, “American History through the Eyes of the American Girls.” In *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 25, no. 1 (2002), 87.

<sup>14</sup> “Our Story,” American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>15</sup> “Our Story”, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>16</sup> “Our Story”, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>



Figure 1. Pleasant T. Rowland with her first three dolls- Kristen Larson, Samantha Parkington, and Molly McIntire- in 1986, (Image retrieved from: “Our Story,” American Girl, accessed October 17, 2022, [https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story.](https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story))

An issue Rowland observed during her 1984 Christmas shopping trip was the lack of dolls targeted at children over the age of six.<sup>17</sup> The 1980’s doll market surmised that girls stopped playing with dolls after the age of six, thus marketing to an older group would be futile.<sup>18</sup> Rowland deliberately targeted children age seven to twelve.<sup>19</sup> In her pursuit of the design of the American Girl doll, Rowland intentionally ignored the adult Barbie body with pronounced curves and the baby doll design of Cabbage Patch Kids and planned for the dolls to represent the prepubescent bodies of AG’s target audience. The prepubescent silhouette hoped to encourage girls to be comfortable with their young bodies rather than aim for the unrealistic proportions and idealizations popularly endorsed by the doll industry. The AG doll prototype was found in Marshall’s Field Department Store in Chicago: the German Götz Company Dolls.<sup>20</sup> Rowland

<sup>17</sup>Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 16.

worked with Götz on the design and production of the first three dolls.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, AG outsourced production to China, Germany, Taiwan, Sweden, Spain, Russia, and the United States.<sup>22</sup> While some parts were manufactured in the United States, not a single American Girl doll was assembled entirely within America. With Pleasant Company functioning, crude business mock-ups, and concepts for dolls, Rowland worked to perfect an expansive doll line: Historical Characters.

### **Rowland's Historical Characters**

The Historical Characters were the result of Rowland's years of planning and the centerpiece of the American Girl brand. Each character represented a specific, defining era of American history. The doll would be sold alongside a *Meet Book*, introducing the character and situating them within an era and cultural environment. Along with a unique historical era, each character would have their own individual adversities and story. Period-accurate clothing, hair, and accessories supported the historical immersion and emphasized educational value. Rowland insisted that authenticity was paramount. Every detail, from the girl's dinner to her shoes and socks, would be researched by a team of freelance and Pleasant-Company employed historians before anything was finalized.<sup>23</sup> With such attention to detail, the development of a character progressed into a three to four-year process.<sup>24</sup> Historical Characters ignored the traditional male-focused historical perspective and utilized the perspective of girls. The characters were active

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<sup>21</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 19.

agents, designed to be, “intelligent, independent girl[s] who has few limitations on her future.”<sup>25</sup> The Historical Characters were created to demonstrate that girlhood transcended time and how “great stories with aspirational characters could inspire girls to make their own positive mark on the world.”<sup>26</sup> The first three Historical Characters were released in 1986. The doll accompanied by her *Meet Book* and several period-accurate accessories retailed for sixty-eight dollars.<sup>27</sup>

Maintaining Rowland’s rejection of the status quo, she utilized a unique selling model; the dolls would not appear in toy stores or on department store shelves but were to be sold exclusively through American Girl catalogues. The catalogues were available through mail order and purchased items were sent directly to homes. Rowland utilized print advertisements in high-end magazines including *Smithsonian* and *Yankee and Child* for the initial promotions.<sup>28</sup> Originally due to a lack of funds and resources to contend with large brands on shelves, the crucial decision to avoid third-party selling persisted as the brand developed into a household name.<sup>29</sup> By controlling sales, Pleasant Company avoided saturating the market and American Girl escaped the fate of becoming a doomed fad.

Despite the dolls and products being mail-exclusive, the books were widely accessible. The books appeared in bookstores, toy stores, public libraries, and even Scholastic Book Fairs hosted in elementary schools across America.<sup>30</sup> The June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1998, edition of *Publishers*

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<sup>25</sup> Fred Nielson, “American History through the Eyes of the American Girls.” In *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 25, no. 1 (2002), 87.

<sup>26</sup> “Our Story,” American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>27</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 16.

<sup>28</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 160.

<sup>30</sup> Jan Susina, “American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History.” In *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1999), 132.

*Weekly* reported that roughly ninety percent of AG books were sold through retail outlets.<sup>31</sup> The books were not only easy to obtain but were affordable. In 1986, the dolls retailed for \$68 each while their books were priced at \$5.99.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, while the books were available alone, it was impossible to purchase a doll without her *Meet Book*. The dolls were bundled with their books to maintain the emphasized educational value. Aside from their role as an educational tool, the books operated as advertisements. Consumers were introduced to the characters, products, and appeal of the brand through the narratives.

Published by the Pleasant Company-owned American Girl Publishing Company, the books allowed AG to adopt a marketing and sales strategy where the dolls, books, and catalogues worked symbiotically.<sup>33</sup> Operating as product placement, the accessories, dresses, and even furniture mentioned in the characters' books were all purchasable. For example, girls could buy Felicity's riding hat and habit, her dressing table, and even her horse Penny, all items which were featured in her books. Each doll amassed six books and collections inspired by significant girlhood moments including bedtime, holidays, and even school.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, extra items including Felicity's Colonial Undergarments were created to further education and more importantly, offer more products.<sup>35</sup> Catalogues were integral to the symbiotic relationship as the products emphasized in the books were visualized. Likewise, catalogues sold products to the

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<sup>31</sup> Jim Milliot, "Mattel to Acquire Pleasant Company for \$700 Million" *Publishers Weekly*, June 22, 1998, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Pleasant Company, "Pleasant Company Catalogue 1987," *Pleasant Company*, 1987, 3, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/mmpc1987>.

<sup>33</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 20.

<sup>34</sup> "Historical Characters," American Girl, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

<sup>35</sup> Pleasant Company, "American Girl Catalogue Holiday 1999," *Pleasant Company*, 1999, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/hchd1999>.

girls that neglected to read the books. Instead of locating items from the books, some girls flipped through the sizable catalogues for products that piqued their interests'. The marketing strategy prompted girls to re-enact portions of the books or expand their imaginative play with products from the catalogues. Under the guise of expanding girls' play, the symbiotic relationship was designed to stimulate sales.

With the release of the Historical Character books and doll advertisements occurring simultaneously, girls were introduced to the brand through two distinct avenues. The books highlighted the educational value of the brand while the dolls were the aesthetic markers, drawing in girls with pretty hairstyles and unique historical modes. Kim Chuppa Cornell explains, "Those who read the books first meet smart, spunky, and adventurous girls, learning to conquer both everyday challenges (bullying) and potentially life-threatening situations as well (slavery). Those who meet the characters through the store, website, or catalogue first will find pretty dolls with stylish clothes and accessories."<sup>36</sup> Brookfield, in "From American Girls to American Women: A Discussion of American Girl Dolls Nostalgia" outlined that many girls based their favourite dolls off her clothing, accessories, or physical appearance rather than her personality or stories.<sup>37</sup> Rowland understood that American Girl not only had to appeal to the girls who would interact with the products but with the adults purchasing the products and spending their money. The emphasized educational value, which could be neglected by the child, attracted adults. As a result, gifting became a common form of AG's proliferation.

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<sup>36</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 20.

<sup>37</sup> Molly Brookfield, "From American Girls to American Women: A Discussion of American Girl Dolls Nostalgia" in *Deconstructing Dolls*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), 64.

As American Girl grew and proliferated across the country, new forms of introduction emerged. Advertisements fell to the wayside as girls' dolls, accessories, and books helped introduce new consumers to the brand. Not only were girls attracted to the products, but they were attracted to attaining products their friends possessed and obtaining a sense of belonging. Hooked onto the brand by their friends or as gifts from adults, new consumers entered the cross-merchandising marketing scheme. Regardless of their method of introduction, girls were enticed by AG's cross-merchandising as they were either curious of the products mentioned throughout the books or were fervently perusing the catalogues.

With a buzz surrounding the brand and sales growing to seventy-seven million in 1991, American Girl expanded the Historical Characters.<sup>38</sup> In the fall of 1991, American Girl released their fourth doll: Felicity Merriman.<sup>39</sup> Set in Williamsburg, Virginia, Felicity highlighted the American Revolution. With four Historical Characters, Rowland noticed a lack of diversity in her products. To remedy this issue, AG released their fifth and first doll of colour in 1993.<sup>40</sup> Addy Walker, a former slave escaping the Confederate South, released to both praise and criticism. American Girl was celebrated for diversifying but denounced for exploiting slavery and the brand's optimistic messaging for glossing over harsh realities.<sup>41</sup> In 2012, parent Jennae Peterson chastised AG's use of slavery and wrote, "essentially forcing a heavy conversation with a child about slavery because [American Girl was] too lazy and culturally blind to come up with

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<sup>38</sup> "American Girl History," *Zippia*. Last modified September 9, 2022. <https://www.zippia.com/american-girl-careers-952774/history/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Historical Characters," American Girl, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

<sup>40</sup> "Historical Characters", <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

<sup>41</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 144.



less stereotypical depiction of African Americans in history.”<sup>42</sup> Rowland intended for Addy to expand AG into a new market while allowing white girls to encounter diversity, she wrote, “if I got hit by a car tomorrow, I could die knowing that we made toy history. We made a black doll the object of status and desire for white children.”<sup>43</sup> Despite the release of Addy, slave-owning and plantation society remained in Felicity’s narratives. Both dolls followed the previous format, accumulating six collections based on the same girlhood moments. By the turn of the century, American Girl Historical Characters totalled five dolls.

As the Historical Characters’ cast expanded, the company capitalized on their success by expanding into new markets including living history exhibitions and theatre kits. In 1997, American Girl collaborated with museums across the country on living history exhibitions based on the dolls’ narratives.<sup>44</sup> Girls could travel to Colonial Williamsburg to explore Felicity’s daily life or Scandia, Washington to experience Kristen’s pioneer lifestyle.<sup>45</sup> Felicity’s exhibit remained a permanent fixture at Colonial Williamsburg.<sup>46</sup> Rowland did not intend to educate girls solely on American History. The American Girl Theatre Kits, offered from 1991 to 1994, encouraged girls to develop agency over theatre by understanding its strategies and vocabulary.<sup>47</sup> The kits featured three short plays based on the characters and facts about theatre in their eras. Despite the characters’ popularity, Rowland strived to maintain her intent that AG was not solely

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<sup>42</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Victoria P. Lantz, “Staging American Girlhood the Pleasant Way: Centering Girls in History and Performance with the American Girl Theatre Kits,” in *Youth Theatre Journal* 34, no1. (2020), 5.

a doll business but rather, “in the business of little girls” which she achieved by branching into non-historical markets.<sup>48</sup>

American Girl was not restricted to the Historical Characters, but Rowland expanded the brand with other projects including a magazine, self-care books, and new doll lines. In 1992, the first issue of *American Girl Magazine* was published.<sup>49</sup> The bi-monthly publication featured stories from real girls’ lives, craft ideas, recipes, and advice columns.<sup>50</sup> Originally, the magazine included historical character short stories but by the mid-90s they were phased out.<sup>51</sup> American Girl Publishing Company continued with non-historical works by releasing self-care/guide books. The works ranged from body image, diversity, and crushes to their bestseller, *The Care and Keeping of You*; the company’s answer for parents seeking to avoid teaching girls the trials and tribulations of puberty.<sup>52</sup>

In 1995, two new doll lines released: Truly Me and Bitty Baby.<sup>53</sup> Accompanied by books, Truly Me reflected modern life while Bitty Baby deviated by adopting the baby doll design. Truly Me targeted girls uninspired by the historical motif of the Historical Characters and Bitty Baby opened American Girl to a younger demographic, aiming to “teach younger girls important life skills like caring and nurturing.”<sup>54</sup> Despite Rowland’s best efforts, Bitty Baby allowed girls to celebrate being a mommy. Additionally, Truly Me introduced contemporary collections which

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<sup>48</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 18.

<sup>49</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 27.

<sup>51</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> “American Girl: Books”, American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/books>.

<sup>53</sup> “Our Story,” American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>54</sup> “Our Story,” <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

could be utilized by the Historical Characters. Spas, hair salons, and animal companions were advertised alongside the historical collections in the catalogues. Ultimately, new doll lines meant new consumers, new products, and a lot more profit.

In 1998, Rowland elevated American Girl's accessibility and fulfilled a vision from her initial planning period with the opening of American Girl Place in Chicago.<sup>55</sup> The creation of AG's flagship store was the first-time girls could purchase catalogue exclusive products in-person. Comparable to theme parks, the stores offered unique experiences including dining with your doll, a doll hair salon, and even a doll hospital.<sup>56</sup> The American Girl Café offered Historical Character themed meals and attachable high chairs allowed girls to dine alongside their dolls. Girls flocked to Chicago to participate in the American Girl retail experience.

For Rowland, American Girl was not exclusively about teaching girls about history but rather, at its core, was a celebration of girlhood. American Girl embodied Rowland's determination to empower girls with confidence and character.<sup>57</sup> In a 1991 interview, Rowland told a newspaper reporter, "It doesn't take a Freudian genius to figure out that in some ways I was making all eight-year-old girls my child. And what other women invest in their own children, I was going to invest in girls at large."<sup>58</sup> Despite attempting to invest in girls at large, Rowland was never able to fully meet the needs of less affluent children.

Since the creation of American Girl, the brand has experienced criticism for their prices with accusations on conspicuous consumption and its availability to mostly upper-middle-class

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<sup>55</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>56</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>57</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>58</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 17.

girls.<sup>59</sup> Introduced in 1986, the dolls retailed for \$68 and the paperback books for \$5.99.<sup>60</sup> Even if girls were determined to obtain a doll, a large number were halted by the price and sequestered to the books or knock-offs. Rowland regularly justified the brand's prices and during Felicity's Elegant Tea party, she said,

“People do not realize that toys can cost so much money... Compare us with Nintendo, which is the largest- selling toy company in the world; it captured one-third of the toy market, and starts at \$100. Or look at Barbie's plastic palace, which costs \$400-plus. A comparable doll to ours costs \$125 at retail, without a book, and reading is the heart of our products. What we provide goes a good deal further in nurturing girl's creativity, their history, and their sense of self [than these other products].”<sup>61</sup>

According to Rowland, the books gave the brand a valuable edge, one that others aimed to exploit.

The price and success of American Girl inspired alternatives and knock-offs including the Canadian Maplelea Girls and Battat Inc.'s Our Generation. Released in 2003, Maplelea Girls were marketed as a “great alternative to American Girl.”<sup>62</sup> The dolls, accompanied by a book, were set in varying Canadian cities and reflected girlhood across Canada.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, Our Generation is a contemporary, inexpensive knock-off. Released in 2019, Our Generation dolls acted as the friends girls yearned for but didn't break the bank. Retailing for as low as \$25.99, the dolls were available at retailers including Toys R Us and Target.<sup>64</sup> Despite the costly price

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<sup>59</sup> “American Girl (R) Says Farewell to Felicity Merriman” *Business Wire*, (September 01,2010), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/748886192?parentSessionId=kx2C1sUPccxeLPn79f1R6t8ytdpVFpj51TD2nmhBo64%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=10406>.

<sup>60</sup> Pleasant Company, “Pleasant Company Catalogue 1987,” *Pleasant Company*, 1987, 3, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/mmpc1987>.

<sup>61</sup> “American Girl (R) Says Farewell to Felicity Merriman” *Business Wire*, (September 01,2010), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/748886192?parentSessionId=kx2C1sUPccxeLPn79f1R6t8ytdpVFpj51TD2nmhBo64%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=10406>.

<sup>62</sup> “Maplelea Homepage,” Maplelea, accessed January 23, 2023, <https://maplelea.com>.

<sup>63</sup> “Maplelea Homepage,” <https://maplelea.com>.

<sup>64</sup> “Ourgeneration Homepage,” Battat Inc., accessed January 23, 2023, <https://ourgeneration.com>.

tag of American Girl and alternatives available, business flourished and the company's sales rose to \$1.2 million in 1994.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the rise in knock-offs and competitors, American Girl's prices rose and by 1998, the dolls retailed for eighty-two dollars.<sup>66</sup> Parents themselves justified the price including Peggy Megginson who explained in a 1998 interview, "I know \$82 is a lot to pay for a doll, but they're worth it. The dolls are wholesome, high-quality, and the books are educational and really build self-esteem. This really fills a much needed niche for little girls."<sup>67</sup> A 1991 study analysed the company's earnings to observe the consumers' incomes. The study discovered that 10,000 customers with incomes less than \$20,000 and 100,000 customers with incomes less than \$40,000 had purchased AG products.<sup>68</sup> While the survey included books in their count of AG products, it proved that families were willing to purchase American Girl despite it being outside of their economic means. Rowland never fully bridged the economic gap between product and consumer. Rowland's 1998 retirement closed the curtain on American Girl's autonomy as the Pleasant Company was purchased by Mattel, ushering in the age of Mattel's American Girl.

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<sup>65</sup> Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy J. Kreshal, "I'm an American Girl... Whatever That Means": Girls Consuming Pleasant Company's American Girl Identity," in *Journal of Communication* 52, (2002), 140. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2002.tb02536.x>

<sup>66</sup> "American Girl (R) Says Farewell to Felicity Merriman" *Business Wire*, (September 01,2010), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/748886192?parentSessionId=kx2C1sUPccxeLPn79f1R6t8yt dpVFpj51TD2nmhBo64%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=10406>.

<sup>67</sup> Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy J. Kreshal, "I'm an American Girl... Whatever That Means": Girls Consuming Pleasant Company's American Girl Identity," in *Journal of Communication* 52, (2002), 140. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2002.tb02536.x>

<sup>68</sup> Felicity Evans, "Focus: American Girls to Treasure: Dolls, History & Dresses for the Well-Padded Purse," In *The Washington Post* (August 27, 1991), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/307433854?parentSessionId=uiHReVv0xQOHaXDKH9B%2FzOfVXYmViD3DEB9ySI31eLM%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=10406>.

## Mattel's American Girl

For seven hundred million, Mattel acquired the niche they previously overlooked: educational dolls targeted at older girls. Founded in 1946, Mattel was a multinational toy company. The home of Barbie, Lego, and Fisher-Price, Mattel reigned over the toy industry. Mattel not only attained one of their largest competitors but a brand with millions of loyal customers. In Mattel's 1998 Annual Report, American Girl contributed \$213.2 million in gross sales from its acquisition in July until December.<sup>69</sup> Rowland's decision was clarified by Pleasant Company's then Communications Director, Julia Prochaska, when she asserted, "There comes a certain point in a company's growth when you need partners to do what you want to do, and we reached that point."<sup>70</sup> Operating as a subsidiary of Mattel, Pleasant Company was formally renamed American Girl.<sup>71</sup> Rowland retained some control as the Vice Chairman of Mattel and a seat on the Board of Directors until her official retirement in 2000.<sup>72</sup> Despite being led by Rowland's original vision, Mattel's acquisition of American Girl enacted permanent shifts in the company and its products as the new conceptualization of AG deviated from education and towards commercialization and capitalization.

Mattel's purchase of American Girl enacted significant changes to the brand including new sales methods and new products. Prior to Rowland's 1998 retirement, American Girl Place in Chicago was opened. Mattel utilized the enthusiasm for the Chicago store to bring the

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<sup>69</sup> Mattel, "Mattel, Inc. 1998 Annual Report," *Mattel*, 27, [https://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReportArchive/m/NASDAQ\\_MAT\\_1998.pdf](https://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReportArchive/m/NASDAQ_MAT_1998.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> Jim Milliot, "Mattel to Acquire Pleasant Company for \$700 Million," in *Publishers Weekly* 245, (New York: June 22, 1998), 20.

<sup>71</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 23.

<sup>72</sup> "Our Story," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

American Girl retail experience to girls across the country. Stores opened nationwide in cities including New York, Los Angeles, Nashville, and even expanded internationally into Canada.<sup>73</sup> Following the precedent set by the Chicago store, the stores emphasized the American Girl retail experience. Girls across the country could transform their dolls' hair at the Dolled Up Salon and enjoy a surprisingly decent soft pretzel with their doll at the American Girl Café. Opening solely in urban centres, the stores remained widely inaccessible. Moreover, American Girl Stores never expanded outside of North America. The stores operated as destination spots; if a girl wanted to participate in the American Girl retail experience, they were required to travel.

Mattel sought to maintain the fragile balance of accessibility and demand. It increased American Girl's accessibility with the creation of the American Girl Website. Now, American consumers had another way to obtain AG products and non-North Americans had easier access. The website entered the symbiotic relationship experienced by the books, dolls, accessories, and catalogues. Along with a new method of sale, the website offered new forms of play. Multiple online games themed around the Historical Characters were offered. Girls could play Felicity's Courageous Ride or Samantha's Scavenger Hunt, and then purchase the furniture or dresses included in the games.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>74</sup> "American Girl Museum," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com>.



Figure 2. Eight-year old Amelia and Kristen in matching outfits on the cover of *Life Magazine* December 3, 2004, (Image retrieved from: Life Magazine Digital Archive, “Life Magazine December 3, 2004,” New York Public Library, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.nypl.org/node/444480>).

Despite new methods of sale, Mattel’s American Girl remained economically confined. Throughout the brands’ thirty-seven years, the products’ price has consistently increased. Released in 1986, the dolls retailed for \$68 and books for \$5.95 but now in 2022, the dolls retail for \$115 and the books for \$7.99.<sup>75</sup> Mattel retained Rowland’s selling process by preserving the books’ affordability and the dolls inaccessibility. While the basic doll bundle was pricey, collections and bundles could be exorbitant. “Ultimate Collections” containing the doll, *Meet Book*, and selection of accessories and outfits retail as high as \$284.<sup>76</sup> In 1999, Felicity’s Starter Collection retailed for \$295 and her entire collection totalled \$995.<sup>77</sup> With embedded marketing and six collections per doll, it was easy for some consumers to spend thousands as girls

<sup>75</sup> “Historical Characters,” American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

<sup>76</sup> “Historical Characters”, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

<sup>77</sup> Jan Susina, “American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History.” In *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1999), 133.



demanded more dolls, more outfits, and more American Girl. Inversely, girls were commonly only able to afford the books; directly affecting the collecting practices of AG and leading to accusations of conspicuous consumption. Despite new ownership permitting new business opportunities, American Girl was never equally available to all American girls.

Mattel continued Rowland's expansion and released its' first new American Girl doll line in 2000. Girl of the Year operated identically to the Historical Characters but instead were contemporary characters with modern-day issues who, "[gave] voice to a diverse range of personalities and backgrounds."<sup>78</sup> In 2016 and 2017, two lines were released back to back: WellieWishers, a nature themed cast of characters targeted at girls four and up, and Create Your Own.<sup>79</sup> Available solely online, Create Your Own allowed for girls to design a custom doll. Girls could customize key aspects of the doll from hair colour to her face shape.<sup>80</sup> American Girl released their most recent doll line in 2021, World By Us.<sup>81</sup> The line focused on difficult current events like racism and clothing's environmental impacts and attempted to inspire youths to enact change. American Girl Publishing Company continued to release non-doll line publications including *The Care and Keeping of You 2*.<sup>82</sup> As Mattel introduced new doll lines and books, the Historical Characters would not go by unscathed.

Mattel recognized that the Historical Characters were the essence of American Girl. Mattel capitalized on the Historical Characters with new characters, movies, and new collections. Beginning in 1998, Mattel accelerated production on new dolls and in 2000 released their first

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<sup>78</sup> "Our Story," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>79</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>80</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>81</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>82</sup> "American Girl Books," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/books>

doll post-acquisition, Kit Kitteredge.<sup>83</sup> Dolls continued the precedent set by Rowland, utilizing embedded marketing and each accumulating six collections. Mattel made significant developments to release new dolls with the introduction of the archival system and Best Friends. Introduced in 2000, American Girl began to “archive” dolls to make room for new dolls.<sup>84</sup> As such, the company archived dolls as a strategy to avoid the frightening word: discontinued. Best-sellers including Samantha, Kristen, and Felicity were all at one point archived. An announcement of a dolls’ impending archival elevated demand and allowed for re-releases of characters years later which cashed-in on former consumers’ nostalgia.<sup>85</sup> While archiving classic dolls, AG capitalized on established and beloved Historical Characters to introduce new characters. Introduced in 2004, Best Friends expanded on opposing sides of history without the effort and expense of a full launch. In 2005, Felicity received the loyalist Elizabeth Cole to operate in direct conjecture. Over the span of thirty-seven years, American Girl has released a total of twenty-five Historical Characters.<sup>86</sup>

Mattel not only expanded on the Historical Characters line with new dolls but the dolls’ collections were frequently redesigned. Throughout the early 2000s, several dolls were revamped with new meet dresses and accessories. In 2005, Felicity’s original 1998 Meet Gown was replaced by her Traveling Gown along with new accessories.<sup>87</sup> As a result, her book cover was redesigned to illustrate the modifications. The most radical redesign occurred in 2014 when the

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<sup>83</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 27.

<sup>84</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 27.

<sup>85</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 27.

<sup>86</sup> Sydney Jean Films, “Every Single American Girl Doll!,” *American Girl Doll News*, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.americangirldollnews.com/everydoll>.

<sup>87</sup> Pleasant Company, “Felicity’s Collection: A Keepsake Collection 2000,” *Pleasant Company*, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmkc2000>

Historical Characters was rebranded as BeForever and the dolls were available in a new format.<sup>88</sup> Meant to refresh the line and introduce the Historical Characters to a new generation, the dolls and their books were reworked and redesigned. Formerly archived dolls, including Samantha and Felicity, were rereleased into the new format. In 2019, BeForever reverted to the Historical Characters label but several changes to collections remained. With the return of the Historical Characters label, yet again, Felicity was discontinued.



Figure 3. Felicity Merriman’s Collections including (L to R) Felicity’s Original 1991 Meet Collection, Felicity’s 2005 Meet Redesign, Felicity’s 2014 BeForever Collection, (Image retrieved from: Fandom, “Felicity Merriman (doll)” American Girl Fandom, accessed January 20, 2023, [https://americangirl.fandom.com/wiki/Felicity\\_Merriman\\_\(doll\)](https://americangirl.fandom.com/wiki/Felicity_Merriman_(doll))).

American Girl continued to capitalize on the nostalgia of the Historical Characters with the 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Limited Edition Collection. Commemorating the 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of American Girl, the collection revived the first six dolls in their original designs. The doll, its’ original *Meet Book*, and original accessories retailed for \$150.<sup>89</sup> Instead of the modern American Girl packaging, the dolls were encased in original 1980s Pleasant Company packaging. The

<sup>88</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 23.

<sup>89</sup> Meilan Solly, “The Enduring Nostalgia of American Girl Dolls,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, (Washington DC, June 3, 2021). <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/evolution-american-girl-dolls-180977822/>

collection highlighted American Girl's efforts to capitalize on nostalgia and cross-generational appeal. For the first time in years, the original six dolls were all available in their original outfit and accessories. For example, this was the first time in seventeen years that Felicity's original 1991 products were all available. A majority of the original 1980s/1990s consumers are now parents/grandparents of girls aged eight to twelve. By bringing back the original dolls, adults could purchase the dolls of their youth and share it with their children or reminisce their childhood; actively participating in a form of consumed nostalgia. An additional level to AG's commercialized nostalgia was the release of Courtney, a doll set in 1986.<sup>90</sup> The doll appealed directly to the childhood of the original consumers. Courtney, like other 1980s girls, had her own Historical Character. A mini-Samantha in her original 1986 outfit and Pleasant Company packaging was released as part of Courtney's collection. Mattel's mass commercialization of the Historical Characters was not restricted to new characters, rebranding, or nostalgic collections.

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<sup>90</sup> "Historical Characters," American Girl, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.



Figure 4. Official promotional pictures for American Girl’s 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Limited Edition Collection which re-released its original six characters (L to R), Felicity Merriman, Kristen Larson, Samantha Parkington, Addy Walker, Josefina Montoya, and Molly McIntire, (Image retrieved from: Meilan Solly, “The Enduring Nostalgia of American Girl Dolls,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, (Washington DC, June 3, 2021), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/evolution-american-girl-dolls-180977822/>)

In 2004, Mattel presented the Historical Characters to a new industry with the release of direct-to-DVD movies. American Girl partnered with Julia Roberts’ *Red Om* Production Company to adapt beloved characters’ *Meet Books* for the big screen.<sup>91</sup> Beginning with *Samantha: An American Girl Holiday*, soon Felicity’s, Molly’s, and Kit’s *Meet Books* were all adapted.<sup>92</sup> The adaptations applied creative liberties to appeal to audiences. Plot points, characters, outfits, and accessories featured in the characters’ other books were commonly included; for example, *Felicity: An American Girl Adventure* featured Elizabeth who does not

<sup>91</sup> “American Girl Movies”, IMDb, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls023884040/>.

<sup>92</sup> “American Girl Movies”, <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls023884040/>.

appear in *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, the films were successful with each being nominated at the Young Artists Awards and the actors later becoming breakout stars including Shailene Woodley and Olivia Rodrigo.<sup>94</sup>

With more name recognition, money, and influence in the toy community, Mattel's acquisition of American Girl allowed for the brand to explore new forays. American Girl's accessibility grew with new methods of purchase. Likewise, new doll lines accreted new consumers and appealed to current buyers. While Mattel continued American Girl's legacy, the brand and its products were heavily commercialized. From the inception of Mattel's acquisition, the Historical Characters were expanded upon, re-designed, and even adapted. The educational value entrenched within the brand was overlooked as the Historical Characters were removed from non-historical products. For example, the Historical Character were phased out of the *American Girl Magazine*. Rather than expand educationally, the Historical Characters were frequently redesigned, archived to make room for fresher, new characters and re-released in limited editions years later. Mattel's American Girl utilized consumers' nostalgia to tap into new generations. Likewise, products remained expensive despite becoming more accessible. Mattel's American Girl remained in the business of little girls but refused to sacrifice the economic power of the brand.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the story of American Girl is the story of its founder, Pleasant Rowland. The self-proclaimed "Mother of American Girl", created a product she believed was loyal to

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<sup>93</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin: Pleasant Company, 1991).

<sup>94</sup> "American Girl Movies", IMDb, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls023884040/>.

girlhood.<sup>95</sup> Rowland was correct in her belief and in ten years the company was purchased for \$700 million.<sup>96</sup> Rowland created a product that not only informed and befriended children but attempted to celebrate girlhood. The spunky, headstrong characters sought to instill vital lessons and values ranging from confidence to the strength to make their mark on the world.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, for many girls, American Girl Historical Characters was their introduction to history. Sydeney Rose Paulsen, a former buyer and now doll photographer, outlined the impact of the brand, “I slowly started to become very interested in historical fashion because I wanted to dress like my doll so badly.”<sup>98</sup> As Pleasant Rowland taught girls history and the importance of perspective, she constructed her own form of the ideal American girl. Simultaneously, as Rowland developed and heralded her own form of girlhood, she controlled contemporary perceptions of American history. Rowland’s cast of characters concurrently resisted and conformed to gender roles and stereotypes. Whether consciously or unconsciously, on her journey to create her own form of the ideal girl, Rowland commercialized girl power and utilized 1980s neoliberalism.

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<sup>95</sup> “Our Story,” American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>96</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 22.

<sup>97</sup> “Our Story,” American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>98</sup> Meilan Solly, “The Enduring Nostalgia of American Girl Dolls,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, (Washington DC, June 3, 2021). <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/evolution-american-girl-dolls-180977822/>

## CHAPTER TWO

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“not a f\*\*\* lot of content”: American Girl’s Commercialization of Girl Power

“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 understanding of where they came from and who they are today.”- Pleasant T.

Rowland, 1998<sup>1</sup>

Established in 1986, American Girl emerged in an era characterized by institutional involvement in society. Proliferated by President Ronald Reagan, neoliberal ideals and family values were secured to the collective consciousness of the American people. Neoliberalism and post-feminism both yearned for the same ideal subject; empowered, out-spoken individuals shackled to capitalism and consumption. Individuals strove for the characteristics defined by both neoliberalism and post-feminism which in turn emerged as a powerful marketing tool. The empowered ideal subject was perfected as a purchasable product, achievable by virtually any subject. As neoliberal post-feminist ideals spread, girl power emerged. For girls by girls, girl power allowed girls to operate as active political objectors rather than remain confined to consumerism. The movement embraced girls regardless of their ethnicity, class, and gender presentation. Their word would be assimilated and bedazzled by economic and patriarchal institutions to sell products and control young women. Rowland placed neoliberal girlhood in the identity of American Girl as she aimed to create her own ideal American girls. With American

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<sup>1</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*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 139, <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2002.tb02536.x>



Girl, Rowland presented girlhood as “chocolate cake with vitamins,” desexualizing and confiscating agency from a group yearning for honest representation.<sup>2</sup>

## Neoliberalism

Defined by Rosalind Gill and Christian Scharff in *New Femininities: Post-feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, neoliberalism is a “mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation, and rolling back and withdrawal from the state from many areas of social provision.”<sup>3</sup> Existing prior to the 1980s, neoliberalism rose to prominence in the United States under the Reagan administration (1981-1989).<sup>4</sup> President Ronald Reagan, entrenched neoliberal ideologies into his economic policy. Reaganomics or free-market economics championed neoliberal principals by emphasizing self-sustainability and insisting upon less government involvement in the economy. Through Reaganomics, laissez faire and trickle-down economics combined to open new markets all while championing individual entrepreneurship by idealizing self-improvement and the idea that success was achievable alone.<sup>5</sup> Americans were compelled to start their own businesses and as a result, the wealth and volume of the upper-entrepreneurial class surged. Reaganomics hoped that the growth of the upper-entrepreneurial class would encourage spending and wealth would “trickle down” to lower classes stimulating even more consumption. Reaganomics and neoliberalism were not bound

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<sup>2</sup> Acosta, “I’m an American Girl... Whatever that Means,” 139, <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2002.tb02536.x>

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, “Introduction,” *New Femininities: Post Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Gill and Scharff, “Introduction”, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 54.

exclusively to politics and economics. They were intrinsically linked to culture, operating as ideologies which endorsed family values and strived to construct ideal subjects.

Since the creation of the United States of America, the state and family have been intertwined and, occasionally, indistinguishable. A hold-over from Empire, family values obtained a higher cultural emphasis and power in the freshly independent United States of America.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of nobility, the family became the basis for morality.<sup>7</sup> Families assumed a political role, relying on strict stereotypes based on the structure, function, and responsibilities commonly demonstrated by white European-American families.<sup>8</sup> Reagan and his campaign slogan, “Let’s Make America Great Again” reaffirmed family values’ use and significance within American politics.

Reagan’s slogan desired a return to the nuclear family. Popularized in the 1950s to combat communism, the nuclear family affirmed strict gender roles where the husbands were the breadwinners and wives were confined to the home and shopping. This myth ignored the diversity and changes in American families to perpetuate a familial type frequently only observed in upper/middle-class suburbanites.<sup>9</sup> Rather than combating communism and dissuading nuclear Armageddon, Reagan’s family values rhetoric was used to quell societal issues and the feminist plague.<sup>10</sup> Instead of the state, “bad” families and absent working mothers

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<sup>6</sup> Philippa Levine, *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3).

<sup>7</sup> Elain Tyler May, “Family Values: The Uses and Abuses of American Family History,” *Revue Française D’Etudes Américaines*, (Cairn, 2003). <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2003-3-page-7.htm>

<sup>8</sup> May, “Family Values”, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2003-3-page-7.htm>

<sup>9</sup> May, “Family Values”, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2003-3-page-7.htm>

<sup>10</sup> May, “Family Values”, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2003-3-page-7.htm>

shouldered the blame for the rise in crime, drug use, and poverty.<sup>11</sup> As Reagan exploited family values, neoliberalism's societal rationality proliferated nationally.

Political geographer, David Harvey explains that neoliberalism is, "an ethic itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substitution for all previously held ethical beliefs."<sup>12</sup> Neoliberalism was never simply about politics or economics but fundamentally served as a moral code, with the goal to instil crucial ethical values and mould ideal subjects. Ideal neoliberal subjects were meant to be individuals capable of being entrepreneurs of themselves and their lives, unrestricted by their race, gender, and class.<sup>13</sup> Individuals were meant to embody essential characteristics and present as: rational, calculated, self-motivated, flexible, resilient, and - most importantly- they were to be self-made.<sup>14</sup> Ideal subjects were simultaneously aware of their identities and freedoms made available by neoliberalism and loyal to the state and consumerism.<sup>15</sup>

Neoliberalism operated as a pseudo-manifest destiny. Instead of moving west seeking economic prosperity, Americans were led to believe that entrepreneurship and becoming the ideal subject allowed for success and an opportunity to rise in class. Neoliberalism, like America was built on the exploitative beliefs of individual entrepreneurial opportunity and the ability to become whatever you dream. As neoliberalism touted individuality, it developed a relationship with a movement Reagan considered a plague: post-feminism.

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<sup>11</sup> May, "Family Values", <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2003-3-page-7.htm>

<sup>12</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, "Introduction," *New Femininities: Post Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Shelley Budgeon, "The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Post-feminism, and 'New' Femininities," *New Femininities: Post Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 284.

<sup>15</sup> Budgeon, "The Contradictions of Successful Femininity", 285.

## Post-feminism

Popular in the 1960s and 70s, second-wave feminism openly critiqued patriarchal institutions and aimed for equality in the workforce. Concurrently, the movement championed sexual liberation and the legalization of abortion. Second-wave feminism declined as more women were accepted into the workforce, abortion was legalized in 1973 by *Roe v Wade*, and feminist in-fighting over pornography materialized. The dwindling popularity of second-wave feminism ushered post-feminism into mainstream culture.

Post-feminism is a varied ideology and a source of contention. Although it is connected to various theories in feminist discourse, post-feminism is most commonly associated with the belief that many feminist goals have been achieved.<sup>16</sup> With multiple methods of contraception and the legalization of abortion, the acceptance of women in the workforce, and women's suffrage in the 1910s, equality had been mostly achieved and feminism was unnecessary.<sup>17</sup> The movement has also been presented as a critique on second and third wave's binary thinking and lack of agency towards the relationship of femininity and feminism.<sup>18</sup> Despite multiple conceptions, post-feminism gained traction. Post-feminism became a way for the housewife and working women to both present themselves as feminists. Emerging prior to Reagan and his socio-political economic reforms, post-feminism endangered family values. Women disregarded Reagan's family values by entering the workforce, terminating pregnancies, or refusing to have children altogether. Regardless of Reagan's condemnation of post-feminism, the ideology's popularity and emergence was partially due to the proliferation of neoliberalism.

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<sup>16</sup> Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no.3. (Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>17</sup> McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 2.

<sup>18</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, "Introduction," *New Femininities: Post Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 6.

In *New Femininities*, Gill and Scharff outline three ways in which neoliberalism and post feminism are connected. The pair begin by demonstrating that both theories are structured around individualism which has replaced the idea that individuals were subject to pressures or influences outside of themselves.<sup>19</sup> If an individual is driven, self-sustained, and personifying the ideal subject, then no external factors should hinder their success. Likewise, the ideal subject championed by neoliberalism bears a strong, almost indiscernible resemblance to the ideal post-feminist with both ideologies valuing, “active, freely choosing, and self-reinventing” subjects.<sup>20</sup> Finally, compared to men, women are often more demanded to self-manage and regulate every aspect of their conduct to society as if it is freely chosen.<sup>21</sup>

The pair move on to explain that post-feminism isn't merely a response to feminism but is partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideals.<sup>22</sup> Post-feminism emerged from the proliferation and popularization of neoliberal ideals which in turn generated desire to become the ideal subject. The nature of this relationship suggests that the ideal post-feminist is the same as the ideal neoliberal subject. Furthermore, post-feminism allowed for individuals to conform to widespread, elusive neoliberal ideals and remain perceived as an empowered feminist individual. According to neoliberal post-femininity, out-spoken, active housewives were just as feminist as childless, career women. As post-feminism spread, young women became heavily associated with the movement.

By the 1950s, young women and teens had emerged as their own phenomenon. By the 1980s, they began to claim space economically and culturally. Neoliberalism and post-feminism

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<sup>19</sup> Gill and Scharff, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>20</sup> Gill and Scharff, “Introduction”, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Gill and Scharff, “Introduction”, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Gill and Scharff, “Introduction”, 7.

became increasingly associated with young women. The two had become so synonymous that by the 1980s, the media labelled young teens and girls the “post-feminist generation.”<sup>23</sup> The tropes of individualism, self-driven, and empowerment were thrust upon young girls and soon developed into expectations. Despite feminist agency developing ties with young women, the American media continued to view girls as vapid, self-obsessed, and yearning for romance.<sup>24</sup> Teen magazines and products continued to emphasize the makeup, clothes, and personalities that boys enjoyed. As girls younger and younger were introduced to neoliberal feminist concepts, they realized an opportunity to claim feminist agency. Girls organized their own concepts of girlhood with the ideals declared to them by neoliberal post-feminism. Girl power became American girls’ weapon to combat stereotypes and claim authority over their representation.

### **Girl Power**

Girl power championed gender equality and questioned patriarchal institutions while giving agency to a powerful consumer group arising in America: teenage girls. Although not formally named until 1991, girl power ideologies appeared in the 1960s.<sup>25</sup> Major cultural events including the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and political assassinations altered American culture and sense of agency. Activism, political, and cultural unrest exploded as groups fought for racial and gender equality or their right to refuse conscription. Simultaneously young women emerged as their own phenomenon with their own values, perspectives, and

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<sup>23</sup> Tricia Lootens, “Wednesday The Post-Feminist Generation and Media,” *Off Our Backs: A Woman’s News Journal*, October 1984, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ednie Kaeh Garrison, “U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave,” *Feminist Studies*, (College Park: Feminist Studies, Inc, 2000), 143.

<sup>25</sup> Anita Harris, “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls In Late Modernity,” *Feminist Review*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 40.

political objectives distinct from older women and numbers.<sup>26</sup> Girl power emerged as a form of non-conformity, expression, and communication of their desires to a larger collection of their peers.

Girl power as a codified slogan materialized from the Riot Grrrl Movement. Born from the underground US punk scene, Riot Grrrl combined feminist consciousness and punk aesthetics, politics, and style.<sup>27</sup> The grassroots movement was heavily associated with the punk girl band Bikini Kill. The Riot Grrrl Manifesto written by the band's lead singer standardized the movement that had occurred clandestine for decades. The Manifesto, published in the 1991 zine *BIKINI KILL ZINE 2*, demanded for not only the patriarchy to take girls seriously but for girls to do the same.<sup>28</sup> Riot Grrrl rejected the notion that girlhood was embarrassing and unbecoming but instead could be a tool to help young women claim space in male-dominated spaces.<sup>29</sup> As more and more girls became attracted to Riot Grrrl, the slogan evolved into girl power. Now, girl power ideologies were available to all girls, not just those involved in the punk scene.

As girls claimed space economically as powerful consumers, they were determined to claim space politically. The movement was built around opposition to stereotypes that young American girls are too preoccupied with themselves and boys to be interested in being politically creative or loud.<sup>30</sup> Girl power encouraged young women to consider themselves producers and creators of knowledge, as expressive dissenters rather than passive consumers of culture.<sup>31</sup> Girl

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<sup>26</sup> Harris, "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines," 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," *Feminist Studies*, (College Park: Feminist Studies, Inc, 2000), 142.

<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Hanna, Riot Grrrl Manifesto, 1991, *Riot Grrrl Manifesto*, Actipedia, (2013), <https://actipedia.org/project/riot-grrrl-manifesto>.

<sup>29</sup> Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," *Feminist Studies*, (College Park: Feminist Studies, Inc, 2000), 142.

<sup>30</sup> Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style!," 143.

<sup>31</sup> Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style!," 158.

power was promoted by real girls; operating as neoliberal display of self-stylized, sexy, brash, and individual expression of power.<sup>32</sup> The slogan was not confined to white, able-bodied, cis-gender, slim girls. Girl power was for all girls, no matter her ethnicity, sexual preference, gender identity, or body type. Girls communicated their ideas through print and visual media. Zines showcasing poetry, short stories, photographs, and art spread locally, nationally, and even internationally.<sup>33</sup> Girl power helped form a collective feminist consciousness in a younger demographic that would not go unnoticed by the state or economic institutions.<sup>34</sup>

By the 1950s, young women had developed into a key consumer group with significant spending power.<sup>35</sup> Marketing campaigns and products exploded, attempting to gain the loyalty of a robust consumer group. As feminism gained traction and girl power proliferated, economic institutions and the state saw the profit potential that could be generated by harnessing female empowerment. Companies understood they couldn't utilize girl power in its true form. A new type of girl power was engineered; de-sexualized, non-violent, marketable to tweens, teens and parents of virtually any political standing. Commercialized girl power championed girls who were risk-taking, loud, and active but retained loyalty to stereotypes that girls were vapid, egocentric, and boy crazy.<sup>36</sup> The sassy young women promoted by girl power became a powerful marketing and advertising tool.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Anita Harris, "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls In Late Modernity," *Feminist Review*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 40.

<sup>33</sup> Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," *Feminist Studies*, (2000), 143.

<sup>34</sup> Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style!," 158.

<sup>35</sup> Anita Harris, "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls In Late Modernity," *Feminist Review*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 40.

<sup>36</sup> Harris, "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines," 40.

<sup>37</sup> Harris, "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines," 40.



Commercialized girl power represented girls and provided them consumer power while instilling important character traits synonymous with post-feminism including confidence, bravery, and selflessness. Despite becoming widely available and accessible to a younger demographic, the process of commercialization obliterated aspects integral to the essence of girl power. Most importantly, girls no longer dictated their own definitions of girlhood. Instead, girls were informed of girlhood and its expectations by companies that ultimately aimed to make a profit. Institutions, predominantly controlled by men, procured control over girlhood and power over a significant, easily impressible, malleable consumer group. Girls were told what to wear, what to be, and who to be rather than given the opportunity to discover themselves. Teen magazines flooded with tips on “how to get a boyfriend” and “how to lose weight” alongside articles on “how to be more active in your community.”<sup>38</sup> Media’s girl power hinged on the validation of others.

Simultaneously, the state was struggling to impose and control girl’s behaviour.<sup>39</sup> The concept of young women as risk-takers, although marketable, was dangerous as general concern for juvenile delinquency, nihilism, and antisocial attitudes rose in the latter half of the century.<sup>40</sup> For girl power to perform successfully, companies had to ensure their target demographic remained loyal to the state and consumerism. Instead of admitting their failures, the state continued to place the blame on “bad” families.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Angela McRobbie, “Young Women and Consumer Culture,” *Cultural Studies*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 533.

<sup>39</sup> Anita Harris, “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls In Late Modernity,” *Feminist Review*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 42.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines,” 41.

<sup>41</sup> Elain Tyler May, “Family Values: The Uses and Abuses of American Family History,” *Revue Française D’Etudes Américaines*, (Cairn, 2003). <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2003-3-page-7.htm>

By the mid-1990s, girl power had developed into a mainstream slogan. Despite being coined by punk band Bikini Kill, girl power became synonymous with the British pop band, Spice Girls. Even with the best of intentions, girl power became what it was so determined to avoid. The message of girl power which was inherently sexual, aware of gender issues and its feminist goals was disregarded and watered down. In *Her Heroes Aren't Gone*, Kylie writes, “now I see Spice Girls and supermodels and sparkly slogan signs-their version of lame ‘girl power’ is so far from our original vision of ‘grrrl power’; co-opted, watered down, marketable, profitable-all style and not a fuck lot of content.”<sup>42</sup> As an attempt to reclaim space in the patriarchy, the patriarchy exploited girl power to perpetuate the performance of equity and feminist agency. Anita Harris in “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls in Late Modernity” summarizes this point by writing, “young women who attempt to speak up, participate, and articulate their experiences have witnessed their words homogenized, commodified, and sold back to them in the form of clothing, accessories, toys and popular music.”<sup>43</sup>

As commercialized girl power proliferated and appealed to younger girls, it abandoned a large portion of girl power participants and believers. The commercial representations produced by girl power favoured “slim blondness”; ignoring girls of colour, the queer community, and the non-able bodied all while affirming their lack of space within society.<sup>44</sup> Girl power was exploited by the rich to get richer; a cash cow that could influence girls and shape a loyal consumer who would buy the company’s teen products and once of age, the women’s products. Unlike its

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<sup>42</sup> Anita Harris, “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls In Late Modernity,” *Feminist Review*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003),49.

<sup>43</sup> Harris, “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines,” 42.

<sup>44</sup> Harris, “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines,” 42.

competitors, Pleasant Rowland and American Girl retained the political nature of girl power but assisted in perpetuating the commercialization of girl power.

### **Rowland's Ideal Subject**

Girlhood and girl power were integral to Pleasant T. Rowland's creation of American Girl. The entrepreneur repeatedly stated she was "in the business of little girls" rather than the doll industry.<sup>45</sup> As a result girlhood assumed an important role as Rowland attempted to gain the loyalty of an impressionable, key consumer group. Rowland decidedly placed girlhood in the centre of the brand's identity.<sup>46</sup> While the use of neoliberal girl power was successful in capturing the doll and book market, it was not without its' flaws and critiques. "Our Story", a page on American Girl's website which outlines the brand's history and intent, reveals how intensely girl power and girlhood are entrenched within the brand's identity.

From the outset, "Our Story" establishes the brand's passionate employment of girlhood by stating, "bringing out the joy of girlhood is at the heart of everything we do."<sup>47</sup> The page continues: "through adventurous stories and imaginative play, we give girls the chance to discover who they are-and who they're meant to be."<sup>48</sup> Rather than "who they can be", the wording is deliberate and revealing. Girls are given no choice, American Girl is telling girls who they are meant to be or have to be. The brand operates as Rowland's manual on how to become

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<sup>45</sup> Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017), 18.

<sup>46</sup> Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Victoria P. Lantz, "Staging American Girlhood The Pleasant Way: Centering Girls in History and Performance with the American Girl Theatre Kits," *Youth Theatre Journal*, (2020), 6.

<sup>47</sup> "Our Story," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>48</sup> "Our Story," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

the ideal American girl. Rowland values similar characteristics as neoliberalism but with a capitalized girl power twist. Her ideal subject or ideal American girl is “resilient, confident, and kind”, independent, and active.<sup>49</sup> The brand successfully claimed agency over the consumer and flourished into a “trusting partner in empowering girls with confidence and character.”<sup>50</sup> AG operated similarly to the state by co-opting girl power, controlling a powerful consumer group, and shaping the beliefs of individuals to create ideal subjects. The brand and its products are disguised as friends but operate as role-model, enforcing Rowland’s ideal American girl; an active agent but confined to the state, consumerism, and gender roles.

While the dolls and consumers were active, political agents, they remained confined to the domestic and stereotypical familial roles. Roles associated with the 1950’s nuclear family and the values being reiterated by President Reagan are present within the character’s narratives and non-character products. The Historical Characters simultaneously speak out on the failings of society while acting relatively pleasant towards roles associated with the girls of their times. Likewise, the accessories and items released by American Girl frequently involve activities associated with feminine stereotypes including dancing, cooking, art and theatre. The brand’s promotion of family values extended past the doll lines. The *American Girl Magazine* and self-help books perpetuated the brand’s commodification of girl power. The *American Girl Magazine* Premiere Issue in 1992 featured an article on daughters of politicians with advertisements for children’s clothes intermixed (FIG 5 &6).<sup>51</sup> Girls were empowered by their patriotic peers and reminded of their role as a consumer. The self-help books additionally had a wide range. While

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<sup>49</sup> “Our Story,” <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>50</sup> “Our Story,” <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>51</sup> American Girl, “American Girl Magazine Premier Issue, November 1992, ,22-30,

some operated as extensive puberty guides or discussed race and inclusion, others focus on crushes and traveling.<sup>52</sup>



Figure 5. An Article in *American Girl Magazine* discussing children of government candidates, (Image retrieved from: Jason Scott, “*American Girl Premiere Magazine- Campaign Kids*, Pleasant Company, November 1991, 22-23, <https://archive.org/details/american-girl-magazine-premier-issue-1992>).



Figure 6. Children’s clothing advertisement in an article covering children of government candidates, (Image retrieved from: Jason Scott, “*American Girl Premiere Magazine- Campaign Kids*, Pleasant Company, November 1991, 28-29, <https://archive.org/details/american-girl-magazine-premier-issue-1992>).

<sup>52</sup> American Girl: Books”, American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/books>.

Rowland's employment of girlhood and girl power into the foundation of the brand's identity was successful. Emilie Zaslow writes, "Parents and girls alike love and cherish the dolls in part because narratively they 'always do what's right' or 'fight for causes they believe in'."<sup>53</sup> AG was designed to fill a perceived void in the market and in the structure of girlhood.<sup>54</sup> In just over a decade, Rowland sold AG for \$700 million; a far cry from the \$1.2 million she used to start the brand. Despite the commercial success, American Girl assisted in co-opting girl power, commercializing the slogan and abandoning integral aspects of the movement.

Rowland's capitalization on empowerment and girl power perpetuated the expansion of commercialized girl power and girlhood. Akin to other companies and the state, Rowland de-sexualized and bedazzled girl power to appeal to younger girls. Rowland assisted in commandeering agency from girls. Although AG retained the political, rebellious nature of girl power, the brand ignored several sentiments and values central to the slogan. Rowland largely ignored non-white, queer, and disabled American girls which preserved the white girl as the standard and exclusive participant of girlhood.

Under Rowland, the brand only rectified one issue and it took nearly a decade after the creation of the Historical Characters. Addy welcomed the brand to a new racial demographic and accurately represented the racial diversity of the United States. Addy would later be joined by two other dolls of colour in 1997 and 2002; Mexican-American Josefina Montoya and Pacific Northwest Nez Perce, Kaya'aton'my.<sup>55</sup> The line's diversity increased with Mattel's acquisition

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<sup>53</sup> Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Victoria P. Lantz, "Staging American Girlhood the Pleasant Way: Centering Girls in History and Performance with the American Girl Theatre Kits," *Youth Theatre Journal*, (2020), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Sweigart-Gallagher, "Staging American Girlhood the Pleasant Way", 3.

<sup>55</sup> "Historical Characters," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

of Pleasant Company in 1998. Since the acquisition, the Historical Characters has included three African-American characters, a native Hawaiian, and a Jewish American.<sup>56</sup> Over the span of thirty-seven years, American Girl has begun to accurately depict the diversity of America. Despite Rowland's progress towards returning to the original vision of girl power by making the brand more diverse, she never attended to queer, non-able bodied, or girls outside of the gender binary.

Not only did Mattel work towards properly depicting the diverse reality of America but they began to appeal to non-able bodied girls. In the 2010s, accessories that appealed to non-able bodied girls appeared in the Truly Me Collection. Wheelchairs, a service dog, asthma and diabetes kits, and bald dolls appeared in the catalogues.<sup>57</sup> In 2020, the Girl of the Year was a deaf character.<sup>58</sup> A surfer and wanna-be cheerleader, Joss Kendrick was noticeably disabled. The doll came with removable hearing aids that could fit with other dolls. Despite dolls representing disabled girls appearing in the Truly Me Collection, there has yet to be a disabled Historical Character. The lack of disabilities in the Historical Character Collection affirms that disabilities and disability representation are considered strictly contemporary.

While Mattel aspired to portray the diverse reality of girlhood, the brand does not represent all forms of girlhood. The characters and narratives which are inherently non-sexual and devoid of sexuality allows for the brand to freely dismiss sexuality. Although the brand is intrinsically sex-free, the brand ignores the scope of girlhood. Girlhood is not confined to cis-gender girls but rather can be experienced by transgender girls. While the characters frequently

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<sup>56</sup> "Historical Characters," <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

<sup>57</sup> "Truly Me Collection," American Girl, accessed November 3, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/collections/all-truly-me-dolls>.

<sup>58</sup> "Girl of the Year: Joss Kendrick," American Girl, Accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.americangirl.com/collections/girl-of-the-year-joss>.

find themselves at odds with their gender roles, they remained confident in their birth-assigned gender identity. For example, Felicity scrutinizes the constricting nature of 18<sup>th</sup> Century female clothing and cross-dresses to comfortably ride Penny the horse.<sup>59</sup> The dolls, in every line, continue to abide by the gender binary. As a result, American Girl is ignoring the varied reality of girlhood that has existed since the beginning of time.

## Conclusion

Although co-opted and displaced from its original vision, the girl power promoted by American Girl was a powerful tool in instilling agency in young girls. Inspired by neoliberal post-feminism, girl power aimed for change and for girls to be active dissenters.<sup>60</sup> American Girl assisted in this vision. The products, from the dolls to the magazines, assisted girls in finding their voice and agency. Although the brand empowered girls and positively reinforced healthy traits, American girl has largely underrepresented girlhood. The brand for nearly a decade perpetuated the myth that girlhood is exclusive to the white girl. Despite becoming more accessible to girls of colour and non-able bodied girls, the dolls remained tailored to girls with a distinct binary.

American Girl was designed to fill a perceived void in the marketplace and structure of girlhood.<sup>61</sup> Girls aged eight to twelve were offered exclusive, educational products designed to empower and educate the consumer. Rowland aggressively utilized girlhood as a marketing tool to seduce customers, evoke profits, and create her ideal American girls. Girlhood was not only

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<sup>59</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin: Pleasant Company, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," *Feminist Studies*, (2000), 156.

<sup>61</sup> Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Victoria P. Lantz, "Staging American Girlhood the Pleasant Way: Centering Girls in History and Performance with the American Girl Theatre Kits," *Youth Theatre Journal*, (2020), 3.



placed into the identity of the company but in the identity of the characters. The Historical Characters displayed how girlhood operated in specific eras. Girls were meant to read the dolls' books and "discover that their feelings, ideas, and dreams are just like yours."<sup>62</sup> While the dolls were empowered, out-spoken individuals, they remained confined to their familial gender role and bound to consumerism.

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<sup>62</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin: Pleasant Company, 1991).

### CHAPTER THREE

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#### The Creation of the Ideal American Girl: The Case of Felicity Merriman

“What was it like to be girl long ago? The American Girls Collection takes you inside the worlds of girls who lived during exciting times in the past. As you read their stories, you can imagine how different life was back then. But you’ll also discover that their feelings, ideas, and dreams are just like yours.”<sup>1</sup>

For eight days in August 1991, nearly 6,000 and 5,8000 parents gathered at Colonial Williamsburg.<sup>2</sup> Girls and parents had assembled to attend a tea party held by American Girl. Only seven years after the launch of the brand, American Girl had developed into a household name. Now, throngs of girls from forty-nine American states were gathered, having responded to the Tea Party invite mailed out the previous spring.<sup>3</sup> For the first time since the brand’s establishment in 1986, a new Historical Character was debuting. The girls, clutching their dolls sat through the historical fashion show, enjoyed the fancy finger food, and endured the Pleasant Company Founder, Pleasant T. Rowland’s speech.<sup>4</sup> Finally, American Girl’s newest Historical Character was revealed: Felicity Merriman.

Felicity, a spritely, spirited, independent, nine-year old personified pre-Revolutionary America.<sup>5</sup> Set in 1774 Colonial Williamsburg, Felicity represented the birth of America and

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin; Pleasant Company, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Felicity Evans, “Focus; American Girls to Treasure: Dolls, History, & Dresses for the Well-Padded Purse,” *The Washington Post*, (Washington D.C.), August 27, 1991.

<https://ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/focus-american-girls-treasure-dolls-history/docview/307433854/se-2>.

<sup>3</sup> Evans, “American Girls to Treasure”.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, “American Girls to Treasure”.

<sup>5</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin; Pleasant Company, 1991).

celebrated the success of the American Girl line as the first doll to be launched outside of the original three. The red-haired, green-eyed doll was bundled with *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*. The introductory novel displayed Felicity's mission to free the abused, willful horse, Penny. Identical to the initial three dolls, Felicity accrued six collections. Furthermore, she received a Best Friend, several short stories, extra items, and a straight-to-DVD adaptation.

The Historical Characters adopt several functions in the company and its intent to educate and empower girls. Firstly, the dolls operate in two categories: doll and literary character. The dolls operate as play items, enticing girls with the prospect of a beautiful doll. Aside from the dolls' historically accurate costumes, the books serve the purpose of educating and empowering the consumer. As literary characters, the Historical Characters have the dual function of representing the girlhood of their time period and of the 1980s. For Felicity, this meant personifying the reality of girlhood in 1770s Virginia while representing the ideals preached by the company. The idealizations favoured by 1980s- and 1770s- America included several overlaps and various contradictions. For example, Felicity displayed both the accurate 1770s consumer lifestyle and the 1980s entrepreneurial, neoliberal consumer. A subject of the crown, Felicity was controlled by Empirical ideals, which had distinct conceptions of gender and how it should operate. Empirical girlhood was characterized by subordination to male figures and domestic confinement. In accordance with girl power ideologies championed by Rowland, Felicity operated as an active dissenter. Felicity rebels against the prevailing conceptions of gender, successfully claiming her independence all while endorsing Rowland's ideal American girl.

## American Context: An Empire of Imports

Set in 1774, Felicity's story occurred a year prior to the official start of the American Revolution. Already, the sparks of resistance were igniting the flames of revolution. Enlightenment ideologies, collective identity, and the weaponization of consumption materialized as the colonists rejected British-imposed taxes. Although taxation and exploitation had occurred before the 1770s, Enlightenment doctrine had altered the socio-cultural nature of the colonies. The Enlightenment promoted scientific reason and a bevy of values including liberty, progress, happiness, and republicanism.<sup>6</sup> Colonists were angered by imperial taxation, not because of the microscopic rise in price, but due to the act of passing taxes itself without colonial representation in British parliament.<sup>7</sup> The taxes both imposed on the citizens of the colonies' spending habits and infringed on their civil liberties. Likewise, without representation in parliament, the colonists were routinely overlooked and seemingly sequestered across the ocean. To combat the empirical inequities, the colonists exercised non-consumption and the boycott of imports. As thirteen individual colonies defied their mother country, they uncovered the possibility of unity. In conjecture with years of bloody insurrection, the British Empire and her colonial holdings had previously maintained nearly two centuries of an interdependent relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to the revolution, the British Empire's relationship with her American colonies was one of emulation and joint profit.<sup>9</sup> The colonies provided raw materials to be manufactured in Britain which would, in turn be exported to the colonies as British goods, proliferating empirical

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<sup>6</sup> Ushistory.org, "Foundations of American Government," *American Government Online*, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://www.ushistory.org/gov/2.asp>.

<sup>7</sup> Ushistory.org, "Foundations of American Government," <https://www.ushistory.org/gov/2.asp>.

<sup>8</sup> T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2014), 152.

<sup>9</sup> Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 152.

culture, morality, and policy while hindering the progress of domestic colonial manufacturing.<sup>10</sup> Instead of buying local, colonists consumed cheap European imports. Goods including tea, china, and garments entered ports, circulating into cities and penetrating as deep as the backcountry.<sup>11</sup> Colonists bought *en masse*, filling up china cabinets with fine china, their linen closets with linens, and their cupboards with tea and tea paraphernalia.<sup>12</sup> From 1769 to 1772, almost 6.5 million yards of plain linen were exported to the colonies from Britain and Ireland.<sup>13</sup> 1.5 million of the 6.5 million yards alone were delivered to Virginia's James River.<sup>14</sup> The British witnessed colonial spending power and proceeded to ban the sale of non-British imports at their colonial ports. The imposition of mercantilism meant colonists, who relied heavily on imports, had no choice but to buy British.

England's imposition of taxes and mercantilism was not purely for profit but it fulfilled their moral obligation to their colonies. Colonialism dictated that the Imperial power had an obligation to morally guide her colonial holdings.<sup>15</sup> Colonization meant educating and displaying the ideal morality, mode, religion, and life style. The British took issue with the colonies' abundant procurement of imports. According to the British perspective, the colonists were greedy and overly affluent, displaying features that were morally unacceptable.<sup>16</sup> In reality, the colonists were no richer than the British citizens. Rather, the colonists were willing to spend

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<sup>10</sup> Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002), 78.

<sup>14</sup> Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Wilson, "Empire, Gender, and Modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century," *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>16</sup> T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

beyond their means to assuage their desire to shop, consume, and own, an American feature still prevalent.<sup>17</sup> The taxes imposed would siphon money into Britain while satisfying their empirical duty to impose morality on their colonies. Britain had to ensure her colonies were pillars of simplicity, virtue, and politeness. To combat British imposition, consumption was weaponized. Conscious of their consumer strength, colonists purchased illegal non-British imports or locally manufactured goods.<sup>18</sup> Mercantilism and recurrent taxation left thousands of colonists angry and dubious of their relationship with the nation meant to care for them.

### **18<sup>th</sup>-Century Colonial Girlhood and Gender**

When the American colonists declared their independence, “a move enshrined above all in the principles of political representation,” the prevailing conceptions of gender functioned to exclude women.<sup>19</sup> American gender roles were empirical holdovers from the British Empire, based on western-European conceptions.<sup>20</sup> Colonial institutions worked to regulate the sexual, conjugal, and domestic lives of all within their purview.<sup>21</sup> The relationship of Empire and colony permitted the British to claim precedence over gender conceptions. Non-western and indigenous family values, societal expectations, and gender roles were colonized and superseded by British cultural standards.<sup>22</sup> Despite breaking from Empire, the prevailing conceptions settled by colonization endured through years of bloody fighting and persevered into American policy.

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<sup>17</sup> Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Eighteenth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 118.

<sup>19</sup> Philippa Levine, “Introduction,” *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Levine, “Introduction,” *Gender and Empire*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Kathleen Wilson, “Empire, Gender, and Modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, “Empire, Gender, and Modernity,” *Gender and Empire*, 17.

Women, like children, were a group apart from men and a category that had to be defined and managed by men.<sup>23</sup> Women who were not servants were predominantly excluded from skilled trades while law and custom limited the social significance of women's work, subordinating them to their husbands and fathers as "goodwives" and daughters.<sup>24</sup> Although subjugated, women were granted special societal roles. Women were an index; a measure less of themselves but of men, society, and morality they inhabited.<sup>25</sup> They operated as purveyors of morality; educating their children in simplicity, virtue, and politeness.<sup>26</sup> Boys were taught morality to prepare for their inevitable liberation from adolescence. Meanwhile, girls were taught morality to prepare for their role as pillars of societal morality and to ensure morality continued to be communicated and maintained. Women were consistently encouraged to abort their inclinations towards "effeminizing luxuries" to promote the stoicism and love of country.<sup>27</sup> By the 1770s, women's role in nation and patriotism were perceived as more beneficial than ever before. Their domestic virtue was promoted as a source of moral authority in the broader empirical policy especially as family values claimed agency over royalty in the colonies.<sup>28</sup> Girls were not dissimilar to women, confined to domestic work with lessons in etiquette and manners.<sup>29</sup> The main goal of parenthood was preparing the children for adulthood, ensuring the

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<sup>23</sup> Philippa Levine, "Introduction" *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Wilson, "Empire, Gender, and Modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century," *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 27.

<sup>25</sup> Philippa Levine, "Introduction" *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Levine, "Introduction," *Gender and Empire*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Wilson, "Empire, Gender, and Modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century," *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, "Empire, Gender, and Modernity," *Gender and Empire*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> "Women and Children in Colonial America," *National Geographic*, May 20, 2022, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/women-and-children-colonial-america/>

prolongation of European morality and innovation.<sup>30</sup> As gender was possessed by importation and imperial policy, it was preserved socially through imported manuals and fashion.

### **Clothing: The Warden of Gender**

Fashion was obsessed with gender.<sup>31</sup> Clothing and fashion are where gender was most actively produced, signified, and presented.<sup>32</sup> Its rules, occasionally controlled by policy, were codified socially. Fashion communicated not only gender but social position, race, and morality to the wearer and others.<sup>33</sup> Eighteenth century society and culture actively acknowledged and utilized fashion to ensure the persistence of power hierarchies.<sup>34</sup> The rules of 18<sup>th</sup>-century upheld by Empire were determined by simplicity, virtue, and politeness. Pennsylvanian scribbler, “Tim Gruff”, described the colonial fashion perspective by writing, “There is nothing that influences mankind (and by mankind here I would be understood to mean womenkind also) so much as fashion. -Let a thing be ever so preposterous or inconvenient, ‘its’ the fashion,’ is sufficient to be admired.”<sup>35</sup> Moralistic fashion rules were a present anxiety in the colonies, notably in the fashion-conscious Williamsburg, Virginia.

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<sup>30</sup> “Women and Children in Colonial America,”

<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/women-and-children-colonial-america/>

<sup>31</sup> Fiona Martin, “Fashion and Gender,” SOSA 2044: Fashion, Selves, and Social Worlds (class lecture, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, February 7, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Martin, “Fashion and Gender.”

<sup>33</sup> Martin, “Fashion and Gender.”

<sup>34</sup> Rhiannon O’Neil, “‘Clothes Make Men’: Clothing and the Embodiment of Gender in Virginia, 1750-1775, *Electronic Thesis and Dissertations 2021*, (University of Central Florida, 2021), 28.

<sup>35</sup> T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2014), 153.



Clothing in Williamsburg, like the rest of the colonies, was decisively gendered and seldom gender fluid. Fashion was confined to two categories: womenswear and menswear.<sup>36</sup> Women wore shifts, stays, hoops or bustles, petticoats, gowns, robes and jackets.<sup>37</sup> For women, it was about producing a distinctly domed silhouette and embodying a certain morality. Women strove to remain in vogue while promoting their virtue, simplicity, and politeness. Petticoats, skirts, stays, and bustles limited mobility and ensured proper movement. Their lack of comfort and clothing's role in immobility likewise symbolized their subordination and reliance upon men. Men's clothing was less about morality and more about refuting femininity. Men wore shirts, breeches, waistcoats and jackets, and overcoats.<sup>38</sup> Men's apparel exhibited their morality and thanks to feminine anxiety, altered their mode. As a result, men's silhouettes were refashioned, with coat skirts shortening and reducing in volume, ruffles vanishing, and items became more form-fitting.<sup>39</sup> The only unisex items were stockings, shoes, and some cuts of jackets.<sup>40</sup>

Children's clothing had no individual category. Instead, it was modelled after women's apparel. Girls and boys alike wore shifts, stays, gowns, stockings and shoes.<sup>41</sup> Stays, unlike the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tight lacing corsetry that aimed to create life-threateningly small waists, moulded

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<sup>36</sup> Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002), 228.

<sup>37</sup> Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 228.

<sup>38</sup> Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 120.

<sup>39</sup> Rhiannon O'Neil, "'Clothes Make Men': Clothing and the Embodiment of Gender in Virginia, 1750-1775, *Electronic Thesis and Dissertations 2021*, (University of Central Florida, 2021), 56.

<sup>40</sup> Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002), 120.

<sup>41</sup> Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 162.

the body for children as young as less than a year old.<sup>42</sup> The boned bodices, exhibited in Figure 7, taught posture and proper movement by creating narrow flat backs.<sup>43</sup> Boys escaped the realm of womenswear by being “breeched” around age eight.<sup>44</sup> Finally dressed in breeches, boys abandoned their stays and assumed their autonomy. Unlike their male counterparts, girls never participated in the rite of passage. Girls remained confined to stays, shackled and subordinate to men.



Figure 7. Women’s Stays (1775-1790) made of American white cotton, boned with cane, and made in America (Image retrieved from: Colonial Williamsburg, “*Stays 1775-1790*,” Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/49500/stays?ctx=afe8489742d352d209b5b38d9ac7b2294b2d3df7&idx=8.>)

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<sup>42</sup> Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 162.

<sup>43</sup> Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 121.

<sup>44</sup> Rhiannon O’Neil, “‘Clothes Make Men’: Clothing and the Embodiment of Gender in Virginia, 1750-1775,” *Electronic Thesis and Dissertations 2021*, (University of Central Florida, 2021), 58.

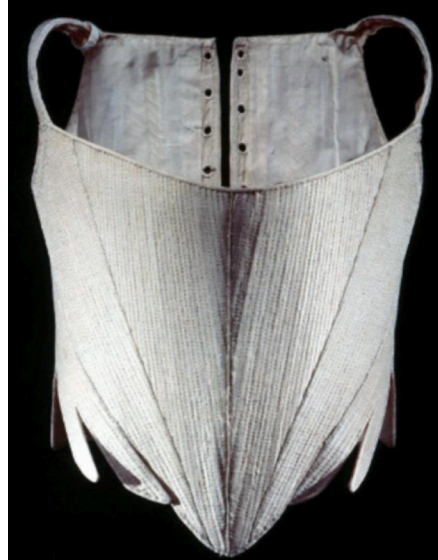


Figure 8. Child Stays (1775) made of cream silk, boned with baleen, originating in England, (Image retrieved from: Colonial Williamsburg, “Stays 1775,” Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/2500/stays?ctx=afe8489742d352d209b5b38d9ac7b2294b2d3df7&idx=3.>)

Alongside enslaved Africans and material goods, British gender standards were imported to the colonies. Fashion was dictated through imported garments and print culture including magazines and manuals.<sup>45</sup> Manuals outlined both the ideal mode and ideal behaviours, specifying women and girls’ places in society.<sup>46</sup> Some manuals, like *The Whole Duty of Women* (1753) by William Kenrick, were penned under the guise of a woman.<sup>47</sup> Others were honest about their male perspective like James Fordyce in *Sermons to Young Women* (1766).<sup>48</sup> Aimed at young women and girls, *Sermons to Young Women* revealed cultural attitudes reinforced by Christian doctrine and Bible verses. Fordyce identified vanity as a disease and simplicity as its cure.<sup>49</sup> He antagonized the process of beauty as age, disease, and depression as it will inevitably, “destroy

<sup>45</sup> O’Niel, “Clothes Make Men,””31.

<sup>46</sup> O’Niel, “Clothes Make Men,””32.

<sup>47</sup> William Kenrick, *The Whole Duty of Women*, (London, 1753).

<sup>48</sup> James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, (London, 1766).

<sup>49</sup> Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, 30.

every remaining allurements, and leave thee to lament too late the jading course thou hast run.”<sup>50</sup>

He questioned if beauty is humane, much less Christian and declared, “simplicity is that which above everything else touches and delights. Where simplicity is wanting, men may be dazzled for a moment.”<sup>51</sup> Fordyce and Kenrick emphasized the fragile morality entertained by women were secured chiefly by frugality, modesty, and simplicity.<sup>52</sup> Women who dressed too richly were not only taking resources from their families but were insipid, worthless, and vain.<sup>53</sup>

British-published manuals appeared throughout the colonies, circulating the preferred values and mode.

### **Felicity Merriman**

Released in 1991, the Felicity Merriman doll represented the pre-revolutionary era of colonial America and the values of the gendered morality of the period. A resident of Virginia, Felicity was under the purview of Empire and its societal conceptions. Despite tensions brewing between Britain and her colonies, Felicity in *Meet Felicity: An American Girl* is largely oblivious to the larger predicament arising. Felicity’s story focuses on her preoccupation with the safety of Penny, a horse owned by the villainous, tanner Jiggy Nye.<sup>54</sup> Enamoured with the beautiful creature, Felicity works to set the horse free. To free Penny, Felicity steals her father’s apprentice, Ben’s breeches.<sup>55</sup> In the background of her narrative, Felicity rebels against her mother’s societal requirement to mentor and foster her children’s morality and girlhood. As her

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<sup>50</sup> Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, 36.

<sup>52</sup> Rhiannon O’Neil, “‘Clothes Make Men’: Clothing and the Embodiment of Gender in Virginia, 1750-1775, *Electronic Thesis and Dissertations 2021*, (University of Central Florida, 2021), 35.

<sup>53</sup> O’Neil, “‘Clothes Make Men,’” 35.

<sup>54</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin; Pleasant Company, 1991), 33.

<sup>55</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 33.

mother wishes for Felicity to be more ladylike, Felicity utilises empirically stereotyped gender expectations as her weapons of insurrection. Over the course of five chapters, Felicity triumphantly plays her part as a consumer, grapples with her predetermined gender role, and successfully frees Penny all while perpetuating Rowland's ideal American Girl values. Meanwhile, Felicity Merriman's role as a doll appeal to American Girl's system of mass profit.

### **Felicity Merriman: The Literary Character**

The Historical Characters simultaneously taught American history and exhibited important character traits for girls to learn.<sup>56</sup> In the narratives, each character has an overarching adversity or disagreement with society. Some characters like Addy and Melody grappled with institutional racism while others like Samantha confronted the ethicality of industrialization.<sup>57</sup> The issues correlate with the character's time period, making the challenges historically appropriate and demonstrating the character's utilization of girl power. Felicity's larger adversary was gender, its presentation, and its expectations. Just as the colonists rebelled against Empire, Felicity revolted against the traditional perceptions of 18<sup>th</sup>-century girlhood. Through feminine expectations, social position, and clothing, Felicity subverts 18<sup>th</sup>-century girlhood to better represent contemporary girl power.

Felicity's tumultuous relationship with gender is apparent from the outset of her narrative. In the first chapter of *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, she lamented about leaving her

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<sup>56</sup> "Our Story," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/our-story>.

<sup>57</sup> "Historical Characters," American Girl, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.americangirl.com/pages/historical-characters>.

father's shop and returning home to bake a ginger cake.<sup>58</sup> Her frustration is palpable as she knows her place is not at the store,

“She knew where she *should* be helping-at home. A pile of mending was waiting for her there. Felicity hated the idea of sitting straight and still, stitching tiny stitches, when all the while she was stiff with boredom. She would much rather stay at the store.”<sup>59</sup>

Just like women of the period, the home was where her girlhood was circumscribed. Girls and women of the middle class were largely excluded from the working sphere, unable to make money and subject to their fathers.<sup>60</sup> Confined to the home, Felicity sews, darns, mends, embroiders, and practices her penmanship.<sup>61</sup> Felicity would rather remain in the masculine realm of work than return to her domestically restricted role.<sup>62</sup>

In *Meet Felicity*, a large portion of Felicity's interactions with her mother occur around her agitation with her social position. Introduced in chapter two, Felicity's mother reprimands her for not staying still.<sup>63</sup> Their second interaction is her mother comparing Felicity's hasty stitches to Nan's, Felicity's younger sister.<sup>64</sup> She repeatedly tells Felicity to adopt patience, to slow down, and to practice her handwriting, sewing, and other domestic duties.<sup>65</sup> She commonly branded Felicity with attributes including head-strong, lively, impatient, and wilful.<sup>66</sup> Her mother's interactions are the fulfilment of her societal role. Her periodical reminders of proper ladylike decorum sustains her role both as the purveyor of morality and as an index of society.

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<sup>58</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin; Pleasant Company, 1991), 4.

<sup>59</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Kathleen Wilson, “Empire, Gender, and Modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 27.

<sup>61</sup> Valerie Tripp, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, (Wisconsin; Pleasant Company, 1991).

<sup>62</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 25.

<sup>65</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*.

<sup>66</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 12, 32.

Her comments and advice are attempts to mould Felicity into the mandatory virtuous young woman. Her interactions with Felicity and the audience serve to establish and administer proper 18<sup>th</sup>-century feminine attitudes and values.

While Felicity is disturbed by society's expectations based on her sex, the secondary characters are satisfied with their gender role. Her little sister, Nan, and her mother epitomize the ideal colonial woman: virtuous, morally-competent, ladylike, and equally satiated and limited to the domestic sphere. Her mother adheres to her preordained role as a purveyor of morality and prepares her children for adulthood. Nan not only embodies the ideal 18<sup>th</sup>-century feminine characteristics but excels. Felicity and her mother both admit that although Nan is only six, she is the better sewer; more careful, accurate, and less wasteful.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, Nan's decorum is more akin to a lady than Felicity's. On the way to see Penny on the edge of town, Nan "walked in lady-like steps, picking her way carefully around the puddles."<sup>68</sup> It is only through the primary character that girl power and post-feminist agency take precedence over accuracy.

Clothing is the most apparent way that Felicity's rejection of gender and the presentation of American Girl endorsed girl power is manifested. Throughout *Meet Felicity*, she comments on her clothing's comfort. She dislikes her straw hat that her mother insists she wears, at one point leaving the house before her mother can place it on her head.<sup>69</sup> She scratches at her stays, complaining they're laced too tight.<sup>70</sup> She complains how she has to raise her petticoats, an impolite gesture, in order to maintain pace with Ben.<sup>71</sup> Clothing and its meanings take centre

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<sup>67</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 26.

<sup>68</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 15.

stage in Felicity's narrative. It operates not only as an answer to how Felicity can tame Penny but more importantly how she can seize her independence.

Determined to train Penny, Felicity realizes her petticoats and stays are limiting her mobility. She outwardly wishes for mobility by exclaiming, "I wish I could wear breeches," and continues,

"Gowns and petticoats are so bothersome. I'm forever stepping on my hem and tripping unless I take little baby steps. Small steps are supposed to look ladylike. But I can't get anywhere. 'Tis a terrible bother. In breeches your legs are free. You can straddle horses, jump over fences, run as fast as you wish. You can do anything."<sup>72</sup>

While running to Penny in the night, her petticoats drag and limit her strides, slowing down her perilous journey.<sup>73</sup> She locates her solution: Ben's Sunday Best, black cotton breeches.<sup>74</sup> In the dead of night, Felicity dons the breeches over her shift.<sup>75</sup> Tying the breeches secured with a rope, Felicity abandons her stays and petticoats, successfully "breeching" herself. A coming-of-age ceremony reserved purely for boys, Felicity liberates herself and abandons her feminine confinement. She gains both physical mobility and social mobility by wearing clothes restricted to men, especially a garment integral to a male rite of passage. In the dead of night, Felicity snatches her independence from the patriarchal, empirical system designed to regulate and confine on the basis of sex.

Outside of her secret, individual "breeching" ceremony, she frequently scratches at her confinement. In the second chapter, she complains her stays are too tight, pinching her. As her mother loosens her stays, she comments that if Felicity sat up straight and moved more

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<sup>72</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 15.

<sup>73</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 37.

<sup>75</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 37.



gracefully then they wouldn't hurt.<sup>76</sup> If Felicity succumbed to the expected norms marked by her stays then she would be more comfortable. Ultimately, Felicity surrenders to her femininity. Even though Felicity claims her autonomy through her self-“breeching” ceremony, *Meet Felicity* concludes with her returning Ben's breeches washed and mended. She embraces the feminine roles she previously detested and rejected, relinquishing her newfound self-acclaimed independence. As Felicity questioned gender and its ramifications on girlhood, she displayed the ideal American girl Rowland aimed for all consumers to embody.

American Girl was created to empower and educate the consumer with key characteristics. The dolls were the personification of Rowland's ideal subject as they embodied the traits she favoured all while informing and shaping consumers. Packaged as friends to be played with, girls uncover characteristics Rowland admired and qualities favoured by the neoliberal society during the time which American Girl was established. As an American Girl Historical Character, Felicity was one of Rowland's tools for communicating and displaying neoliberal, girl power ideologies. Described by American Girl as spunky, spritely, and tomboyish, American Girl Publishing adds independent, loyal, and spirited.<sup>77</sup> The values attributed to the Historical Characters are versatile, representing values admired by Rowland and correlating with the doll's historical era. Felicity's characteristics are the same traits associated with the American Revolution: independence, resilience, and forthright. The values American Girl applied to the American Revolution, and by extension Felicity, are not only prevalent within her character but are represented in her story as the values she respects.

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<sup>76</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 28.

In the midst of Felicity's gender rebellion, Felicity embodies and praises key traits synonymous with the American Revolution and American Girl's values. The most apparent of these characteristics is independence. Felicity outlines American Girl's definition of independent to her sister, Nan, by explaining, "It means she (Penny) has a free spirit. Penny wants to run."<sup>78</sup> Penny is not a name bestowed by her owner, Jiggy Nye, but by Felicity. During her first encounter with the creature, Felicity witnessed and admired the horses' unwilling independent spirit as she actively resists her master.<sup>79</sup> She named Penny after two notoriously American things: a penny and independence.<sup>80</sup> Felicity selected the "pen" from independence and her coppery colouring for inspiration for the horse's name.<sup>81</sup> Through Felicity's narrative, American Girl is defining and informing readers of the concept of independence. The trait of independence is integral to the embodiment of the neoliberal ideal subject endorsed by Reagan and Rowland. Felicity's admiration and embodiment of independence and loyalty advocates those characteristics to the reader. Fans of Felicity, in their journey to become like Felicity or at least someone she would respect, become Rowland's ideal subject.

Penny's relationship to American independence does not cease with her name or characteristics. Penny and her owner, Jiggy Nye, operate as foils for the political and cultural unrest between the colonies and Britain transpiring in the background of *Meet Felicity*. Jiggy Nye, like Britain, is attempting to subject Penny, the colonies, to his will. Master and horse are locked in a battle of independence and subjugation just the same as Empire and her colonies. Felicity's admiration for Penny's independent spirit simultaneously displays her reverence for

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<sup>78</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 28.

<sup>79</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 22.

<sup>81</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 22.

the fight for independence. Penny's character and her role in *Meet Felicity* reveals the nature of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century colonial political climate, Felicity's values, and the neoliberal values admired by American Girl.

Independence is not the only way Felicity personifies and advertised American Girl's neoliberal girl power. In accordance with neoliberalism the ideal subject is not only an independent individual but is most importantly, a capitalist consumer. Consumerism is fundamentally linked to Felicity, her narrative, and her time-period. The connection establishes the consumer, import-obsessed culture of 1770s Williamsburg and expresses the consumer idealizations of highly capitalist 1980s society. The first chapter of her introductory book opens with Felicity entering her father's store.<sup>82</sup> Sent on an errand by her mother, she buys ginger root for a cake.<sup>83</sup> She daydreams about the origins of her father's inventory such as the tulips from Holland, the Chinese-imported tea, and Indian cotton.<sup>84</sup> Outside of her fascination for importation, consumerism and entrepreneurship are how Felicity survives. Her father fulfils his neoliberal familial role as the entrepreneur-breadwinner, supporting his family by selling goods to the people of Williamsburg. Felicity's relationship with consumerism not only depicts an accurate 18<sup>th</sup>-century lifestyle but promotes the neoliberal ideologies of 1980s American society. Felicity as a consumer and ideal subject informs girls of characteristics they could and should embody for the rest of their lives.

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<sup>82</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Tripp, *Meet Felicity*, 3.

## Felicity Merriman: The Doll

Felicity's link to consumerism develops beyond her narrative. Ultimately, Felicity was a product created to be consumed, a doll designed to sell and earn a profit. Felicity the literature character and Felicity the doll operated on different planes, one fulfilled the educational element that aimed to empower the reader and the other elicits a profit for Pleasant Company. Her narrative not only embodied the neoliberal ideal subject supported by Rowland but captured the doll market. Central to American Girl's marketing system, Felicity's books operate as product placement for the items available in the catalogues. The stays and Ben's breeches, central items in her self-liberation, were manufactured, packaged, marketed, and available for purchase.



Figure 9. American Girl Catalogue Holiday 1999 featuring Felicity's Undergarments, (Image retrieved from: Pleasant Company, *American Girl Catalogue Holiday 1999*, from Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables, (HCHD1999,) accessed March 10, 2023, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/hchd1999.>)



Figure 10. American Girl Catalogue Holiday 1999 featuring Felicity's Riding Breeches and Hat, (Image retrieved from: Pleasant Company, *American Girl Catalogue Holiday 1999*, from Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables, (HCHD1999,) accessed March 10, 2023, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/hchd1999.>)

American Girl invested heavily in Felicity, frequently reworking her collections, releasing extra items, and capitalizing on the nostalgia surrounding the iconic character. Originally released in 1991, her Meet Collection was remodelled twice. First, in 2005, her Meet Outfit was replaced by the Traveling Gown. The purple garment originally adapted from a 1999 short story, *Felicity's New Sister*.<sup>85</sup> Her original Meet Gown remained available as the Rose Garden Gown, allowing for consumers to reminisce on Felicity's old collection or have access to products they desired prior to redesign.<sup>86</sup> Her mop cap and floral choker were replaced with a lilac round-eared cap and coral necklace.<sup>87</sup> The changes ushered in new *Meet Felicity: An*

<sup>85</sup> Pleasant Company, *Felicity's Collection: American Girl Keepsake Catalog 2000*, from Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables, (FMKC2000), <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmkc2000.>

<sup>86</sup> Pleasant Company, *American Girl Catalogue October 2005*, from Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables (FMKC1005), <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmcc1005>

<sup>87</sup> American Girl *Catalogue October 2005*, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmcc1005.>

*American Girl* book covers. Coupled with her revamped collection, Felicity launched with a Best Friend. Daughter of a loyalist, Elizabeth Cole operated as a foil to Felicity.<sup>88</sup> She explored a side of the American Revolution underdeveloped in Felicity's preceding stories. Archived in 2011, Felicity reappeared in 2017 in the new Historical Characters format: BeForever. Yet again, her Meet Outfit changed to a blue and yellow brocade gown. It wouldn't be for nearly two decades that Felicity's original 1991 Meet Collection would be available again.<sup>89</sup> Capitalizing on the consumers' nostalgia for the original collections, Felicity's original collection released for the American Girl 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.



Figure 11. Figure 5: Felicity's Traveling Gown which would later become her Meet Gown, (Image Retrieved from: Pleasant Company, *Felicity's Collection: A Keepsake Collection 2000*, Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables, (FMKC2000), accessed March 10, 2023).  
<https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmkc2000>.

<sup>88</sup> American Girl Catalogue October 2005, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmec1005>.

<sup>89</sup> Meilan Solly, "The Enduring Nostalgia of American Girl Dolls," *Smithsonian Magazine*, (Washington DC, June 3, 2021). <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/evolution-american-girl-dolls-180977822/>

On top of her standard six collections, she had several extra items and outfits. In 2000, *Felicity's Collection: A Keepsake Catalogue* displayed every available Felicity product.<sup>90</sup> The Catalogue featured a fold-out checklist to encourage well-rounded collections.<sup>91</sup> The Catalogue highlighted each collection and a myriad of extra items including books and dress patterns.<sup>92</sup> From 1998 to 2011, Penny the horse, a carriage, her Riding Habit along with several other products were all available in the catalogue and website.<sup>93</sup> Her stays and Ben's breeches were among the extra items. The Riding Breeches and Hat retailed for fifteen dollars from 1999 to 2003 while her Colonial Undergarments were available from 1992 to 2008 for eighteen dollars.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, until 2000, her Meet Gown was available in Dress Like Your Doll. Transformed into a life-size garment, the Rose Garden Gown retailed for eighty dollars and the coral necklace for thirty dollars.<sup>95</sup> The life-size items supplemented the girls' play, allowing them to act out Felicity's narrative or embody her wilful, independent spirit.

The release of *Felicity: An American Girl Adventure* in 2005 raised the potential for new products. Items from the catalogues and books were costumed alongside new items that would be converted into a product for an 18-inch doll.<sup>96</sup> The film combined the plot of *Meet Felicity*:

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<sup>90</sup> Pleasant Company, *Felicity's Collection: American Girl Keepsake Catalog 2000*, from Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables, (FMKC2000), <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmkc2000>.

<sup>91</sup> Pleasant Company, *Felicity's Collection: An American Girl Keepsake Catalog 2000*, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmkc2000>.

<sup>92</sup> Pleasant Company, *Felicity's Collection: An American Girl Keepsake Catalog 2000*, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmkc2000>.

<sup>93</sup> Pleasant Company, "American Girl Catalogs", from Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables, <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/articles/list-of-complete-catalogue-scans>.

<sup>94</sup> "American Girl Catalogs", <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/articles/list-of-complete-catalogue-scans>.

<sup>95</sup> "American Girl Catalogs", <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/articles/list-of-complete-catalogue-scans>.

<sup>96</sup> Pleasant Company, *American Girl Catalogue October 2005*, from Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables (FMKC1005), <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmkc1005>

*An American Girl* and plot points from her other works.<sup>97</sup> Ben's breeches, her 1991 and 2005 Meet Gowns, and her Christmas gown were all featured as costumes. Meanwhile, her Tea Lesson Gown and Patriot the Foal were both transmuted into doll products.<sup>98</sup> Despite countless products and her popularity, Felicity was archived from 2011 to 2017 and again in 2019 to accommodate new Historical Characters. "Because stories are at the heart of the company's mission to celebrate girls," Felicity's books remained available.<sup>99</sup>

### Conclusion

As the first doll to be released after the initial three doll launch, Felicity marked an important milestone for Pleasant Rowland and American Girl. Felicity represented the success of a company that had utilized neoliberalism and girl power to grow and obtain cultural status. Felicity not only marked American Girl's success but she celebrated the birth of the United States of America. The American Revolution sowed the seeds for nation, actively rebelling against an Empire disregarding and burdening her colonies. The same nation Felicity inhabits, is the same state where Rowland developed American Girl.

Felicity's girl power is demonstrated by her insurrection against gender. Through clothing and her domestically-defined familial role, Felicity challenges 18<sup>th</sup>-century girlhood and the family values touted by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Her negotiation with her Empirical expectations are more reminiscent of 1980s girlhood as she speaks out and attempts to save Penny. Throughout *Meet Felicity*, she avoids her mother, thus avoiding her future as a pillar of

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<sup>97</sup> "American Girl Movies", IMDb, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls023884040/>.

<sup>98</sup> Pleasant Company, *American Girl Catalogue October 2005*, from Changnon-Piper Museum of Toys and Collectables (FMEC1005), <https://toysandcollectiblesmuseum.org/fmec1005>

<sup>99</sup> "American Girl Says Farewell to Felicity Merriman," (Business Wire, September 1, 2010), <https://ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/american-girl-r-says-farewell-felicity-merriman/docview/748886192/se-2>.



morality. Although she successfully breeches herself from male subjugation, she returns to her confines when she returns the breeches to its rightful owner. Her taste of freedom is enough to satiate her desire for independence which concluded at the end of her introductory novel.

Ultimately, Felicity is another tool created by Pleasant Rowland to advertise her ideal subject and sell product. The subject Rowland desires is independent, kind, and resilient, an active dissenter yet an avid consumer. Felicity embodies the exact characteristics of Rowland's ideal American Girl as an independent, spunky 9-year old striving for freedom but enamoured by capitalism. Felicity, as a product, obtains a role outside of the ideal subject. The basis of Felicity's creation is to elicit a product. As a character, Felicity needs to engage with the reader and more importantly, drive them to consume more American Girl. As a doll, Felicity must entice the consumer as a gorgeous doll with beautiful garments, accessories, and furniture. Felicity achieves both goals as one of American Girl's foundational characters, a character worthy of mass production, reworking, and nostalgia.

## CONCLUSION

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The story of American Girl is first and foremost the story of Pleasant Rowland. American Girl is her brand, her creation, and her concept. Amidst the baby dolls and full figured Barbies, Rowland saw room for empowered, educational characters that displayed girl-centred American history. Each doll would embody a distinct era of American history with their own individual adversities themed around their time-period. Debuting with only three dolls, the Historical Characters now number a cast of nearly thirty. The line was joined by Truly Me and Bitty Baby and by the late 1990s, the brand released *American Girl Magazine*. Initially featuring the Historical Characters, the magazine quickly became more about the brand's consumers with recipes, crafts, and girl-authored articles. Although Rowland retired from CEO of American Girl in 1998, her essence was inherently intertwined to the brand's message and intent. Mattel retained Rowland's vision by continuing to employ empowerment and education but capitalized on the brand with more Historical Characters, more doll lines, films, and books.

Rowland placed girlhood at the core of American Girl. Through stories and doll, the brand aimed to give girls a chance to discover who they are or who they are meant to be. The homogenization of commercialized girl power assisted companies in acquiring the loyalty of a new consumer demographic but abandoned key aspects of the slogan. Girl power was capitalized; co-opted and devoid of its inherent political dissemination, self-sustained proliferation, and was now being defined by patriarchal economic institutions. American Girl assisted in co-opting girl power but unlike their counterparts, the Historical Characters retained the political nature of the slogan. Felicity Merriman's narrative was no different, actively surrounded by political and empirical dissemination. Her revolutionary backdrop is supplemented by her personal rebellion against her gendered expectations.

Despite American Girl's loyalty to girl power's political nature, the brand remained confined to white, blonde cis-gender girls. A key aspect of girl power was that the slogan was not confined to the white, blonde slimness widely represented-in and favoured by the patriarchy. Girl power is for all girls regardless of gender, race, and class. For a long time, AG's version of history was strictly white, able-bodied, and cis-gender, non-representative of the reality of girlhood or America's cultural diversity. The Historical Characters diversified with the release of Addy and the line has since expanded with Josefina and Kaya. Despite becoming more racially inclusive, the Historical Characters remains non-symbolic of non-able bodied and transgender girls. American Girl remains confined to a strict binary and strict representation, inadvertently invalidating the scope of girlhood. In reality, the brand is not afraid of representing disabled girls with the Truly Me collection including hearing aids, wheelchairs, and guide dogs. This disproportionate representation ignores the reality that disabilities are not contemporary.

Meanwhile, the most relaxed American Girls gets with their binary is through Felicity. The nine-year old's larger adversity is her feminine expectations and the gendered nature of girlhood. As a girl, she is confined to the domestics, shackled to her father, and bound to her future as a mother and purveyor of empirical morality. Angry with her feminine expectations, Felicity rebels through her clothing. By cross dressing and breeching herself, Felicity seizes her independence. Ultimately, Felicity surrenders to 18<sup>th</sup>-century girlhood by returning the stolen breeches, mended and washed. Despite American Girl's willingness to explore gender and its expectations, the brand has retained loyalty to a strict, hegemonic binary.

Girl power's commercialization was not a unique phenomenon but had coupled with the popularization of post feminism, neoliberalism, and an increase in regulating American morality. Although it is unclear if Rowland was inspired by neoliberalism, the brand embraced and placed

neoliberal feminism-aka post feminism- in the forefront. Established in the early 1980s, American Girl emerged in the renaissance of popular neoliberalism. Revived by United States President Ronald Reagan, entrepreneurship, family values, and consumerism were advertised as critical aspects of ideal citizenship. Ideal subjects were meant to be empowered individuals, aware of their liberties afforded by capitalism and loyal consumers. Similar to Reagan, Rowland worked to create her own ideal subjects. American Girl taught important values reflected by neoliberalism. Rowland aimed for American Girl to teach confidence, kindness, and resilience, and to create empowered individuals that retained loyalty to the brand and consumerism. Rowland's ideal values and characteristics were marketed as girl power and placed at the core of the brand. The doll lines, the books, the catalogues, *American Girl Magazine*, and all the other miscellaneous products were designed to proliferate Rowland's values and create Rowland's American girls. Felicity is no exception, representing the American Revolution, she is described as spunky, spritely, and independent. Packaged as a friend to be played with, Felicity embodied and advertised values aligned with Rowland's ideal American girl.

The purpose of the Historical Characters was to educate and empower. Rowland understood that the dolls alone were not a tool powerful enough for her intentions. Each doll would come with a *Meet Book*, introducing the character, time period, and fulfilling the role as educational and empowered toys. The nature of the doll and *Meet Book* placed the characters in two planes: a doll and literary character. Dolls were what Rowland set out to create and are the brand's money maker. Available exclusively by the catalogues until the launch of the AG website, the dolls were expensive. Their prices continually increased and were constantly threatened by the possibility of archival. More than just a cash cow, the dolls were the play items. The clothing, accessories, and furniture from the characters' collections and Truly Me line

supplemented play. The dolls and their collections allowed girls to recreate the books or exercise their imagination and create their own stories.

The literary character aspect acquired the function of empowerment and education Rowland yearned to achieve. The books reinforce the dolls by assigning them personalities, attaining power as a piece of education, and operating as Rowland's advertisement for her ideal subjects. The books display the company's intention as the purveyors of girlhood and girl oriented American history. Outside of their role as gatekeepers of morality and publicity for Rowland's neoliberal values, the books were advertisements. Unlike the catalogue selling model, the books were available in non-American Girl retail spaces. Compared to the dolls, the books were cheap thus making them more monetarily accessible. The characters, accessories, furniture, and other items described in the books were made tangible as items of play for the dolls. The Historical Character's dual roles allowed American Girl to capture two distinct markets and virtually all economic classes. The books appealed to a wider audience and achieved the brand's touted power as a tool for education and empowerment.

Money is the primary incentive for any company. For a brand or company to proliferate its message, pay its workers, and remain afloat, the brand must successfully generate profits. American Girl is no exception as money is the brand's primary concern, pushing girlhood to the wayside. The monetary incentive is apparent in the creation of the dolls and internalized product placement. The brand was created to fill a niche in the doll industry and based on its \$700 million acquisition in 1998, AG had succeeded. American Girl captured two markets: the doll industry and children's books. Despite dominating two markets, Rowland set out to create a doll line and not a publishing company. The niche Rowland aimed to fulfil couldn't be successfully attained by dolls alone. The books were the true distributors of Rowland's goals, values, and

morals. If Rowland truly wanted to educate and empower, then the dolls were obsolete. The dolls were expensive and exclusive, leaving many reaching beyond their means to satiate their children's desires. Despite the economic disadvantages highlighted by the dolls, dolls were what Rowland set out to create and allowed little girls to do what they do best: play.

While I may have dismantled much of the magic of American Girl, the brand has been a valuable tool in teaching important values and unique perspectives of history. For nearly four decades, American Girl has remained one of the nation's most beloved brands. For many, including myself, the Historical Characters were an introduction into history. Unlike male dominated popular history taught in schools, American Girl discussed historical girlhood. Aside from the unique perspective of historical girlhood, American Girl focused on types of history that were widely ignored. Unlike traditional history which favoured bloody battles or interpersonal drama, American Girl was about portraying daily life. Although not entirely accurate on account of age-appropriateness, historical dress, cuisine, furniture, and values were all contextualized. Likewise, the characters dealt with large themes and adversities while remaining engaging and fun. From the surface, Felicity's story characterizes a girl hoping to free a beautiful horse. Diving deeper, the reader understands the power of clothing in gender dissemination, gender roles, the reality of 18<sup>th</sup>-century girlhood, and pre-revolutionary culture. Although the narratives are altered to display 1980s girl power and to personify Rowland's values, American Girl is a doll brand meant for little girls. In lieu of historical accuracy, the Historical Characters assume a more important task in empowering an impressionable, widely ignored demographic. American Girl understands the vital truth that girls are more than makeup and fawning over boys but are active dissenters, figures to be celebrated and supported, and successful risk-takers worthy of representation and socio-political agency.

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