Girls Just Want to Have Fun

Mayer, Merkel & Ottmann, Lith. N.Y.

This morning, with great fear and trembling, I entered my stepdaughter's American Girl room. When my husband and I got married and the three of us moved in together, the room was something of a selling point, a private space of her own, much like a study, and I had promised I would never touch her dolls when she was away. She'd left Addie, the runaway slave, lounging in shorts and hiking boots. Molly was still in her 1940s pajamas but was in the process of climbing out of bed and reaching for her glasses. As for Kit, a child of the Great Depression, she had been dressed in a white silk ball gown and black felt cape and was arranged in a hammock intended for Beanie Babies. She looked a little like Sleeping Beauty.


Fig. 1: American Girl Dolls: Addie, Molly, Kit. © by the Pleasant Company.

These girls come from radically different historical circumstances, but as far as my stepdaughter is concerned, they are sisters. Addie, circa 1864, is, logically enough, the oldest. The girls share clothing, lunches, and accessories freely. For a while, Addie didn't have a bed. Given her history, I took this to heart and got my stepdaughter—or, more honestly, Addie herself—the "official" Addie bed for Christmas, complete with African American story-quilt. I'll admit that my compassion was misguided. As far as my stepdaughter is concerned, the three dolls are only incidentally connected to their official profiles. It doesn't matter that Addie may never be reunited with her family, that Kit was thrown into jail with a group of hoboes, or that Molly's father is off at war. These dolls are refugees from their own histories. There are seven American Girl dolls in all, spanning a period from the American Revolution to the Second World War. The Pleasant Company, named after its founder, Pleasant T. Rowland, has sold five million dolls since 1986. The company's staff includes a small team of historians and librarians, and clearly, they are having a terrific time. For anyone with a taste for the history of everyday life, the catalogue makes fascinating reading. Each of the girls is surrounded by meticulously researched doll-sized butter churns or snowshoes or school desks. Kit's lunchbox is decorated with WPA-style heroic locomotives. Addie's is an old milk pail big enough to hold a cold meat pie and a bunch of grapes. In some ways, the dolls have the feel of successful market research. At ninety dollars, they're hardly cheap, and their price tag is part of their appeal. These are not intended to be superficial toys. They're a way to spark historical imagination, to make connections between the past and present, to help girls understand that, as the catalogue brightly notes, "You're a part of history too." Do American Girl dolls turn young girls into junior historians? I can only speak from my own experience. My stepdaughter adores her dolls, but was initially ambivalent about their stories. Each doll comes with the first book of its series, and her father had gotten her a full set of the Molly books, but she never asked to read them. Her reaction to the Addie books was even stronger. She had started on the first, only to find the descriptions of slavery so intense that they gave her nightmares. But as time went on,

particularly as she became an independent reader, she began to pick up some of the “short stories,” books that can be read in a single sitting, and slowly graduated to the chapter books. She now has most of the Molly series memorized.


Fig. 2: American Girl books. © by the Pleasant Company.

Fifty-six million American Girl books have been sold since the Pleasant Company was founded. At $5.95, the books are much less of an investment than the dolls and are sold not only through the catalogue, but are available in libraries and bookstores. Although the books can be purchased independently, the American Girl stories and accessories are intended to have a symbiotic relationship. A dress that plays a key part in *Addie’s Surprise* is available in the catalogue for $22.00; Kit’s typewriter and rolltop desk, key features in several of her adventures as a budding journalist, can be purchased for $82.00. Still, the stories can be read by girls who have no interest in—or no money for—the dolls. My ten-year-old niece, who prefers gerbils, regularly plows through two American Girl books a day. These books deserve their popularity. The writing is lively and, remarkably enough, rarely crosses into gross sentimentality. Admittedly, the stories are formulaic. Each of the dolls gets six books with interchangeable titles: *Meet* _____, _____ *Learns a Lesson,* _____ *Saves the Day.* This drives home the central message, that at bottom, all of these girls face the same problems: a family in transition, adjustments at school, a summer where they are thrown into unfamiliar circumstances. The girls themselves are also essentially identical: spirited and resourceful, surrounded by loving grown-ups, and often in a position to help those less fortunate. As a writer of historical novels, I can appreciate the way the authors of these books use basic similarities to ease their readers into less familiar territory. Historical details are woven through the books: we learn, along the way, how school was taught in 1774, 1834, 1864, or 1934. The authors work not only with staff historians, but also with curators of historical museums in the towns where they set the stories. Each of the chapter books ends with a section called “A Peek into the Past,” a few pages of illustrated historical background. At first, my stepdaughter had no interest in those pages, but as time went on, she began to suffer through them, and sometimes, she would even ask questions. At the end of one of the Molly books was a photograph of Hitler, and suddenly I had an opportunity to carefully broach the subject of the Holocaust.


Fig. 3: American Girl books. © by the Pleasant Company.

It would be easy to poke holes in the way the Pleasant Company presents history. Felicity, “a spunky, spritely girl growing up in Virginia in 1774,” visits a local plantation where there are clearly slaves; the issue never

arises. Kirsten, a second-generation Scandinavian pioneer, has an entirely predictable friendship with a Native American girl named Singing Bird. The hardest to take, to my mind, is Samantha, a Victorian orphan who lives with her wealthy grandmother and has befriended an Irish servant girl named Nellie. I suspect, with a sinking heart, that Samantha is the most popular doll of the series. Still, at times the books can take you by surprise. The Addie series, in particular, not only covers her escape from slavery, but moves on to deal with life in Civil War Philadelphia, Northern racism, freedmen's mutual aid societies, class antagonisms, and gradual, moving reunions with members of her family, including a brother who lost an arm in the war. Josefina lives in 1824 in what is now New Mexico, and her stories don't dismiss the cultural and historical complexities of that time and place. Even the Samantha books contain a suffragette or two. One could wish for more. I have recurring fantasies of "Rosa, a strong-willed and clever girl growing up in 1914 in the tenements of New York." On the third anniversary of losing her older sister in the Triangle Fire, Rosa is comforted by cheerful visits by the old family friend, Aunt Emma Goldman, who takes her to her first strike. I imagine the doll dressed in a rather stained shawl and kerchief, carrying a union card. I don't know what my stepdaughter would make of her. Chances are, Rosa would simply join her sisters, Addie, Kit, and Molly, under a nine-year-old's benign dictatorship. Even now, when the American Girl books have become staples in our household, the "official" stories have nothing to do with the world the actual dolls inhabit. My stepdaughter creates stories of her own. Perhaps it would be too complex to have three histories coexist, or perhaps it is simply a tribute to the power of imagination. The careful research of the historians on the staff at the Pleasant Company is not relevant, and that is as it should be. In any event, I would probably have to buy Rosa a bed.

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