

American Girls

A Podcast and a Community

Allison Horrocks and Mary Mahoney

ABSTRACT: Since Pleasant Rowland launched the American Girl brand in 1986, the popular dolls and books have inspired generations of young people. The American Girls Podcast, developed and produced by two historians, re-examines the world of American Girl, applying historical analysis and social commentary to understand how formative the brand was for their own and others' lives. The podcast has also cultivated a community of listeners who continue to engage with the dolls and stories in innovative ways; in this way, the show serves as a forum for ongoing conversations about the meaning of American Girl.

KEY WORDS: American Girl, podcasts, consumerism, toys, childhood

What happens when two millennial historians revisit the American Girl series, book by book? This is the premise of the *American Girls* podcast, a show that we research and produce together as an act of scholarship and friendship. Reviewing a franchise, story, or product from childhood is hardly a novel idea in podcasting. There are many shows such as *Raised by TV* that serve as platforms for humorous and mostly uncomplicated nostalgia. Although our podcast is inspired by a childhood interest, we critically engage the franchise and related popular culture using our expertise as historians. These deep dives into what we call “the worlds of American Girl fandom” have invited people who do not consider themselves historians to think about history and their own lives in new ways. Using this podcast as a vehicle for public history, we deliberately cultivate ongoing conversations with our listeners on the many lives (and afterlives) of stories, histories, and products from American culture.

We started the *American Girls* podcast in February 2019. With each sixty-to-seventy-five-minute show, we examine a story, place, or cultural artifact associated with an American Girl character. After catching up with one another on-air and talking about our current pop culture interests, we focus on American Girl content, drawing heavily on listener feedback and conversation. In an early episode, we

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 164–180 (February 2021). ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576. © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tp.2021.43.1.164>.

discussed Britney Spears's legal status (a conservatorship under intense scrutiny) as a way to talk about imperialism and discourses of "unfreedom." We engaged in this discussion to explain the predicaments faced by Felicity Merriman, an eighteenth-century American Girl who questions her place in the British Empire. Under our *American Girls* mantle, both Britney and Felicity are likely and important subjects. Our podcast takes seriously the many topics that intrigue us, which is why the show notes include works by prestigious academic historians and tweets from cultural critics.

As co-hosts, colleagues, and friends, we have connected with one another and many others on the subject of American Girl. After all, we came of age during the height of the historical American Girl dolls' popularity, and we became adults during the rise of podcasting. A desire to connect with others on a publicly accessible digital platform is what ultimately led us to make a biweekly podcast. Compared to other media, podcasting can be generally more accessible and inclusive. The basic requirements include an internet connection and smartphone. Podcasts also have an intimacy that can be hard to replicate through the written word alone.

Listeners usually hear just two women speaking into a microphone, but this is only one piece of a larger dialogue. Although the American Girl catalogs prompted young consumers to receive storylines and interpretations pre-packaged for them, our show invites the public into a process of co-creation with makers and public historians. Our guests and listeners have answered calls to create their own fan fiction, syllabi, and more, offering meaningful complications to our analyses. Much of our discussion on the show is fueled by off-air social media messages, emails, and other forms of communication. The connection that we have with the people who call, write, and share their lives with us across a range of digital mediums are what make the podcast a community.

Meet American Girl

If the names Samantha, Molly, Kirsten, Felicity, Addy, and Josefina evoke images of eighteen-inch dolls in historical costume and thin white books with silhouettes on the binding, you were likely a consumer of the early American Girl products. Collectively, this roster represents the first six characters created under the brand of American Girl, which launched in 1986. Since its inception under the Pleasant Company, American Girl has grown from a small series of dolls and books into a "transmedia juggernaut" owned by Mattel.¹ By now, several generations of readers have grown up with the brand. Children of the early-to-mid-1990s saw the most dramatic evolution. The first American Girl products were focused exclusively on telling historical stories through young girls' eyes. Though "girls of today" would become more of a focus for the company by the late 1990s, for those who came of

¹ Michael Anthony DeAnda, Jennifer deWinter, Chris Hanson, Carly A. Korcurek, and Stephanie Vie, "Families, Friendship, and Feelings: American Girl, Authenticating Experiences, and the Transmediation of Girlhood," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 4 (2018): 992.

age just a few years earlier, the initial (and to some canonical) American Girl dolls, books, catalogues, and other associated products were rooted firmly in the past.

Historians, cultural critics, and marketing analysts have various interests in considering the long-term impact of these products on a generation. Public historians of a certain age may already sense something close to a consensus, however. There is strong evidence that early American Girl devotees are well-represented among professionals working in careers related to history, museums, or the study of material culture. We know that we are not alone in drawing a connection between enjoying historical dolls, books, and playthings as a young person and pursuing a career that continues to draw on imagining and re-creating elements of the past. It is not a new or original insight to suggest that American Girl dolls had a major impact on a generation of young people.

Despite the relatively short life of this brand, a number of scholars have taken great care to examine the meaning of both particular dolls and the larger universe created to support them. There is a robust and growing line of scholarship that deals with American Girl in relation to histories of childhood, consumerism, and feminism.² We have read this literature, and been inspired by the work that others have done to contextualize the worlds invented through this brand. This article is not a synthesis of that scholarship, though it is informed by many other public historians' insights and findings. Instead, it is an overview of the work that we have

² 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* 52, no. 1 (January 2002): 139–61; Stefania Borghini, Nina Diamond, Robert V. Kozinets, Mary Ann McGrath, Albert M. Muñiz, and John F. Sherry, "Why Are Themed Brandstores So Powerful? Retail Brand Ideology At American Girl Place," *Journal of Retailing* 85, no. 3 (September 2009): 363–75; Kim Chuppa-Cornell, "When Fact Is Stranger than Fiction: Hair in American Girl Stories and Dolls," *The Lion And The Unicorn* 37, no. 2 (2013): 107–25; DeAnda, et al., "Families, Friendship, and Feelings," 972–96; Nina Diamond, John F. Sherry, Albert M. Muñiz, Mary Ann McGrath, Robert V. Kozinets, and Stefania Borghini, "American Girl and the Brand Gestalt: Closing the Loop On Sociocultural Branding Research," *Journal Of Marketing* 73, no. 3 (2009): 118–34; John F. Sherry, "The Work of Play at American Girl Place," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2009): 199–202; Jennifer Domino Rudolph, "Identity Theft: Gentrification, Latindad, And American Girl Marisol Luna," *Aztlan: A Journal Of Chicano Studies* 34, no. 1 (2009): 65; Jennifer M. Miskec, "Meet Ivy and Bean, Queerly the Anti-American Girls," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 157–71; Nana Osei-Kofi, "American Girls: Breaking Free," *Feminist Formations*, 25, no. 1 (2013): 1–7; Stuart Reifel, "Girls' Doll Play in Educational, Virtual, Ideological and Market Contexts: A Case Analysis Of Controversy," *Contemporary Issues In Early Childhood* 10, no. 4 (2009): 343–52; Molly Rosner, "The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children's Consumer Culture," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 35–53; Sami Schalk, "Beforever?: Disability In American Girl Historical Fiction," *Children's Literature* 45, no. 1 (2017): 164–87; Diane Carver Sekeres, "The Market Child and Branded Fiction: A Synergism of Children's Literature, Consumer Culture, and New Literacies," *Reading Research Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2009): 399–414; Arthur C. Sturm, Jr., "Dolls and Dollars: New Insight for Revenue," *Healthcare Financial Management* 59, no. 11 (2005): 76–8, 80; Rebecca J. West and Bhoomi K. Thakore, "Racial Exclusion in the Online World," *Future Internet* 5 (2): 251–67; Emilie Zaslow and Judy Schoenberg, "Stumping to Girls through Pop Culture: Feminist Interventions to Shape Future Political Leaders," *Women & Language* 35, no. 1 (2012): 97–116; Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of The American Girl Collection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017).

done in developing and managing our podcast, and what we have learned about the ways that some stories change as we do.

We Learn Some Lessons

For years, we wondered how we could share our continued interest in American Girl. There was nothing inevitable about us creating a podcast, but the medium seemed to fit our interests just right. Although we understood that we had expertise to share, we knew that we also wanted to make the conversation much bigger than the two of us. We wanted to hear from other American “girls” who have grown up with this brand, as much as we wanted to share our own thoughts. This was partially the genesis for the title *American Girls*. On one level, it speaks to our identities as people who grew up in the United States and were influenced by American Girl. The title is also evocative of the shared culture among people who once found the brand to be formative, especially that first generation of readers and collectors.

In thinking about audience, we knew we wanted to make the show accessible to people who had not thought about American Girl in a long time. We also wanted to reach people who might be looking for a way to reignite their interest in history. We decided that this return to the books, dolls, and other materials associated with American Girl would not be purely nostalgic. Instead, we would explore the uses of these historical representations for us as readers and consumers now, in the present. Overall, the primary audience for the show is not young people, though some children do listen to it with adults. Our show is also not necessarily designed for adults who are avid, lifelong collectors of American Girl. Fellow public historians *do* listen, but they comprise a small percentage of our listenership. Based on our hosting platform’s analytics and an audience survey we conducted, most of our listeners are women in the United States from our generational cohort (millennials). Our imagined and actual audiences are not too far apart.

Even though American Girl was such a big part of our collective childhood, we often find ourselves surprised by how little we (and others) remember about these characters that were deeply meaningful to us as children. Looking back with a new perspective, we serve as intermediaries, processing how we re-read these stories and reexamine these products out loud. For the discussion of each character, we spend a considerable amount of time researching the periods covered in the books, looking carefully at the exact years they were produced (1986–97), and studying more recent fan remixes. Just as much time is also spent responding to our listeners, who write to us via email, send us messages, and call our voicemail line. They are vital to the show. As a community, we are probing the meanings that American Girl once had in our lives, filtered through our adult perspectives and shared interests in the present.

We wanted listeners to be able to come along on this journey with us—but where to start? Our initial episodes began with Felicity Merriman, who debuted

in Fall 1991. Felicity's stories are set in colonial Williamsburg between 1774 and 1775. She was not the first doll that Pleasant Company released (Samantha, Molly, and Kirsten came out together) nor was she the oldest in terms of historical periodization (Kaya, 1764). We launched with Felicity because her story was the oldest (in terms of setting) among the first six characters released between 1986 and 1997. In addition to closely covering the six canonical books associated with Felicity, we read additional stories produced by Mattel along with fan fiction published online. This is a model we have since replicated with additional characters.

As the show has evolved, we have also worked on incorporating more and more supplemental material. This is partially a reflection of the wonderful array of texts and photographs of material objects that people send to us. Some listeners have a deeply vivid memory of cracking open a certain book for the first time. Others only seem to remember the dolls or specific toys. Overall, people who have consumed various items in the American Girl universe tend to have a stronger interest in one aspect (books) more than another (dolls, other merchandise). It has been important to us that this show reach people who have interacted with these brands in a variety of ways. This explains why we are just as likely to talk about a plot point as someone's beloved American Girl puzzle, film, or Instagram post.

During the episodes where we focus on a particular book, we provide a primer on the character and place her creation in historical context to bring everyone to the same place. This requires research on our end as to the genesis of each doll, the background of the author, and some digging on the committee of scholars and historians that worked on the development of each character. We understand that it is impossible to exactly remember how we (or anyone else) felt the first time they played with an American Girl doll or read an American Girl's story. There is also no expectation that anyone will re-read along with us, so we try to include extensive recaps of plot points and the historical information sections called "A Peek into the Past."

Although we are returning to stories we have read before, this show is an entirely new process of creating meaning. Since we are relieved of the burden of remembering exactly what we thought more than twenty years ago, we are free to think anew about our childhood and contemporary experiences. Listeners may tune in to relive a good memory from childhood, but many seem to indicate that they are just as interested in thinking about material they *haven't* considered in a while if ever. Others are pleasantly surprised when we (or they) remember something well. One of the pleasures of a podcast is that listeners can "talk back" and become part of this conversation, too.

In honoring the important role that American Girl had in our lives, we conceptualized our podcast to include extensive critique balanced with an appreciation for how the books reflect a particular historical moment and perspective. As we look back on the American Girl catalogues, books, and other materials, we do not, for example, fixate on the accuracy or inaccuracy of any one story or outfit. Those who are more familiar with the brand may know that each book was extensively

researched, not just by the author but also a team of experts. The same is true of the accoutrements. What was more interesting to us, and we hoped to listeners, would be a new and critical look at the context in which these materials were created.

The American Girl dolls and books were obviously not the first products to represent historical female figures. But these series were an important departure from much of the content that existed for and about young women. Through the *American Girl* magazine and other outlets, creator Pleasant Rowland made a line of dolls and stories in which girls' experiences were central to larger national narratives. For caretakers seeking well-researched historical content, the American Girl books were an important intervention some thirty years ago. By placing bright and often brave girls in historical moments, the early American Girl stories also reflected the "girl power" feminism of the early and mid-1990s that has had a huge impact on us, personally. We try to put this moment in a historical context as much as any of the periods in the books.

Pleasant Rowland's Pleasant Surprise

On the show, we model our training as historians and interpreters by providing context—this includes a close look at the start and evolution of the brand. Pleasant Rowland is the original American Girl—but who is she? The most extensive history written about American Girl to date is Emilie Zaslow's *Playing with America's Doll*. Zaslow provides a comprehensive overview of Pleasant Rowland, the driving force behind Pleasant Company. Rowland was in her forties when she transformed from educator to toy mogul. When she first conceptualized American Girl, Rowland had saved \$1.2 million from earning textbook royalties. That financial backing, paired with an interest in living history, empowered Rowland to create a new kind of doll brand, in spite of considerable resistance from the industry.³ Under her Pleasant Company, American Girl became a lucrative corner of the toy market, bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars. But Rowland saw this project as something bigger than a market intervention. Rowland "had a feminist inspiration: to create stories about girls who took themselves and their participation in life seriously."⁴ From the start, American Girl was positioned as a new kind of brand, not just for its emphasis on history but also in its representations of girlhood that girls themselves would help shape. American Girl stories and merchandise were marketed to children as mutually constituted products.

The first three dolls came out in 1986. In addition to the eighteen-inch toy, each character would come alive through an arc spanning a series of books. Across the six eponymous tales, readers would meet the character in book one, watch her learn a lesson in book two, experience a birthday in book three, learn about a holiday in book four, save the day in book five, and finally, observe a social

³ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

change in book six. All would experience a range of seasons and historical events as they grew from age nine to age ten. Many of these early books were authored by Rowland's friend and colleague in children's education, Valerie Tripp. The first "contemporary doll collection"—which shifted the focus away from historical figures and more toward the present—would come out in 1995.⁵ This new line, along with the addition of BittyBaby (more conventional baby dolls) marked a change in priorities for the company. But the biggest change came in 1998, when Rowland sold the company to Mattel for \$700 million.

For those who grew up during the early years of American Girl, the first six characters released prior to the Mattel sale hold particular meaning, and many fans feel an affiliation with one or more characters. This is often manifest in a question such as: "Are you a Molly?" This question refers to whether one feels a kinship with Molly McIntire, an American girl living in Illinois between 1944 and 1945, who was one of the first three characters released in 1986. As her family and country grapple with World War II, Molly and her friends deal with relatable adolescent problems as well as historically specific events, a formula used throughout the book series. Also in 1986, Swedish-born Kirsten Larson made her debut to tell the story of westward expansion and immigration in the 1850s. Soon thereafter, Kirsten and Molly were joined by Samantha Parkington, an orphan living with her wealthy grandmother, whose stories are set in 1904–1905 in New York.

In the early 1990s, Pleasant Company released the next cohort of historical dolls, Felicity Merriman, Addy Walker, and Josefina Montoya. Whereas the first three characters were all white, with the addition of Addy (a Black girl who escapes bondage during the Civil War) and Josefina (whose story, set in 1820s New Mexico, expands the definition of "American"), American Girl began to diversify and change their representation of American girlhood. The lack of diversity early on also points to another tension within the brand. American Girl books were designed to illuminate the lives of people "who lived long ago" so that readers could "see that some things about growing up have changed, while others—like families, friends, and feelings—haven't changed at all."⁶ For Rowland, it was important to show difference, but also to emphasize the transhistorical aspects of girls' experiences.

A criticism of the brand is this very attempt to force too many similarities onto characters who represent people whose experiences were widely divergent. One example we found was Josefina's "lesson" book. Josefina, who is illiterate at this point in the series, is featured on the cover of *Josefina Learns a Lesson* sitting at a desk with a writing implement. This imagery puts her in line with other, earlier American Girls who are posed much in the same way for their lessons. Yet Josefina's story is not about her attending a school, or about her path to becoming

⁵ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 22.

⁶ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 20–23.

a writer. The focus is how she learns to weave from an Indigenous woman—an activity appropriate for a young woman of her place and time period.

This example shows how the larger framework for American Girl stories sometimes forces girls living very different lives across distinctive historical moments into superficially similar trajectories. An emphasis on continuity across dolls can sometimes erase meaningful differences across cultures and time periods. This tendency also robs young readers of the chance to think of their own skills in different ways. For example, the Indigenous woman who teaches Josefina to weave imagines her blanket as a text that tells the story of her tribe. This scene wonderfully illustrates how some Indigenous cultures imagine literacy outside of “Western” conventions. Yet the cover situates Josefina at a desk in a kind of classroom scene that notably does not happen in the story. In a case where one literally cannot judge the book by its cover, this illustration both erases meaningful Indigenous practice and suggests that Josefina falls short of a certain definition of knowing.

Through our early shows on Felicity and then Josefina, we attempted to explain *why* these two sets of books might have been written as they were, in their own historical context. As a contrast to Josefina, Felicity, a girl from a prosperous white family in Williamsburg, Virginia, on the eve of the American Revolution, yearns to receive an advanced education. However, she is confined to lessons befitting a woman of her race and social standing. In several instances, Felicity is dismissive of her mother’s domestic knowledge because she aspires to the kind of education only given to men of privilege in her community. As nine-year-old readers, we didn’t ask if this was reflective of how girls lived and thought in the eighteenth century. Instead, we simply reveled in her strong sense of self, which was familiar to us as girls growing up in the 1990s—the Spice Girls and self-esteem era. Later, we would also see how much these books could reveal about their authors, women raised in the era of Title IX and Second Wave Feminism.

Rethinking what we had been taught about girlhood and empowerment in the 1990s also led us to ask new questions about representations of race and privilege in Felicity’s world of colonial Virginia. In *Felicity Saves the Day*, Felicity enjoys a retreat to her grandfather’s large plantation outside of Williamsburg. At one point, Felicity and Grandfather walk by a field where enslaved people are working. Here, and elsewhere in this book, enslaved people are present but they are not agents. For Felicity, the enslavement of people as part of her home and family life is not remarkable. Felicity also shows no awareness of the dangers faced by Isaac, a Black freeman who she encourages to take part in a dangerous plot in Williamsburg.

As part of Virginia’s Patriot movement, the Merrimans’ fears of “enslavement” in the British empire were figurative; Isaac’s fears are literal, life-threatening, and unexplored. Of course, these books would be very different if they were told from Isaac’s point of view. Or, if Felicity had asked any questions about the enslaved people in her home and in the field during her summer story. Felicity is a fictional nine-year-old, but she is also important to many girl readers, and a well-researched

conduit into the past. This begs the question: what does this representation of eighteenth-century girlhood say about 1990s race politics? Is she really a reflection of girlhood of her time or rather a window into the politics of privilege in “post-racial” America in the 1990s? In our coverage of Felicity, we were interested in probing details of the stories and in understanding the historical moment in which American Girl, and in some ways, our future selves, were made.

Stages of Fandom

As we talked about Felicity in ways new to us and many listeners, we were surprised at first by the intensity of the reaction. We most often hear from people who closely identify with a particular character while we are covering their favorite. Hearing these kinds of criticisms about Felicity could be hard for someone who loved this character as a child. These stories are deeply meaningful to a generation of women, but at the same time, we learned that many of our listeners are also keen on understanding (with us) why and how this came to be. As avid readers of these same books, we understood the impulse to defend, but also the desire to rethink. Part of this process is seeing problematic elements of these stories, as the Felicity example illustrates.

Our re-reading of Felicity also taught us early on just how many flaws there were in our “memories.” We had at first remembered Felicity’s stories as taking place in John Adams’s Boston neighborhood; as described above, she actually lives in Williamsburg, Virginia. She is not involved in Bostonian politics, nor does she meet the Adamses, much to our chagrin. It is not surprising that one would forget much of a book that was first read years ago. What has been illuminating is the extent to which revising these series has started a new process of discovery for us and for listeners. Our show is not scripted and the revelations are not planned. They are simply a reflection of how we talk during and outside of the show.

One of the pleasures of reviewing these compact books is the opportunity to see them completely differently. For example, having now read Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s analysis of Martha Ballard’s diary and other studies of midwifery, we understand the scenes of Mrs. Merriman’s pregnancy (and Felicity’s visits to an apothecary) with a greater appreciation for their accuracy and nuance.⁷ We were also interested in other connections we could make to literature; in this case we were struck by the similarities between the near-death scene in *Felicity’s Surprise* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*.⁸ When we discussed representations of disease in Felicity’s stories on the show, we knew we would gain little from diagnosing a fictional eighteenth-century mother with neurasthenia. However, we thought listeners would be interested in how her story connects to problematic representations of “women’s ills” across time. Many were, and they

⁷ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary* (New York: Random House, 1997).

⁸ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892; eBook Project Gutenberg, 2008).

had their own insights to add, especially those who are themselves mothers of young children. They experienced this re-reading and perception of exhaustion in entirely different ways, adding to our collective understanding.

Many lifelong Felicity fans also reported that they could hold at least two truths about the character at the same time. From a distance, it could be surprising to see young Felicity relentlessly focus on *her* holiday desires (a new dress, a doll) while her mother dealt with illness. Yet her “spunkiness” and holiday wishes also remained deeply charming to some. Balancing these perceptions and considering multiple vantage points has been critical to how we structure each episode. We are not trying to access our first readings of the books, as that would be not only impossible but also a disservice to the people we are now. What we are trying to do is make sense of the distance between our past and present selves as readers. This sometimes means that we are surprised by how differently we and others interpret the characters now. Few could have guessed that our early and avowed irritation with Samantha would erode over time. The words have not been rearranged in her storybooks—even in the recently released *Beforever* volumes (which replaced the original editions, eliminating illustrations but only minimal text). Yet we have come to them in a new light. We also do these readings with an appreciation for the fact that these books were a key element in starting our path toward historical research.

Speaking in tune with many others, listener Amy Cannon noted, “This whole podcast is me flashing back to things I pored over and adored but had zero recall of until presented with them again.”⁹ It is this strange sense of both newness and familiarity that makes this process especially rich. Other academics and marketing professionals have studied the cultural impact of American Girl, but our podcast has opened a different kind of window into fans’ lives. Instead of conducting research on the people for whom this brand is important, we have shared our stories, and been amply rewarded by learning others’ in return. The depth of what people have shared with us has been consistent and somewhat unexpected. Many listeners have written to us to tell us that after listening to an episode, they have returned to their American Girl collections, finding dolls, books, and accessories neatly pressed in cases and trunks. These things have not changed over the years, but they have, and it can be an emotional process to physically retrieve reminders of a period that has passed.

Others have found delight in the random details that have clung tenaciously to their brains. In these cases, listeners have written to us, wondering aloud why a moment or plot had such resonance. Listener Molly Shoemaker wrote an email to us in this vein, asking first what we thought of “the short historical sections at the end of the books”—these are the “peeks into the past.” Though a devoted fan of the character Molly, she admitted that what stood out the most was a passage noting that “After the war women wore pants.” This is a fact, she continued, that “is both

9 Amy Cannon (@amykaycannon), Direct Message on Instagram, September 13, 2019.

medium true and #classic AG.”¹⁰ Much of Molly’s plotlines have been forgotten by this listener, but this one seemingly unimportant fact has been carefully stored, and is something she laughs about often with a roommate who also loved Molly.

Although we generally focus more on the books, we know enough not to underestimate the power of the American Girl brand accessories. Historian Cynthia Chin did not connect with the stories so much as the objects that accompanied them. Speaking of Felicity’s series, she writes, “Though sweet, playful and compellingly told, it wasn’t necessarily the narrative by Valerie Tripp that captivated me at the age of 10–12. It was the attention to historical accuracy that Pleasant Company, then owned by Pleasant Rowland, demanded of its doll accessories.” As a child, Chin “had no idea the level of accuracy of these things” while engaging in “tea parties” with her Felicity doll. Yet now, as a professional and student of material culture, she sees that “what Pleasant Company did was train my hands and eyes to kinesthetically experience and see historical accuracy—in doll form. It encouraged the development of my material literacy.”¹¹

Chin’s comments are not unique when compared to many others in our inboxes. A consistent theme among listeners is an appreciation for the spark of joy it ignited in learning more about history outside of American Girl. The historical sections in each book vary in length, but always contain primary sources and a synthetic essay on the historical period covered in the book. For readers who wanted to dig deeper into the stories behind the story, this was a “peek” at the scholarship behind the fictional stories. Historian Rachel Kline remembers the feelings of pride engendered by *knowing things* because of American Girl. In an email, she explained that as a sixth grader, she had “the answers to questions during a history lesson because of Felicity’s books.” These stories “taught me to love women’s, environmental, and architectural history as well as material culture. They brought the past alive to me. I’m forever indebted.”¹² This sense of owing a “debt” to American Girl is something that resonates with us, too.

So many listeners tie their love of history back to a moment with a doll or book. But certain elements of these stories are more present in some listeners’ present-day lives. For the listener who works as a historic tinsmith, or the correspondent who wears a historic costume (that bears a striking resemblance to Felicity’s garb) at work, the connection is clear. The same goes for public historian Chelsea Jupin, who incorporated a Samantha Parkington plotline into her work at the Henry Street Settlement.¹³ In these cases, the brand is not just something from their past. Their passion has instead been sustained into the present.

There are also American Girl fans who have chosen to build a collection as adults. For them, American Girl is something that has only become accessible in adulthood. Devoted American Girl book reviewer Ciara wrote to us that she “got

10 M. Shoemaker, email to authors, April 29, 2019.

11 Cynthia Chin, email to authors, March 29, 2019.

12 Rachel Kline, email to authors, March 31, 2019.

13 Chelsea Jupin, email to authors, July 8, 2019.

hooked on AG as a child when the catalogs mysteriously started arriving at my house.” As a young person, however, she did not own “the dolls, books, or accessories.” Later, she explained, “I dipped a toe into collecting.” She eventually accumulated five dolls and a range of accessories. Ciara is not alone in this desire to own objects that were once out of reach. Critics of American Girl have noted that it is hardly an affordable collecting hobby, especially for a child.¹⁴ The brand was financially inaccessible for most children, with the dolls beginning around \$80 (now \$110) before accessories. We work to weave these stories into our show, too, because the memory of *not* having a doll is as important as the act of owning one in our discussions of the brand.

Ciara and other adult collectors’ comments about the “mysterious” catalogues also point to the pervasiveness of the brand in the memories of many grown consumers today. As Michael Anthony Deanda and his co-authors argue, this type of brand has both “objects” and “experiences” designed to “foster connections among capitalistic endeavors, specifically collection and consumption behaviors, and girlhood through authenticating experiences.”¹⁵ For young people who grew up as the first historical dolls were becoming popular, it may have seemed that American Girl was everywhere. In the mid-1990s, American Girl transformed from a popular children’s brand to a marketing tool at living history museums and the basis for several major stores throughout the United States. Although we have heard from many listeners who fondly remember American Girl plays, teas, and other events at living history museums, we are aware that these events were expensive and presumed an additional level of consumption (in the form of dolls, books, etc.) going in.

Our free show provides an access point that we could have never conceived of as children. In the spirit of zine culture, we blend academic and pop culture content on platforms that are much more in reach of people who do not have any advanced training in history. The chance to listen to our show in private also allows people who have not felt as though they could publicly engage with American Girl at historic sites or stores to enter the fandom. American Girl was and is a brand based on cis-gender social norms. One listener who wrote to us explained that he “connected to your podcast as a reader of the books and player of the dolls.” As a child, the “books were seriously formative” for him. Yet, “Since I was a boy, I wasn’t allowed to have the dolls and had to read the books on vacation or at home and not in school.” He was able to acquire Molly because he “lobbied hard” to get his sister to make a request for her for Christmas.¹⁶ Our show creates a kind of space for him *now* that he did not get to have as a younger person.

Changes and Creating a Community

In addition to sharing their memories, many listeners graciously show us some of their creative output. The depth of care that some American Girl fans have taken in

¹⁴ Ciara Xyerra, email to authors, September 3, 2019.

¹⁵ DeAnda, et al., “Families, Friendship, and Feelings.”

¹⁶ See Eric, email to authors, August 27, 2019.

unpacking or exploring these stories never ceases to surprise and excite us. For some grown fans, writing has been a primary method for engaging with these characters. As youth and now as adults, readers have not passively received these stories. They have taken an active role in interpreting and re-interpreting them—inventing and then writing entirely new plots, endings, or spinoffs. Through fan fiction, writing about these characters has allowed fans to imagine different pre-stories, sub-plots, futures, and more. With Felicity specifically, many picked up on the potential for romance between the leading character and her family’s apprentice, Ben.

Although heterosexual romance is a mainstay in fan fiction, there has also been great interest in queer interpretations of American Girl. As of this writing, there are not any American Girl characters who are explicitly identified as queer. This has not stopped readers from reimagining or reinterpreting American Girl book or characters. Nor has it discouraged us from discussing the importance of studying these characters through a queer lens. Listener Torrence, for instance, a “longtime lover of American Girl” had not seen her dolls or books for some time. On a recent trip to her childhood home, she opted to look at her American Girl collection, noting, “Without your podcast, it’s hard to know whether I would have been motivated to dig through that dusty box. However, I’m glad I did as I can now prove Kit’s queerness.”¹⁷ Torrence decided to pull out Kit’s wardrobe and stage some photographs, a common enough practice in the world of AG fandom. In her classic outfit, Kit wears a sweater set and small cap over her blonde hair, which is cut in a bob. Torrence had styled her to wear Birkenstocks and linen pants, replacing the given outfit for another style. She quickly saw many commonalities between her aesthetic and Kit’s, which she read as an important moment in rethinking Kit’s identity as a queer character.

This kind of interpretation and storytelling is more common among our listenership than one might imagine. We have received charts, videos, infographics, and many messages about which American Girl dolls are queer. Some have chosen to present select scenes as evidence of queer desire; others have shared why their own identities direct them towards a queer reading of the books. What is at stake with this kind of sharing? Listeners who felt as though their favorite childhood stories were not made for them, or did not include them, have chosen to go back and reinterpret them and to make their own meaning. Many have used these stories to reflect on their understandings of themselves as children—and as adults who hold these stories close.

Indeed, the early American Girl dolls live on, and get new lives, almost every day. Not surprisingly, one way that people who grew up with the dolls continue their engagement with the brand is by producing and sharing content on social media, especially on Instagram, where users deploy the hashtag #AGIG to share their photographs and videos of contemporary and historical dolls. Many of the

¹⁷ Torrence Gregory, email to authors, September 13, 2019.

people who contribute to and interact with this corner of Instagram self-identify as “adult collectors.” Some of these people have sustained an interest that began in childhood whereas others are reconnecting with the brand through specific projects. Adult collector @historic_ag_dolls notes in her biography on Instagram that she features “A few modern dolls, but I’ll always love the historical gals the most.”¹⁸ Her photographs showcase new outfits, snippets from the catalogue, and other toys associated with the dolls. Some of her posts also combine dolls, storylines, and historical periods to create entirely new narratives for the characters. This artist’s posts are typical of a genre in which collectors share what they have and invent new stories through staged tableaux.

Others share photographs under the “alt” category and related hashtag of #alttagig. In the realm of “alt” dolls, almost anything is possible. Public historian Rebekkah Rubin, to take one example, has invented “alt” characters, including a doll who fights for suffrage. Rubin’s posts are carefully researched and staged. Often, she features dolls with new backstories she has created at historic sites. Rubin’s creations add to and expand the foundational women’s histories covered by American Girl, particularly with her emphasis on women’s suffrage. One creation, an eighteen-inch doll with a beautiful nineteenth-century dress (featuring a full bustle) “shares a name with the famous Jewish suffragist and feminist, Ernestine Rose.”¹⁹ Rubin travels with another doll, Elenore, and through her explains the significance of historic sites in the United States. The doll’s “discovery” of these places serves as a useful starting point for expanding on an aspect of local history, as with her October 10, 2018, visit to Newburyport, Massachusetts, where she learned about the birthplace of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.²⁰

Rubin’s work is also part of a larger campaign to create and feature “dolls of color” through #docmonth and other hashtags. Some artists make their own dolls whereas others invent or stretch existing storylines for American Girls such as Addy. This goes beyond simply purchasing the American Girl “Truly Me” dolls offered in a variety of skin tones, eye colors, and hair styles and colors. Rather, this form of content creation is an attempt to expand what is considered “canon” within the American Girl universe, both in terms of historical and contemporary dolls. The addition of Addy and later dolls, including Melody Ellison, who struggles for civil rights in 1960s Detroit, Michigan, were landmark moments in decentering whiteness within American Girl. Yet fans have demanded more of the products they care for, and have taken action to create the world they wish to see. American Girl may never release a doll in a sari or wearing a hijab as part of either the contemporary “Girl of the Year” or the historical series. Until the brand fully reflects all experiences, #doc creators will continue their own revisions.

¹⁸ @historic_ag_dolls, Instagram Bio, https://www.instagram.com/historic_ag_dolls/?hl=en.

¹⁹ @lamexcessivelydollverted, Instagram Post, November 15, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqN6zHoA68e/>.

²⁰ @lamexcessivelydollverted, Instagram Post, October 10, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BoxT5Fyl7bF/>.

Speaking about this kind of work on the podcast, and connecting with creators, has shown us the nearly limitless possibilities that clever American Girl fans continue to forge. In addition to collectors, there are also public historians doing innovative work with the other forms of literature produced by American Girl. In addition to stories, American Girl also produced recipes and party suggestions for each of the early dolls; these were the kinds of products that allowed American Girl to create massive, glossy catalogues with seemingly endless possibilities for consumers. A public historian who blogs under the name “A Peek into the Pantry” (a play on “A Peek into the Past”) has used both the official doll cookbooks and made her own recipes for a range of American Girl dolls.²¹ This historian stages scenes with the dolls and dishes she prepares. Each post about a doll and a recipe is filled with rich detail and is illustrative of her own evolution as a historian, cook, and collector. American Girl is not simply a part of her childhood that has been left behind or romanticized. It is instead a part of her life as a working professional who has important expertise to bring to the branded content.

In listening to our listeners, we have also been reminded of a basic fact of reading—that it can be another form of writing. In a *New York Times* article on our show, television columnist Margaret Lyons captured the ways the books and dolls inspired a sense of possibility set in an imagined historical past: “Might I, like Kirsten, be named Lucia queen to celebrate St. Lucia’s day, wear a candle crown and present my family with cinnamon rolls? No, Margaret, the adults in my life would say. We are not Swedish, and you are not allowed to use the oven by yourself.” Tellingly, in looking back on these books as part our community of listeners, Lyons was able to rewrite the meaning of these stories with a mind not to her place in an imagined past, but as a way to imagine how it helped her evolve into an adulthood marked by a professional emphasis on creative storytelling.

“Re-engaging with doll culture—even if it’s reflecting on possibly the bougie part of my privileged youth—,” Lyons notes, “has prompted me to reconsider how essential all that playing was to how I think about character, story, interiority.” Lyons uses this recollection to narrate a story of her life in which such play was a necessary part of her path to a career in the arts. “Dolls helped me prepare for a life in the arts. If you play making apple butter, or goat-herding, or sturdy perseverance in the face of unforgiving winters; if you play with loss before you have to encounter it; if you play survival, or freedom or girlhood—who knows what you’ll be prepared for.”²² This sense of taking play—and one’s own girlhood—seriously is behind much of what we see, and what we hear, from those who care to explore their past and present interest in American Girl.

As this overview of the world of “AG” fandom online suggests, we are hardly the first adults to look back on the series. We are also not the first to creatively

²¹ @apeekintothepantry, Instagram Profile, <https://www.instagram.com/apeekintothepantry/?hl=en>.

²² Margaret Lyons, “American Girl & Me,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2019.

reimagine different pasts and futures for the American Girl dolls. In her brilliant photography project, *American Girls: Breaking Free*, Nana Osei-Kofi staged a series of photographs “in an effort to intervene in the ways in which the American Girl Collection, as a powerful manifestation of capitalist consumer culture for young girls, normalizes and promotes oppressive constructions of gender, race, class, sexuality, and national identity.”²³ In “Border Stories,” Osei-Kofi positioned a Josefina Montoya doll inside the book *Occupied America: The Chicano’s Struggle Toward Liberation* against the backdrop of a map of “The United States of Mexico” from 1847. American Girl may represent a packaged, commodified version of American femininity and normativity. At the same time, the nearly endless possibilities for remixing, remastering, and rethinking their stories give us pause. There can be no single interpretation of the meaning of a character such as Josefina. Instead, there are children and adults alike who turn to her as a way of working through subjects as complex as colonialism and as intimate as the loss of a family member.

What our show seeks to do is to tap into these endless remixes and to say something about uses of stories—both personal and cultural. There sometimes seems to be a nearly insatiable desire for repackaging and rethinking one’s relationships to the early dolls. Quizzes about how one’s zodiac sign connects to a particular doll, or an article on how each doll would decorate a loft apartment today, show that people who have enjoyed this brand are not seeing the characters as fixed or timeless.²⁴ Together with our listeners, we revisit the American Girls because we continue to see them as a vehicle for learning about ourselves and others. This is a truly distinctive kind of reminiscence that again, must be considered distinct from nostalgia. What interests our listeners is that we do not offer an uncomplicated look at their youthful favorites. They are instead looking to rekindle the joy of connecting with a childhood friend, while also imagining that she has made it into the present and shares your interests now.

In making this podcast, we consciously created a format that incorporates an important marker of childhood: play. Our show offers recaps of the books and discussion of its meaning and context using the language of historical scholarship, interpretation, and pop culture. Although we may mention scholarship that informed our adult reappraisal of these books and the worlds they re-create, we also take delight in sharing similar comparisons and references to our world using the language of film, television, and celebrity culture. Our friendship is as much a part of the show as our shared interest in historical research. While conscious not to perform the same transhistorical comparison that marks Pleasant Company’s imaginary of girlhood, we enjoy putting our contemporary influencer culture in conversation with, for example, Revolutionary-era media. We also take seriously

²³ Osei-Kofi, “American Girls: Breaking Free,” 2.

²⁴ “How American Girls Would Decorate If They Lived in in Studio Apartments,” *Apartment Therapy*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.apartmenttherapy.com/american-girl-doll-studio-apartment-262582>.

the critiques of gender, sex, race, and class presented in these histories, and try to expose how they were grounded in the politics of the 1980s and 1990s.

These books sparked our initial interest in a discipline that has become our life's work. In professional training, there is an expectation to cite academic monographs as the source of our interest in pursuing history. What bonded us early on in our friendship was the shared inspiration we found in *American Girl* as children, even as we lost the thread on most plots in the years between first reading and graduate school. When we would share this affinity with some professionals, they would dismiss *American Girl* as "childish." We chose to focus on the rich potential of the fandom and to make a podcast, knowing there was a larger conversation we could be part of with other peers. Play and levity are integral to how we approach this topic, and even when using our expertise as historians, our goal is not to show what pop culture gets wrong about history.

In many ways, our podcast has become a vehicle for broader conversations about consumption, nostalgia, and the role of historical narratives in the formation of the self. As we look back on *American Girl*, and as others join us in this task, we appreciate the importance of examining how our relationships to stories and childhood objects shape us not once, but many times in a lifetime. Along the way, we have found a new outlet in which we can introduce tools from public history methodologies to wider audiences, many of whom are eager to place their own lives and interests in context and in conversation with others. What has been most rewarding is discovering just how much our listeners want to share in return. As we learn more about these stories and one another, this podcast has become a platform for rediscovering personal histories and changing notions of our collective childhood. With the news that an *American Girl* doll from 1986 was released in August 2020, we find ourselves stunned to see our birth year as fodder for historical fiction. Courtney, a girl of 1986, has a Walkman, hangs out at the mall, and makes friendship bracelets. These accessories now have us wondering when *our* childhoods became history.

• • • • •

Allison Horrocks is a park ranger who works in Lowell, Massachusetts. Her primary research interests are women's history, concepts of work, and public service. In her work as an interpreter, Allison is passionate about connecting people to history through lectures, stories, and dialogue. As part of her work as a public historian, Allison is a co-host of the *American Girls* podcast. She holds a PhD in History from the University of Connecticut.

Mary Mahoney is the Andrew W. Mellon postdoctoral fellow in digital humanities at Trinity College. She is a historian of bibliotherapy with experience creating digital exhibits and podcasts drawing on archival sound and oral history collections. She holds a PhD in history from the University of Connecticut.