

Old-Fashioned and Forward-Looking: Neo-Liberalism and Nostalgia in the Daring Books for Girls.

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"Old-Fashioned and Forward-Looking": Neo-Liberalism and Nostalgia in the Daring Books for Girls

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"Old-Fashioned and Forward-Looking":
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"There are three friends in life: courage, sense, and insight."

— Andrea J. Buchanan and Miriam
Peskowitz, *The Double-Daring Book for Girls*
(63)

An apparent resurgence in gender-specific marketing of products for children has been linked to post-millennial anxieties about the destabilizing of categories such as gender and nationality. Although links can be traced to past patterns of gender segregation in print culture for children, in this paper we are interested in tracking incongruities in texts in the present context. In this paper we analyze critically the franchise anchored around Andrea J. Buchanan and Miriam Peskowitz's *The Daring Book for Girls*, which was a publishing sensation in the USA and which led to an Australian edition as well as several follow-up texts. The inspiration for these books came from *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, originally published in the UK in 2006 by brothers Conn and Hal Iggulden, one of whom had been a teacher, and the Daring books for girls were a direct response to the success of the book for boys. Buchanan and Peskowitz, two American authors of mothering books,¹ approached Iggulden and Iggulden seeking permission to use their design and concept to write a version for girls.

This gender segmentation is not new in children's publishing. The Daring books draw heavily on Victorian girls' manuals, evoking a period when "civilized societies evidenced strict separation of men and women and precocious girls [were believed to] contribute to social degeneration, racial suicide, and imperial decline," as noted by Nancy Lesko (188). Nevertheless, these separate sets of books for boys and for girls are symptomatic of a recent and growing **[End Page 85]** trend in the contemporary marketing of children's media and consumer culture. As American theorist of material culture Ellen Seiter suggests, an

intensification of selling to girls and boys separately emerged in the 1980s with the recognition that a separate and lucrative niche market existed for girl products (Seiter 145). Separate products for boys and for girls represent more than simply increased profits, however. They also imply something about the reinforcement and perhaps resurgence of gender binaries, shifting notions of masculinity and femininity, and the promotion of particular gendered identities as both legitimate and preferred. The tenor and vigour of these renewed campaigns in popular culture reflect what media theorist Diane Negra calls "an anxious preoccupation with structural, national and gender stability" in a post-9/11 world (51). Although links can be traced to past patterns of gender segregation in children's print culture, in this paper we are particularly interested in tracing incongruities in contemporary texts for children.

In a review of Iggulden and Iggulden's *The Dangerous Book for Boys* and of Buchanan and Peskowitz's *The Daring Book for Girls*, Tristan Bridges and Michael Kimmel suggest that the former book responds to pervasive popular discourses about a perceived male vulnerability in light of girls' successes at school and higher test scores by shoring up a Boy Scout conservatism and sense of masculine entitlement. The latter book may also be seen as a response to quite a different set of popular discourses around concerns about girls. The sexualization of girl culture in the media—including a focus on appearance and the perpetuation of limited and stereotypical notions of femininity in toys, games, and storybooks—suggests that girls face a barrage of negative influences. For example, writing for the popular press as "women, moms and teachers," developmental psychologists Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown describe consumer girl power as an overwhelming media discourse from which parents must protect girls because it "only makes girls feel powerful when they are conforming to the cute, sweet, hot little shoppers [marketers] think girls should be" (3). In Australia, a similar call to parents as moral guardians of "tots, tweens and teens" in a media-saturated world is made by academic and "mother of two" Karen Brooks in *Consuming Innocence*, according to its back cover. Set in this context of rampant and unhealthy consumerism, the Daring books present a...



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