

Joan Sangster, *Girl Trouble: Female Delinquency in English Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002).

*Girl Trouble* is an important book. It is important for three reasons. First, *Girl Trouble* tackles a difficult topic: the ways in which girls and young women who are considered to misbehave have been treated. Second, *Girl Trouble* is methodologically exciting. Third and very important, *Girl Trouble* gives us confidence to do activist history. Joan Sangster convinces us good history can, and should, speak to the present day.

Misbehaviour verging on the illegal is captured in the concept of delinquency. The concept is, Sangster points out, both subjective and gendered. Delinquency has historically been defined not by some objective measure but by how the dominant society, at particular points in time, considers we should lead our lives so as to ensure that persons in charge retain their authority into the next generation. "Definitions of youth misbehaviour and the creation of a criminal category – the delinquent – were and are established within a web of power relations, reflecting the prevailing social definitions of what are perceived to be civilized, appropriate, moral standards of behaviour" (13). Childhood is the time period in the life course intended for acquiring expected roles and for, moreover, accepting them as the normal order of things. Those who diverge need to be reformed as soon as possible so they might be set on their appropriate paths toward adulthood.

Expected roles have been defined differently for men and women, boys and girls. Men were long assumed to be in charge, from the boardroom to the bedroom. Women were expected to await their orders whatever the venue. These gender assumptions have caused the concept of delinquency to differ between boys and girls. In general boys have been perceived to misbehave by virtue of not taking charge in appropriate ways, girls by overly doing so. Girls' expressions of independence have very often been sexualized. The female body, dressed or undressed, means 'trouble.' Overly independent girls are perceived as making themselves available, as 'promiscuous,' thereby preventing men in training from developing appropriate leadership in this as in other aspects of their lives.

*Girl Trouble* examines the years 1900-1960 in Ontario (although the title claims a larger geographical sweep). Sangster first explores the role played by women's voluntary associations, in particular the Toronto and Hamilton Big Sisters, in encouraging girls to behave according to their lights. She then turns to the experiences of girls coming up before the law and to the likely consequence of their doing so in the form of institutionalization.

A pithy chapter examines the ways in which Aboriginal girls became perceived as extreme cases of inappropriate behaviour. The book is particularly valuable for considering their circumstances within the larger context of all girls

as opposed to setting them apart as somehow unique from all others. "Native girls usually came into conflict with the law for much the same reasons as other girls did" (151). Aboriginal girls may have been repeatedly put at one end of a behavioural continuum, but it was, all the same, a continuum as opposed to a dichotomy. As Sangster explains in respect to the book as a whole, "protection was always differentially applied according to class, and it could become racialized paternalism directed at Native girls" (3).

*Girl Trouble* is interesting for its methodology as well as its content. Sangster's approach is meticulous, imaginative, and thought provoking. *Girl Trouble* provides an excellent example of careful yet innovative meaning making. The actual data Sangster uses is fairly prosaic, but by interspersing clear tables and figures and personal accounts she both holds her audience and underlines her points. In explaining the workings of the courts, for instance, usually not the most exciting of tasks, she interweaves individual experiences to make the law, quite literally, come alive in terms of its function and uses. The sections on girls' range of responses to their circumstances are particularly remarkable. Sangster aims throughout the book at what she terms "a delicate balance" between "regulation and resistance, structure and agency" (5). *Girl Trouble* demonstrates firmly and convincingly that history need not be dull.

*Girl Trouble* is also important for its activist approach. Sangster is concerned not just with making history come alive but with making it relevant to the present day. Particularly in her first and last chapters, she interweaves past assumptions and practices with those of today, emphasizing how we still create boundaries for our children to suit ourselves. She draws several times on newspaper accounts to demonstrate that notions from half a century and more ago have not disappeared from view. The downside is, of course, that in a few years, when the book will still be relevant for its historical analysis, sections referring explicitly to the year 2000 will also be in the past tense. This minor limitation does not prevent *Girl Trouble* from being an excellent model for all of us who are convinced that the stories of yesterday also belong to today and tomorrow.

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Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois described the "Priest or Medicineman" as the "healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, [and] the supernatural avenger of wrong."<sup>1</sup> Healing, comforting, and avenging are just a few of the roles that Sharla Fett, in *Working Cures*: