Afterword
Picturing Girlhood

Julia Round

As a girl, woman, daughter, mother, aunt and sister, I often think about these gendered roles and labels. I occupy them all at different times but have seldom felt like I fully understand how exactly they fit me, whether they suit me or how their priorities, expectations and restrictions should map onto the thinking "I". At the start of my academic career I think perhaps I viewed many of the theories and ideologies around gender and the female as abstract ideas: with little bearing on me as an individual, on my own life and tastes. But as my research has developed and cohered around certain areas, I've found myself repeatedly encountering and exploring ideologies of the female and feminine. For example, within Gothic studies, where they may appear as victim, as writer, or as Other; within comics studies, where they may be marginalised or fetishised; and within children's literature, where they are often lessons, or symbols, stereotypes and archetypes.

The Comics Picturing Girlhood event was a wonderful space to explore these ideas, bringing together international scholars with diverse backgrounds and experiences to reflect on the forms of girlhood they had encountered and the ways these have been depicted, received, categorised and responded to. As the articles in this collection have stressed, it is not only girlhood and its representations that are shaped by material, historical, intersectional and cultural expectations. Our engagement with these depictions and the ways we feel able to interact with them are also subject to these pressures. And our relationship to our own memories of girlhood (whether taken from personal experiences or our perceptions of another's) are also reshaped by these encounters: building a complex web of intertextual and multimodal associations and creating different understandings and interpretations of a concept that is already deeply variable and constantly shifting. Girlhood itself is an unstable category that changes and is interpreted differently across generations (Gibson 2008) but our engagement with it is just as fluid.

The conference call for papers suggested four main areas that researchers could address: genre and categorisation, representations of girlhood, emotional impact and response, and practice and interactivity. The first of these invited us to consider the historical and social contexts of popular stories and the categories of girlhood and its stories that have arisen. What genres have been felt acceptable, and what historical, social and economic preferences inform this? The papers published here certainly demonstrate the familiar patterns that stories of young girls might fall into, for example, as María Porras Sánchez explores in a discussion of refugee narratives. But Porras Sánchez also offers analytic suggestions for how reductive treatments can be avoided, and how characters can be given wider and more plural possibilities. The potential of girls' texts to reshape understandings is also apparent in Joan Ormrod's discussion of the British comic *Mirabelle*, which draws attention to the way that textual aesthetics can (literally) reshape expectations: giving characters agency that perhaps prefigures significant political movements. Comics are shown here to have unexpected potential, as their multimodal capabilities allow word and image to be disconnected, creating clashing discourses and speaking to multiple audiences simultaneously, as Aswathy Senan's discussion of the Malayalis strip *Bobanum Moliyum* also demonstrates. Other work presented at the event but not published here also speaks to these themes, such as Nicoletta Mandolini's exploration of the ways that Ana Caspão's *Fundo do nada* (2017) uses the concept of abjection to reframe the traditional coming-of-age narrative as a macabre experience, and Alison Halsall's analysis of the feminist recasting of the scouting story in *Lumberjanes* (2014–2020).

Just as important, perhaps, are the genres and categories that girls are excluded from, as Mel Gibson discusses in her chapter "It's *the* girl!", based on her keynote talk. Gibson uses her own memories of childhood embarrassment and feelings of exclusion from the comics genres that she loved to reflect on the ways these acts can shape professional behaviour and self-image. This adds a valuable temporal dimension to the discussion, demonstrating how adult readers are encouraged to leave behind particular texts and drawing attention to the ways girlhood is cast in these titles and framed in their paratexts: as a small space, full of embarrassing memories, to be remembered with humour and treated with self-deprecation. Gibson also extends this argument to the professional sphere, pointing towards similar feelings of doubt and inadequacy around certain research methodologies, such as auto-ethnography. I was struck by the significance of this point, which exposes a self-perpetuating hierarchy within research fields where certain methods are valued more highly than "messier" alternatives.

This leads me to the question of gatekeeping – who does this excluding, and why? Gibson's discussion links this power with seniority and patriarchy, but other papers within the conference spoke to different angles, such as Charlotte Johanne Fabricius's discussion of *The Unstoppable WASP*, which explored the comic's central figure of a white girl as gatekeeper of access and opportunity. We might also think about privileged rep-

resentations of girlhood as gatekeeping figures – which images are made most central and what qualities do they embody? This leads me to the second question of the conference call for papers, which asked researchers to consider what the representation and embodiment of girlhood looks like in comics, with a particular focus on how comics might make visible marginalised identity categories (both in diegetic characters and their real-life creators). These themes are sensitively and convincingly explored here in Marine Berthiot's analysis of Selina Tusitala Marsh's autobiographix *Mophead*, which centralises a Pasifika girl heroine and reclaims her from discourses that have discriminated, abused, othered, exoticised and eroticised this figure. Berthiot shows how many facets of the comics medium contribute to this and, vitally, how the comic assimilates Western formats into Indigenous narrative tropes – inverting this power imbalance. The question of who speaks (and therefore of who has control) is also explored by other work in this collection. Sébastien Conard's graphic essay considers the powerful voice within Charlotte Salomon's *Life? or Theatre?* and the multiplicity of female experience it conveys. JoAnn Purcell reflects on her own comics creation, and how this process allowed her to recognise "crip time" – enabling recognition of her daughter's agency and challenging normalised myths around notions such as progress, pace, trajectories and closure. Purcell's comics allow her to recognise crip time alongside her own experiences: making the contrast explicit and forcing her to reflect on her own responses to this.

Emotional impact and response was the third area suggested by the conference call for papers, asking delegates to consider emotionally loaded representations of girls such as the coquettish, nymphetic, cute or grotesque, and their impact on readers. The papers herein stress the importance of recognising the personal and using it as a strength. For example, Berthiot notes that autobiographix like *Mophead* can sidestep the notion of trauma as unrepresentable. Gibson and Purcell both emphasise the way that auto-ethnography can expose unexpected points of tension and contrast, and the importance of reflecting on the assumptions that underpin not just our research subject but also our methodology. The creative work published here also foregrounds the importance of recognising and enabling emotive expression. Glaude and Lesage both focus on popular series for children and their reception. Glaude studies the readership of the fifteen albums of the Franco-Belgian *Margot et Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces* (1990–2009). Lesage deals with *Corinne et Jeannot*, a comics series published in the French communist magazine *Pif* in the 1970s through looking at the way the series constructs gender roles and how the abundant readers' letters respond to those.

The final conference theme focused on practices and interactivity, asking how girls use their comics, and how they might be encouraged to act as more than just readers. Again, the graphic essays herein constitute a form of response to this question, as creative responses that use comics to express and sustain complexities. My own research into letters pages in the British girls' comic *Misty* has also found that readers often responded

creatively to the comic's stories: for example, by sending in creative work or making imaginative connections with their own lives (Round). Martha Newbigging's "Looking for Queerness" most clearly articulates the positive and affirming qualities of creative response: positioning drawing as a practice of reasserting that can counteract the type of mass forgetting or fake memories that Gibson's work points towards.

Taken together, these pieces offer a valuable insight into the potential of narratives of girlhood to disrupt assumptions and allow marginalised and under-recognised voices to reclaim control. The vast potential for political statement – even in the most unlikely of places (as Senan notes) – is recognised as part of this. My own keynote talk at the conference (not collected here, as it will form the basis of a chapter in the forthcoming *Edinburgh History of Children's Periodicals*) discussed the depiction of supernatural possession in British girls' horror comics as an act with unexpected and political connotations. Far from being a straightforward enactment of passive obedience, possessed girls in these comics often retain their agency, as their possession enables them to negotiate historical trauma. Activity and passivity become blurred concepts here.

Similarly, I find myself reflecting on the tension between movement and stasis that emerges from many of these discussions. Girlhood is often described as a transient or liminal state (Armitt; Georgieva), and many of these papers observe that girls are "transient beings" (Porras Sánchez). But alongside this is a stasis and stagnancy that underpins representation and ideology. For example, Senan points out that the *Bobanum Moliyum* characters are stuck aged eleven, De Dobbeleer indicates that the children in the Flemish *familiestrip Jommeke* will forever remain ten and Porras Sánchez cites Bauman in discussing the "frozen transience" of refugees, as "an ongoing, lasting state of temporariness" (46). Rather than debating which is most true, perhaps (as with many other aspects of girlhood) we are better acknowledging the contradiction and characterising girlhood as "a perpetually transitory state of time" (Lemaster n.p.). Maybe what is important is not the progression of its rites of passage, initiations and conventions, but the ebb and flow of power that underpins these. Who speaks, who has agency, who reflects and responds – and what cultural assumptions and emotions shape these processes? The voices here demonstrate the potential impact of these questions, as the analyses offered go far beyond the pre-established character types and processes mentioned in the introduction. They demonstrate new possibilities for the depiction and reception of plurivocal, dissimilar girls and will undoubtedly provide a vital grounding for future research in this field.

Bibliography

Armitt, Lucie. "The Gothic Girl Child". *Women and the Gothic*, edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik. Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 60–73.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Polity, 2013.

Georgieva, Margarita. *The Gothic Child*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Gibson, Mel. "Nobody, Somebody, Everybody: Ballet, Girlhood, Class, Femininity and Comics in 1950s Britain". *Girlhood Studies*, vol. 2, 2008, pp. 108–128.

Lemaster, Tracy Wendt. "Girlhood and the Feminist Imaginary in Twentieth-Century Transatlantic Women's Literature". Unpublished PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012. https://depot.library.wisc.edu/repository/fedora/1711. dl:WPTWJ5ZTKMDCL8G/datastreams/REF/content. Accessed 28 July 2021.

Round, Julia. *Gothic for Girls:* Misty *and British Comics.* University Press Mississippi, 2019.