This Element looks at the publishing history of the genre, girls’ literature, in the United States spanning 1850–1940. The genre is set in context, beginning with an examination of the early American women’s literature that preceded girls’ literature. Then the Element explores several subgenres of girls’ literature, the family story, orphan story, school story, as well as African American girls’ literature. Underpinning each of these stories is the *bildungsroman*, which overwhelmingly ends with girls “growing down” to marry and raise children, following the ideals outlined in the cult of domesticity.
THE RISE OF AMERICAN GIRLS’ LITERATURE

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The Rise of American Girls’ Literature

Elements in Publishing and Book Culture

DOI: 10.1017/9781108942546
First published online: May 2021

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This Element also has a video abstract: www.cambridge.org/reese

Keywords: bildungsroman, domestic realism, women’s literature, nineteenth century, twentieth century

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ISBNs: 9781108931540 (PB), 9781108942546 (OC)
ISSNs: 2514-8524 (online), 2514-8516 (print)
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1 The Rise of Girls’ Literature

Girls’ books have a rich publishing tradition in the United States. Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, there is a wide selection of literature about and for girls: from books that are part of the broader American canon, such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*,¹ to the often censored *Forever* (1975) by Judy Blume.² How is a mass-market series, for instance, *Sweet Valley High*,³ similar to the award-winning (although racially problematic) *Little House* books?⁴ What does the religious *Elsie Dinsmore* series⁵ have in common with Jean Webster’s college heroine in *Daddy Long Legs*?⁶ With such a vast genre, defining it and understanding its parameters offers a way to not only understand the publishing history of books for girls, but also to interrogate the ideology surrounding girls’ literature today. One might say that the future of publishing girls’ books lies in the past.

This Element traces the origins of American girls’ literature and outlines four major “subgenres” for girls’ fiction, which emerged in the mid nineteenth century. While girls’ literature, especially so-called “classic” girls’ novels, are the center of a few studies, never have girls’ texts been examined as an overarching genre in connection with American women’s literature. Instead, this important part of children’s publishing history has been neglected in favor of examining American children’s books as a whole⁷ or as part of smaller subgenres, including North American orphan girls’ novels,⁸ or “classic” Anglo-American girls’ books,⁹ without defining the genre parameters. One

of the foundational works on broader American publishing history, John Tebbel’s *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, gets numerous facts wrong about girls’ texts, for example, accrediting *Little Women*’s illustrations to Louisa Alcott, instead of to her sister, May, and conflating its publication date with the text’s sequel in 1869.\(^\text{10}\)

Girls’ literature is vaster than the “classic” novels that frequently are included in literary history, books such as Susan Coolidge’s *What Katy Did* (1872)\(^\text{11}\) and Eleanor Porter’s *Pollyanna* (1913).\(^\text{12}\) Lesser-known texts influenced their contemporary market and paved the way for this major branch of children’s publishing. Although few may now read Annie Fellows Johnston’s *Little Colonel* series (1895–1912)\(^\text{13}\) or Lela Horn Richards’ *Caroline* series (1921–1923),\(^\text{14}\) these texts used to be in conversation with the so-called classics. Together, they form a better understanding of what girls’ literature has been and what it is today. Although only a handful of female authors remain in the public consciousness, in actuality, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a “rise of women to prominence as authors, mostly fiction, a trend which was only beginning.”\(^\text{15}\) Before 1800, only four women had published works in the United States; by 1872, “nearly three-fourths of the novels written that year in America came from their pens.”\(^\text{16}\) Many of their works were written for children, and, of these, many were specifically about and for girls.

Most of these books were authored by white women. As Lynn S. Cockett and Janet R. Kleinberg note, emerging American children’s literature in the nineteenth century was “not truly democratic in its


\(^{11}\) S. Coolidge, *What Katy Did* (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1872).


\(^{14}\) L. H. Richards, *Caroline* series (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1921–23).


\(^{16}\) Ibid.
This tendency persists in children’s book publishing, with a recent study showing that Black authors wrote 5.26 percent of children’s books published in the United States in 2019; for comparison, only 21.05 percent total were written by authors of color. Frequently, critics, by omission or indeed direct design, publish histories that only consider books about white children. However, the white, middle-class girls’ story is not a complete picture of the publishing market at this time, neither is it an accurate picture of America. While the number of books is not as plentiful, the publishing history of African American girls’ literature gives a better picture of American girls’ literature. In an effort to broaden our understanding of girls’ novels, this Element seeks to include these books. I must note the problematic use of African American girls’ literature as a label, as it further affirms the standardized “girls’ literature” as necessarily white while “Othering” the non-white protagonist and/or reader. I do not claim to know the answer to this troubling division, but my hope is that by including the ways in which African American girls’ literature fits into the broader genre we might continue to include more voices in our understanding of girls’ literature and its publication history.

As the nineteenth century progressed, book publishing became more prominent in the United States, due in part to the rise of the middle class and its purchasing power. Around this time, childhood became a delimited and celebrated period. As a result of these two intersecting events, books of pleasure, not just of instruction, practically burst onto the market, and, among them, fiction specifically for girls emerged. These books are often part of a series. Although some early American girls’ literature, such as The

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Wide, Wide World (1850), are standalone texts, the majority of the books that follow, including Elsie Dinsmore (1867) and Little Women (1868), are the first in a series. Turning a successful book into a series – whether comprised of twenty-eight books, like Elsie, or four books, like Little Women – clearly appeals to publishers. Readers already know the characters and are more likely to continue to buy books in an established series, minimizing both production risks and cost. Advertisements in magazines including The Youth’s Companion and The Bookman focus on the appeal of “established juveniles” for the “many little girls who have already made friends with” the series’ heroine.20 These advertisements promote the newest book alongside its predecessors, potentially drawing the attention of new and established readers of the series, making it known those books that readers might have “missed.” This publishing trend of relying on readers’ invested interest in series fiction continues today, with mass market paperback series, such as Sweet Valley High.

Gendered book marketing is found in early twentieth-century periodical advertisements. In the nineteenth century, advertisements for children’s books were often classified under the broader category of “juvenile literature.” In a 1909 notice of recently published girls’ books, the difference between boys’ and girls’ books is outlined. The notice acknowledges the quality of girls’ literature, while simultaneously observing the superiority of the content of boys’ books, namely, “a series of adventures which tend to keep up the interest.”21 The notice then outlines almost verbatim the girls’ subgenres explored in this Element: “a story of school or home life or of the girl’s effort to make her way in the world in the face of adverse circumstance.”22 (I would argue that the expression “adverse circumstances” describes the orphan girl’s story.) Although perhaps reductive, the 1909 notice observes that fictional heroes have adventures, while heroines are limited by their setting. A girls’ escapade at home is inevitably tamer than a boys’ escapade at sea. Marketing books based on gender remains popular to this day.

Using the Library of Congress’s catalog, the copyright book depository in the United States, we can start to trace the publishing history of girls’ literature. A search of “juvenile fiction” in the Library of Congress’s catalog results in well-over 10,000 titles published between 1850 and 1940, the years examined in this Element. Observing select years can provide a better idea of the publication of both girls’ and children’s literature and the relationship between the two. To conduct this search, I looked for books that are classified as PZ7, the Library of Congress’s classification for juvenile fiction, that are in English, are identified as a book, and were published in the specified timeframe. Although I narrowed the search to books published in the United States, the corpus was not limited to American books, as American publishers distributed works by non-American authors. This search provided the number of general children’s literature shown in Figure 1. To identify girls’ literature was a little more haphazard, as not all the books are digitized or even summarized online, thus, I was reliant on the metadata to determine whether the title might be girls’ literature. If the title referenced a girl and was by a female author, unless I knew otherwise, I included it in my count of girls’ literature. This methodology seeks to “understanding trends with time.” The data gathered is not foolproof, as “even published government figures are not necessarily clear or reliable.” Still, the graph in Figure 1 gives a sense of publishing history of both children’s and girls’ literature in the United States.

As noted in this chart, the number of children’s books published in the United States steadily increased throughout the period this Element examines. Publication of girls’ literature does not increase at the same rate, but remains fairly consistent: in 1870, it comprises 27.8 percent of the children’s books; in

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23 The Library of Congress became the centralized copyright depository for the United States in 1870. Previously, copyright texts were held by clerks of court.

24 For example, I excluded the Aunt Jane’s Nieces series, as Edith Van Dyne is a pseudonym of L. Frank Baum.


26 Ibid., p. 38.
1890, it is 22.4 percent; in 1910, it is the highest percentage at 28.3 percent; and, in 1930, which also includes the greatest number and variety of children’s books, it falls to 18.5 percent. As these numbers indicate, girls’ literature is a prominent part of children’s literature. To neglect this genre would be to skew our scholarly understanding of juvenile American literature.

1.1 Defining American Girls’ Literature

Girls’ literature can be defined as a book written about a girl, for a girl reader, with the targeted audience identified in its name, similar to children’s or young adult literature. Of course, implied readership is not always translated into actual readers: boys and girls, adults and children alike read these books. For the purpose of this Element, the authors are women, mirroring other girls’ literature studies. However, in identifying


28 Cf. *ibid.*