From American Girls into American Women

A Discussion of American Girl Doll Nostalgia

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Keywords: childhood; dolls; gender; identity; nostalgia

Abstract

The American Girl brand of historical dolls and books celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2011. The girls who first played with American Girl dolls in the 1980s and 1990s are now grown women; their nostalgia for the brand is passionate and complicated, and reminiscences from nineteen such women are the focus of this study. Their nostalgic responses are thoughtful and reflective, at turns unabashedly admiring and astutely critical. The women fondly recall American Girl whilst simultaneously criticizing the company for its consumerism and its representations of American history and American girlhood. Their memories show how nostalgia can be ambivalent and contradictory, and how adults can use childhood nostalgia to reinforce and construct identity narratives.
After building American Girl Place in Chicago and putting on an American Girl musical there, Rowland said that “my original business plan had been executed, and I was tired. One homeless woman, who initially embraced the doll, changed her mind when she found out that American Doll wasn’t donating any of the proceeds from its sales to homeless charities. (The company later said it had given $500,000 since 2006 to HomeAid, a company that tries to find the homeless housing.)