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Under Pressure?

Neglecting Health, Relationships, & Well-being in the pursuit of “Perfection”

ALL PHOTOS BY LAUREN GREENFIELD. COURTESY

STORY BY JOAN JACOB BRUMBERG

LAYOUT BY BRITTANY CROCKETT





Amelia, 15, at weight-loss camp, Catskills, New York
(above)

Jennifer, 18, at an eating disorder clinic, Coconut
Creek, Florida. (left)



Danielle, 13, gets measured as Michelle, 13, waits for the final weigh-in on the last day of the weight-loss camp, Catskills, New York

American girlhood ain't what it used to be. Maybe there are pockets of girls out there who still revel in the "Little House on the Prairie" books or dress up their dolls or run lemonade stands. But they aren't catching the eyes of sociologists, who seem to agree that girls today are growing up in a hyper-sexualized peer pressure-cooker — and they don't show up in "Girl Culture," a new book from photographer Lauren Greenfield (Chronicle Books; \$40.00)

Even the youngest girls in Greenfield's gritty, gorgeous portraits are far too busy dressing up like Barbie dolls to play with them. A gentle warning: this is not a book for parents desperate to maintain their naivete about what's happening in their daughters' lives: these accounts show you more than you've ever imagined about the sexual and social habits of girls. No matter how well you think you understand what goes on in adolescent life, it can be shocking to read first-hand accounts of the jealousy, pettiness, meanness and general anxiety that characterize female adolescence.

Girl culture is the key to understanding what it means to be a young woman today or in the past. In every historical epoch, girls have formed a unique set of activities and concerns generated by their developmental needs as well as the adult society in which they live. What girls do, how they think, what they write, whisper, and dream, all reveal a great deal about them and about us. Lauren Greenfield's photographic vision of contemporary girl culture is both a revealing documentary record and a disquieting personal commentary, infused with a distinctly sympathetic but biting point of view.

A century ago, the culture of girls was still rooted in family, school, and community. When they were not in school or helping Mother, middle-class American girls were reading, writing, and drawing, as well as playing with their dolls. Many young girls knew how to sew, knit, crochet, and embroider, generating homemade crafts to decorate their rooms or give to friends as they sipped hot chocolate and read aloud to one another.

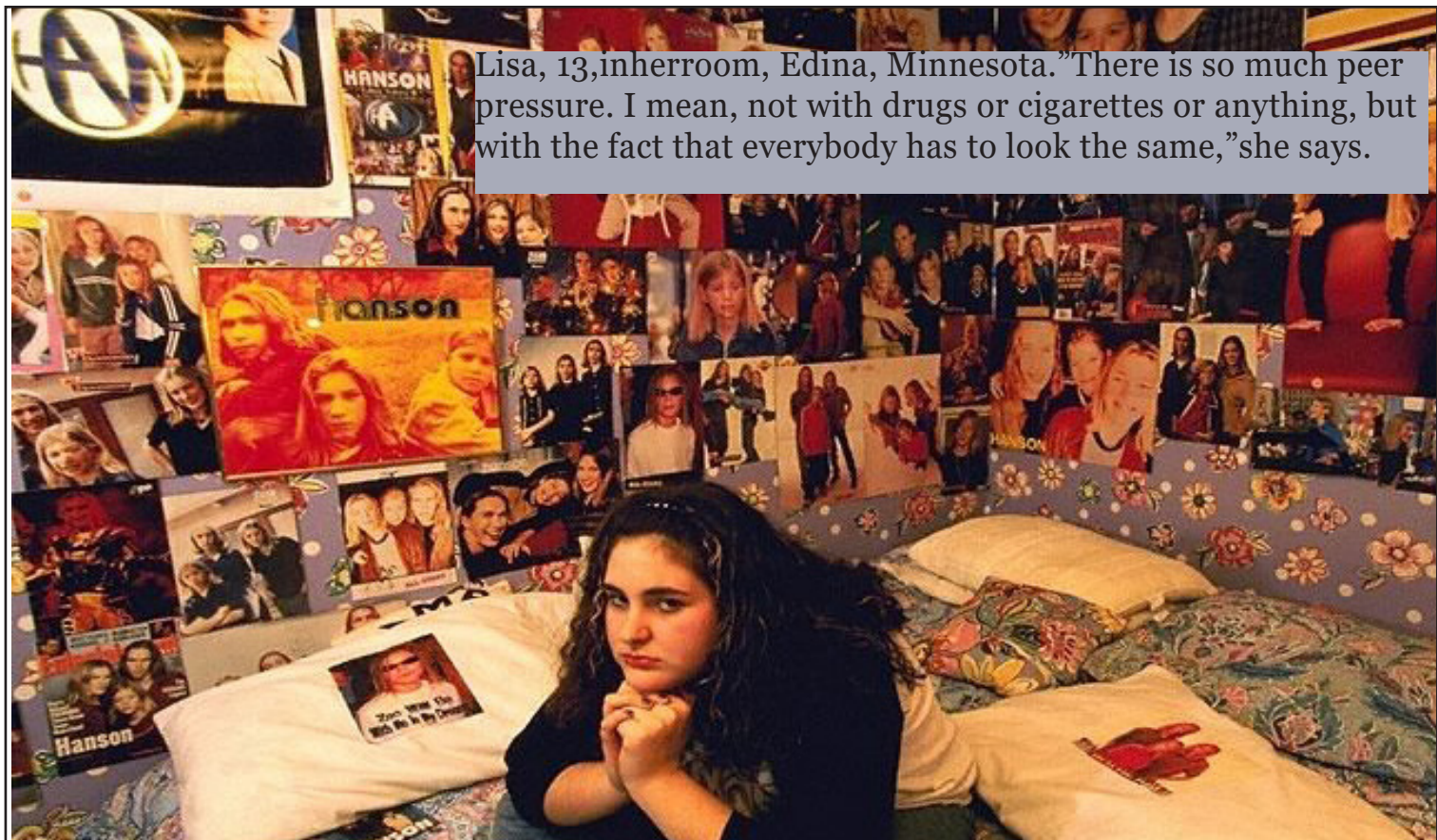
In a girl culture dominated by concerns about the body rather than mind or spirit, familiar rites of passage—such as Bat Mitzvah, quinceañera, graduation, and prom—are also transformed into shallow commercial events dominated by visions of Hollywood and celebrity magazines. These rituals are deeply important to girls, yet they no longer carry a great deal of emotional weight. Instead, they involve frenetic forays into the marketplace, worries about what to wear, and a preoccupation with the pictures that will document the event.

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A hundred years later, the lives of girls have changed enormously, along with our perception of them. Girl culture today is driven largely by commercial forces outside the family and local community. Peers seem to supplant parents as a source of authority; anxiety has replaced innocence. Despite the important and satisfying gains women have made in achieving greater access to education, power, and all forms of self-expression, including sexual, we have a sense of disquiet about what has happened to our girls.

In the 1990s, a warning about girls was sounded by some best-selling books such as *Meeting at the Crossroads* by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan and *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher. These powerful discussions alerted the nation to the psychological difficulties of growing up female in a society that silences and stifles girls even in social and educational settings thought to be enlightened.

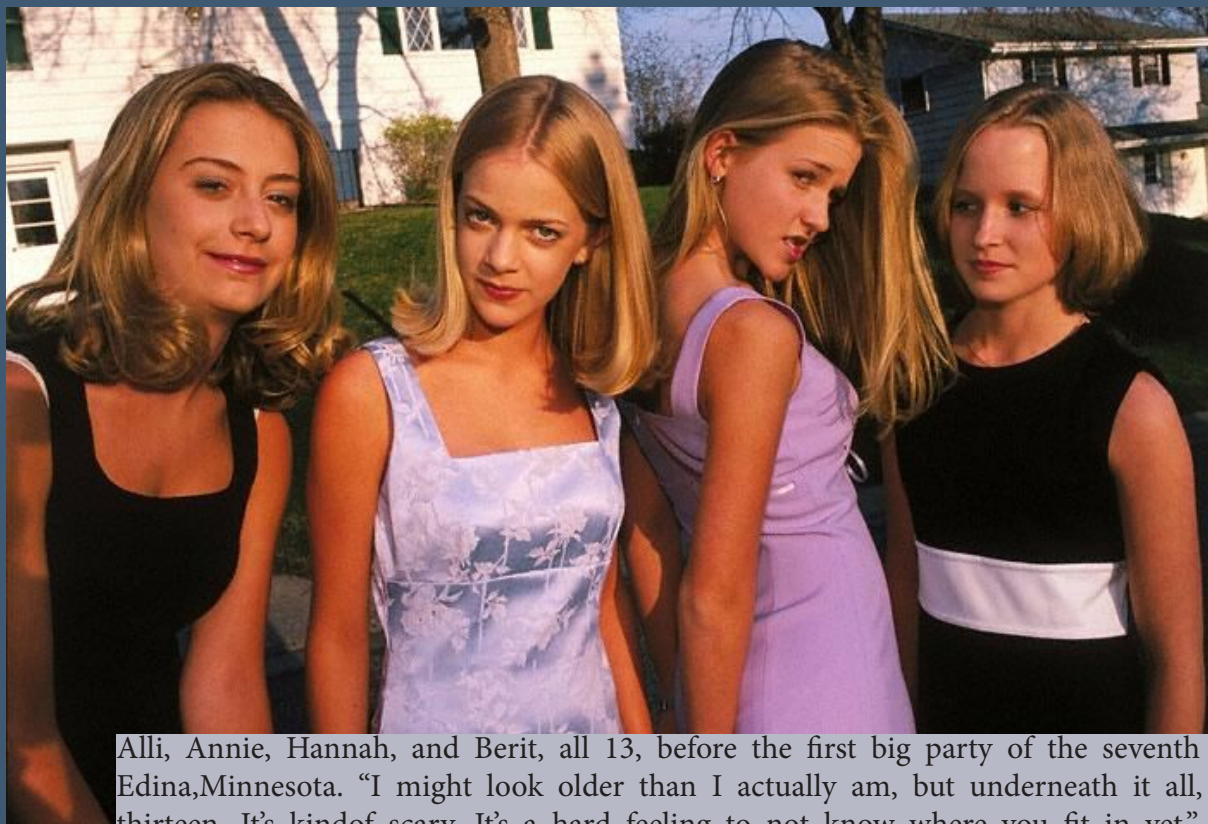
Other studies confirmed that women really are the *Dzstronger sexdz*—that is, until puberty, when their vulnerability to physical and mental health problems increases. In *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, I argued that our current cultural environment is especially *Dztoxicdz* for adolescent girls because of the anxieties it generates about the developing female body and sexuality.

On the basis of my reading over one hundred personal diaries written by adolescent girls between 1830 and 1980, I concluded that as the twentieth century progressed, more and more young women grew up believing that *Dzgood looksdz*—rather than *Dzgood worksdz*—were the highest form of female perfection.

The body projects that currently absorb the attention of girls not only constitute a *Dzbrain drain,dz* but can also threaten mental and physical health. As the influence of Eastern religions and philosophy increase in mainstream American culture, we are recovering the classical ethos that the mind and body are one. The clear interdependence of the mental and physical means that their conditions are linked: when one is in crisis, under attack, or otherwise compromised, the other responds.

While they are taught about the importance of individualism, the value of self, the potential of each person to make unique contributions to the world, girls of all ages are at the same time required to conform to the preeminently important yet narrow ideals of outward beauty and sexual desirability. This situation may sound like tired rhetoric, but the photographs and interviews presented here vividly represent the actual, inarguably familiar, and widely pervasive experi-

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Alli, Annie, Hannah, and Berit, all 13, before the first big party of the seventh grade, Edina, Minnesota. "I might look older than I actually am, but underneath it all, I'm only thirteen. It's kind of scary. It's a hard feeling to not know where you fit in yet," Hannah says.

Girl Culture asks the question, how different are the worlds of the girlish [characteristic or befitting a girl or girlhood] and the girlie [featuring scantily clothed women] in today's popular culture? And if that divide is narrowing, how do real girls sort out this dichotomy as they gauge their behavior by prevailing standards, girls who are often too young to fully understand the implications and motivations of what they are shaped by? How does a contemporary female rectify her inner emotional life, her physiological instincts, and her intellectual grasp of herself in society—evolved from earliest childhood—with the powerful tides of today's commodified womanhood and its host of fantasies and mixed messages? Although there are many young women in the United States whose lives have not developed this harsh edge, the hyperbole in Girl Culture still rings true, suggesting the face of what's likely to come in the decades ahead. These haunting images should leave us feeling, but also pondering, the problems and concerns that are transforming girlhood and diluting



Fina, 13, tanning, Edina, Minnesota



Softball players show off their painted nails in Naples, Florida

THE PHOTOGRAPHY CHANNEL
PRESENTS

GIRL CULTURE

PHOTOGRAPHS AND NARRATION
BY LAUREN GREENFIELD