

Public Abstract

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In this project, I analyze 289 essays submitted to the Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City (TMM) as part of their 2007 "What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?" exhibit. Inspired by-- and anchored with-- the fictional protagonists of the wildly popular American Girls Collection, the exhibit "celebrate[d] the spirit of girlhood in America" through its displays, living history events, and of primary significance for this dissertation, an essay contest seeking answers to the titular question from modern-day girls and women.

Although girls, especially those between the ages of 7 and 12 years of age, are the target audience for American Girl dolls and stories, their perspectives about the meaning and influence American Girl has in and on their daily lives are largely absent from existing scholarly research. With some notable exceptions, the vast majority of research on American Girl relies on and theorizes from analyses of texts that American Girl itself produces.

By integrating and privileging the voices of American Girl's target audience, my analysis seeks to determine if, and to what extent, girls' readings and interpretations of American Girl's stories converge with or diverge from the conclusions drawn by scholars about American Girl in prior research. I examine girls' responses to the question posed in the essay contest's title, as well as essay prompts seeking girls' stories about the lessons they have learned from American Girl and how they have applied those lessons in life. Additionally, I discuss essayists' reflections on contemporary girlhood and how American Girl is implicated (or not) in shaping those perceptions.

This project demonstrates that American Girl stories and meanings function as one set of tools in a cultural tool kit that girls draw from and use in creative, flexible ways and across a variety of situations.