

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

Girl Land



by

Caitlin Flanagan

A conversation with Caitlin Flanagan

Former high school teacher turned *Atlantic* contributing editor Caitlin Flanagan dissects the harrowing world of female adolescence in her second book, *Girl Land*.

Weaving her own recollections of adolescence with on-the-ground research and history, Flanagan's portrait of this transitional period in a girl's life is a fascinating study of how society itself has changed—and not always for the better.

Flanagan spoke with us about the pitfalls of modern feminism, what's bad about the Internet, and why your teenage daughter might be off sulking in her bedroom.

You're looking at milestones of female adolescence here. Were there any aspects of this period that have changed so drastically it surprised you?

Almost everything! Look at menstruation. I'm fifty, and it was maybe a few years before I was born that it was still considered dangerous. It's a bittersweet feeling, the closer you are to giving life, the closer you are to potentially leaving your own.

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There's still a sense that it's a time of profound reckoning in the life of the girl. With boys, [puberty] comes with pleasure and sexuality. With girls, it's blood.

We try to rush girls through things, and I feel sad and conflicted about that. The only positive is that girls' reproductive health is not nearly as dangerous as it once was. But we've failed to give girls the quiet and space to figure out what that all means to them, like we once did.

Are there other things that haven't much changed at all?

What hasn't changed is the enduring desire of a girl to withdraw during this time, to withdraw into herself, into her room. Parents might be used to having a daughter who was such a chatterbox, their constant companion. It's during this period that she retreats, goes into her bedroom, and closes the door. That's very constant. There's an understanding that this is a profound and scary change for her in a way that it's not for a boy. For girls, this period really affects the way they live, ends part of their lives. It's really different for boys.

Do you think that things have changed for boys in a similar manner? That their rites of passage have transformed in such a striking way?

Life's gotten a lot easier for boys. Ironically, what's made it a lot easier for them was done in the name of misguided feminism.

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You're a vehement critic of modern feminism. You've said that "it's shortchanged a generation of women." How so?

I didn't say that feminism shortchanged a generation! It's been one of the most revolutionary and liberating forces in all of modern life. But I do think that some of the attitudes regarding sexuality that are usually identified as "feminist" have been at best misguided. The big thing I see on college campuses is that a lot of girls—the brightest and most capable who fought for admission to top schools, earned it on their own merits, and have huge altruistic goals—are uncomfortable with a normal part of their lives. They're drinking to black out with the intention of hooking up, going out, and having extremely sexual encounters with boys they don't know, or hardly know, that they barely remember the next day.

When I've talked to young women about their experiences, they often say, "It's empowering, it's our right, we can be as free as the guys get to be." If having this kind of semi-anonymous sex is part of the freedom that these girls earned from previous generations, there's something wrong with that.

Pornography, for example. Women watch it too. But the images you see on the screen don't have anything remotely to do with the sexual response of women. Body parts are slammed together; the prerogative of the sexual desire is built around the male desire. How can that be anything that's part of feminism?

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So how do parents address the challenges their daughters face?

I've suggested that there should be no Internet in the girl's bedroom. And somehow it's become the most controversial thing I've said! Whether it's a smartphone or a laptop, Internet in the girl's bedroom is a bad idea—although it's so ubiquitous that getting it out of there is a tall order.

It's not just the extreme images. A girl needs a break, to come home at the end of the school day and just tune out. School is a lot more complicated and dramatic for girls than it is for boys. Their social lives are much more complex. They need a break after that, to be accepted on their own terms. They need space where they don't have to be pretty, don't have to have the guy or sit at the right lunch table, where they can put on their stupid old sweatpants and their retainer.

That smartphone, that Facebook, that Twitter, doesn't allow that—it's coming in all the time, and it's extremely anxiety provoking. It's hard enough for adults to tune out, but terrible for adolescent girls. Parents give them these things, they have the right to say when and where and how they're going to be used. They'll have to deal with the fight that comes along with that. But it's in their daughter's best interest to draw boundaries, to have a least one space outside of that.

A version of this interview by Karen Calabria originally ran on the *Kirkus Reviews* website on January 12, 2012.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. What were the big milestones of your own Girl Land? Which ones were most significant? Which ones caused you the most excitement or the most anxiety?
2. How do you think these milestones have changed over time?
3. What does the word *prom* mean to you? If you went to your prom, how do you remember it? What was its meaning in your life at the time? Did it feel important, significant, or like just another event? If you haven't yet gone to a prom, what are your thoughts about it? Do you think you will go? What do your friends think and feel about prom?
4. How do you think menstruation has changed in the lives of girls over the past fifty years? What does the event mean to girls today? What did it mean to the girls of your mother's generation? Do you think that any girls still fear getting their period? Did you fear it at all?

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5. Did you ever keep a diary? Do you keep one now? Do you keep a kind of online journal, via Facebook or another social-networking site? What's the emotional difference between a secret diary and an online diary? And if you have kept a secret diary, what kind of topics do you reserve for it? What do you think is behind the impulse to keep a journal?
6. Do you think high school-aged boys are more or less respectful of girls when it comes to the subject of sexuality? Have the positive changes in girls' lives extended to the way boys treat them in romantic or sexual relationships?
7. Do you think girls need special protection from the common culture of today—the hard-core material available online, for example, and the way it is changing how people look at young girls? What kind of protection would be in girls' best interest? And if we protect girls in a way that we don't also protect boys, are we therefore limiting their quality and empowerment?

Suggestions for further reading

***Mrs. Mike*, by Benedict and Nancy Freedman, 1947**

Continuously in print since its publication, *Mrs. Mike*—set in the wild and dangerous territory around Alberta, Canada, at the turn of the last century—combines adventure and romance, and it has delighted generations of girl readers.

***The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath, 1963**

Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel about high intelligence, female ambition, and crippling depression.

***Go Ask Alice*, by Anonymous, 1971**

Hailed by the *New York Times* at its publication as “a document of horrifying reality,” *Go Ask Alice* reflects in equal parts the truth and the hysteria surrounding drug use by adolescent girls in the years immediately following the 1960s.

***Stop That Girl*, by Elizabeth McKenzie, 2005**

Stop That Girl is a hilarious coming-of-age novel, told in a

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series of short stories about a peerless heroine named Ann Ransom. Readers of all ages will love it.

The Modern Period: Menstruation in Twentieth-Century America,
by Lara Freidenfelds, 2009

An excellent social history of American attitudes toward menstruation and of the feminine hygiene industry that served to both capitalize on and shape those attitudes.

My Little Red Book, by Rachel Kauder Nalebuff, 2009

An anthology of stories about first periods, *My Little Red Book* has become a classic among young girls awaiting the start of menstruation.

The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls, by Joan Jacobs Brumberg, 1998

A definitive and very readable book on girls' history by a renowned scholar in the field.

Some Wore Bobby Socks: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920–1945, by Kelly Schrum, 2004

Schrum describes the development of a separate material and popular culture devoted specifically to teenage girls, with chapters on fashion, beauty, music, and the movies.

From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America, by Beth L. Bailey, 1988

An excellent, concise history of dating, from chaperoned

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visits in the family parlor to the emergence of car culture.

The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades before Roe v.

Wade, by Ann Fessler, 2006

A heartbreaking collection of interviews with women who were forced to surrender their babies as pregnant teenagers in the decades before legalized abortion in this country,

Also by Caitlin Flanagan

***To Hell with All That: Loving and
Loathing Our Inner Housewife***

“Flanagan writes with intelligence, wit and brio. She’s likable....What makes Flanagan’s book original and vital is that she is a realist, willing to acknowledge the essential gray areas in too often polarized positions.”
—*New York Times Book Review*

“One of the liveliest and most controversial essayists on the scene.”
—*Dallas Morning News*

“Flanagan is an immensely appealing writer and social observer.”
—*Wall Street Journal*

“A sparkling writer with an incisive wit....Flanagan’s a contrarian and frequently brave.”
—*Philadelphia Inquirer*



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