

Girl Power Besting the Net

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Susan Hopkins

Girl Heroes:

The New Force in Popular Culture

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WHEN YOUNG GIRLS are mentioned in the same breath as the Internet, talk is bound to turn to the necessity of protecting them from the myriad adult sexual predators lurking in the shadows of chat rooms. The idea that children, and in particular young girls, are innocents who need protection from the adult world is one of our most deeply rooted cultural beliefs. The borderless character of the Net — the fact that it allows adults and children to exchange images and information — is seen as something that jeopardises this innocence.

Yet, if you go to the Net and look at what young girls actually post there and at the sites they like to visit or the ones they design, a different picture emerges. Young girls, it soon becomes clear, are well aware of what's at stake in the new image economy of the Internet. They know that people like to watch them: some as young as eight or nine are even charging for photos of themselves in their swimsuits and night attire. They understand the gaze: overtly sexual or not. Images are what drive our media culture. The Internet is a vast space where young girls can practise turning themselves into images, thus acquiring the skills to produce themselves as media identities, skills that define postmodern capitalism.

From a traditional feminist perspective, this phenomenon represents the triumph of all the worst aspects of patriarchal capitalism; the triumph of appearances over substance, commerce over community, objectification over personhood — the triumph of image over politics. And yet, as Susan Hopkins argues in her book *Girl Heroes: The New Force in Popular Culture*, images are where much political power now resides.

A reassuring word at this point before I continue: if you are one of those feminists who subscribes to the oppositions I have sketched above, don't throw this review aside in disgust just yet. Hopkins wants to question their usefulness, but she doesn't want to abandon the ethical framework in which they're rooted.

Girl Heroes, in short, is a book that will appeal across the feminist generations, as well as to a wider non-fiction and



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scholarly audience interested in the girl-power phenomenon. Putting this phenomenon into perspective for a broader audience is certainly one of the most important tasks this book accomplishes. Hopkins plants her flag squarely in the centre of popular debates on page three when she rejects the (frequently repeated) notion that girl power is nothing more than a new way to spell exploitation. 'Girl Power,' she writes, 'is an audience, a market and a set of public/private (post) feminist strategies. Our culture has embraced virtually superheroic ideals of young femininity.'

Hopkins is certain that girl power signals a genuine watershed, in both gendered and cultural terms. From 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' to Kate Moss the supermodel, female celebrities provide a reference point for young women throughout the Western world. 'Their story,' Hopkins writes, 'is the dominant story of contemporary girl culture — the pursuit not of romantic love but of personal destiny.' Respect Yourself, as Madonna put it with characteristic pop-cultural prescience.

Much famed for her kickboxing and sword-wielding skills, à la Buffy and Xena, the real power of the girl hero lies, according to Hopkins, in her mastery of the traditionally feminine skills of image management and artful self-creation. These skills, as Hopkins argues carefully and cogently, may have once consigned women to the status of mere object — of something left to shine on a shelf while men participate in the real world. But today those skills are ones that signal cultural authority and influence. Just ask the students competing to get into Media Studies courses.

Girl Heroes is a book that meditates deeply on this question of the image and on what's at stake in the Nietzschean ideal of aesthetic subjectivity, a realm in which the divisions between illusion and reality, art and life, dissolve. Indeed, one of the things that makes this book so pleasurable to read is that the author has such a confident grasp of the ethical and broader philosophical terrain in which she's working that she's able to make it sound simple. Philosophy with a wooden stake rather than a hammer, perhaps.

You don't have to like the conclusions that Hopkins arrives at — they certainly run against the grain of the popular middlebrow discourse that paints young girls as victims of the media — to enjoy this book. *Girl Heroes* is written with such insight, knowledge, confidence and ease that you can't help warming to the authorial voice, suggesting that Hopkins herself may soon be joining some of her subjects on the other side of the screen — coming to a chat show or magazine near you.