That’s What Little Girls are Made of: Paradoxical Productions of Identity in The Baby-Sitters Club

by

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A Note on Style

Throughout this thesis, I refer to books in Ann M. Martin’s series The Baby-Sitters Club. When referring to the series title, I capitalize “The” when it is included as part of the series title (The Baby-Sitters Club) and do not capitalize it when it refers to “the books” as a whole (the Baby-Sitters Club books).

In the books, Martin uses the increasingly less common hyphenated “baby-sitter” and “baby-sitting.” Though both terms are correct, I have chosen to use the unhyphenated versions here (“babysitter” and “babysitting”), except when I am quoting from the texts themselves or referring to the series title.

Throughout this thesis, I refer extensively to girls, and to the category of girls’ series literature. One major factor in my use of the term “girl” is that the books I discuss do not construct an identity of childhood but an identity of girlhood. All the main characters in the series, from whom my analysis is derived, are cisgender girls. The texts’ cisnormativity (and cisnormativity in children’s media in general) deserves extensive scholarly focus, but is not the main focus of this project.

I am aware that not every girl reads girls’ literature and that not everyone who reads girls’ literature is a girl. Readers might also include transgender, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary children, all of whose concepts of girlhood would surely be shaped and affected by the textual representations in this literature. However, the texts I discuss situate themselves in a strict gender binary. They both reflect and deliver messages that are meant specifically for cisgender girls because they lack a discourse for alternative avenues of girlhood. As such, in this project I use the terms “girls” and “girlhood” with the understanding that they are not perfectly reflective or representative of the books’ entire readership.
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This thesis is dedicated to Kristina and Suzanna, my (real) favorite sitters.
What are little girls made of?

Sugar and spice and everything nice,

That's what little girls are made of.

(Nursery rhyme, author unknown)
Introduction: “Kristy’s Great Idea”

If you ask many women who grew up in the United States between 1986 and 2006 about The Baby-Sitters Club books, their eyes will instantly light up. Most can also tell you which main character they most identify with, even today. “I always wanted to be a Kristy, but at heart I’m a Mary Anne,” one might sigh. Or, “I always knew I was a Claudia,” or, “I’m most like Dawn because I’m a health nut and Mallory because I like to write.” They can probably vividly recall getting lost in the deliciously cozy world of Stoneybrook, Connecticut; conjuring up scenes of club meetings in Claudia’s bedroom, babysitting in the Newton’s backyard, and sipping milkshakes at the Rosebud Café as if they’d read the books weeks ago instead of years. Surely, they will be able to describe each character’s personality, style of dress, and appearance in exacting detail, explaining why that particular sitter is the one to whom they most relate. In one of the Baby-Sitters Club books I borrowed from a friend while researching this project, a section at the back invites young readers to fill out information about their own lives through a series of fill-in-the-blank questions. After “The BSC member I am most like” is written “Stacey and Kristy” in what looks like an eight-year-old’s copied version of Stacey’s pert, bubbly handwriting from the books. Scrawled underneath lies the reason for my friend’s combined selection: “I have a big mouth and I am from NY.” Now twenty-two, my friend who wrote these notes at age eight will proudly tell anyone who asks that Stacey is still her favorite babysitter.

The first, second, and third generations of Baby-Sitters Club fans have grown from girls into women, many old enough to have children of their own. Yet the allure of the fictional band of preteen babysitters from the iconic children’s book series persists. A
robust community of childhood readers of The Baby-Sitters Club exists online—many
members of which, as adults, run blogs where they post about the experience of re-
reading the books. A quick Google search turns up many speculations, some quite well-
written, about where the characters of the club would be today. There are also articles
reminiscing nostalgically about the books, artistic re-imaginings of the books’ titles and
covers to reflect millennial issues (“Mallory Hates Boys (And Tinder),” “Kristy Thomas, Bitcoin
Billionaire”), and even a blog dedicated entirely to the memorable wardrobe of one of the
characters.¹ Two men in their forties have created a successful podcast called “The Baby-
Sitters Club Club” in which they devote a weekly hourlong episode to extensive, often
screwball discussion of one of the Baby-Sitters Club books. So far, they have produced
an episode analyzing each of the 131 books in the main Baby-Sitters Club series and
have now progressed to discussing spinoff series like the “Super Special” Baby-Sitters
Club books.²

Though the heyday of its publication is long over, clearly The Baby-Sitters Club
still has a hold on its fans. Not only that, it is gaining new ones. While the current
generation of young girls growing up in America may not be able to purchase a Baby-
Sitters Club board game or doll versions of the characters, commodities that were once
available as tie-ins to the books, they can buy reissued versions of the first several books
in a commemorative tin box.³ They can read the series prequel that was published in

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2009 as part of the same relaunch effort. They can download every book to their e-readers. And they can and do enjoy a set of slightly modernized but still plot-faithful graphic novel adaptations of six of the first Baby-Sitters Club books, the seventh of which is slated for release later in 2019. As I worked on this thesis, the first book in a new Baby-Sitters Club-inspired children’s series about a modern group of girls starting a babysitting business was released. Also during the writing process, Netflix announced its decision to adapt The Baby-Sitters Club books into a ten-episode television series.

I grew up in between generations of Baby-Sitters Club fans, discovering the series after new books had stopped coming out and before the modern reissue. This didn’t stop me from falling in love with them, as they were still readily available to me and my peers in classrooms, libraries, and used bookstores. I was a white, straight, cisgender girl growing up in a suburb, raised by an upper-middle class family. I devoured the books from age six through age thirteen, long after I had forsaken other such literature as babyish. They piled up in my room in pastel-colored stacks, the spines peeling back to reveal curled brown pages. During the years in which I grew from a young child to an older child to a teenager, figuring out who I was and trying to define

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6 Caroline Cala, Best Babysitters Ever (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), Kindle.
and produce my own identity, the Baby-Sitters Club books were my constant companions.

The seven members of the club easily lend themselves to reader comparison and self-categorization. One of the greatest appeals of reading the books, for me, was the clearly delineated identity of each character. Each one has a distinct physical appearance, style of dress, and personality that can be summed up in a few choice adjectives. They even each possess a unique handwriting, shown at the beginning of every club notebook entry, that seems to reflect the given character’s personality (i.e., Claudia’s is messy and riddled with spelling mistakes; Stacey dots all her i’s with little hearts). Readers are reminded of these largely unchanging characteristics, comforting in their permanence, at the start of every book. Although each book is narrated by a different babysitter, the second chapter in each is a nearly identical review, for the reader, of the workings of the club and an introduction to each of its members. Each girl is introduced by her appearance (“Dawn has the longest, palest blond hair you’ll ever see, and bright blue eyes”), fashion preferences (“[Claudia] mixes and matches the weirdest stuff and comes up with the coolest outfits”), personality characteristics (“Kristy is outgoing and can be a loudmouth”), interests and hobbies she has beyond babysitting (“[Mallory] loves to read”), and a brief description of her family members and home life (“Jessi lives with her parents, her younger sister, Becca, her baby brother, Squirt, and a pet hamster”). Frequently included in this list is the way she relates—or doesn’t—to boys. Any past

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9 Ibid., loc. 69 of 1207 Kindle.
10 Ibid., loc. 51 of 1207 Kindle.
11 Ibid., loc. 87 of 1207 Kindle.
12 Ibid., loc. 87 of 1207 Kindle.
changes in any of the previously mentioned categories will be noted, too—for example, if a character’s parents were once together but got a divorce, or a character who had long hair now keeps it short.

Implicit in these lists is the idea that identity can be encapsulated in these static and specific categories. No matter what else is going on within the pages, Kristy will always be bossy and outspoken, with a penchant for turtlenecks and baseball caps. Dawn will always have her waist-length, corn silk-colored hair and laid-back California personality. Claudia will be artistic and unique, terrible in school, and an outlandish dresser. And readers—certain readers, anyway—will always be able to attempt to categorize themselves in the deliciously neat boxes of each babysitter, trying both to emulate aspects of the characters and to see aspects of their own selfhood reflected back to them in the characters’ traits. As a girl, I modeled my outfits after Claudia’s wacky yet sophisticated ensembles; I painted my nails and fluffed out my hair like Stacey. I saw my shy, sensitive best friend as a dead ringer for Mary Anne—she even had two waist-length braids just like the character. The books serve as a kind of primer on identity for young girls, inviting them to imagine a self from a choice of tidily prescribed options for personalities, activities, and items of clothing. Though choosing from a set of pre-selected options for identity may actually be implicitly constraining, it creates the compelling illusion of laying out every option of selfhood, giving the reader a sense of agency to choose which type of girl she wants to be.

Children’s series literature as commodity was far from a new concept when The Baby-Sitters Club rose to popularity in 1986. In her anthology on girls’ series literature *Nancy Drew and Company*, Sherrie Inness defines a difference between “books in a series”
and “series books,” noting that “series books” tend to take place in a world where characters do not grow older and may also be defined by more formulaic plots and less fully developed characters. Inness cites the Little House books as an example of “books in a series,” while the Nancy Drew books are “series books.” To this description, I would add that “series books” (examples include Nancy Drew, Sweet Valley High, and The Baby-Sitters Club) are apt to be ghostwritten and may often include more than one author in a single series, while “books in a series” (the Little House books, the Betsy-Tacy books, the modern Penderwicks series) are more likely to be written by one author. “Series books” as I conceive of them here are also apt to be both shorter and more numerous than “books in a series.” Inness cautions that “a hard and fast distinction between the two types [of series book] should not be made, since books have a disturbing fashion of slipping over the lines.” Surely every one of these qualifications does not apply perfectly to every “series book” or “book in a series” and there are likely many series that defy categorization completely. In the introduction to Turning the Pages of American Girlhood, Emily Hamilton-Honey notes that she finds this stylistic distinction “unhelpful when one is trying to determine how [series books] function culturally,” citing a “belief that they are all part of the same genre and publishing tradition.” Clumsy and imperfect though it may be, I find the distinction helpful when situating The Baby-Sitters Club and other books in the historical and cultural landscape of American girls’ series literature. I think Hamilton-Honey is incorrect and oversimplifying in her

14 Inness, Nancy Drew and Company, 2.
15 Ibid., 2.
assertion that all series books are part of the same publishing tradition. In fact, it is partially the publishing tradition that sets “series books” like The Baby-Sitters Club apart from “books in a series.”

Series like The Baby-Sitters Club, formulaic and numerous in their installments, are created primarily as a commercial objects rather than as literature. They offer a specific and fascinating study of popular culture because they reflect ideas and messages that sell, as well as ideas and messages that are being sold at the time of publication. The material in such books is carefully chosen to maximize sales, customized to a given demographic. “Books in a series,” less overtly commercial, are not necessarily written with the goal of producing a maximum number of iterations. They are written for the primary purpose of telling a story that happens to be ongoing, rather than using new books to repeat devices that were previously commercially successful. They may also be characterized by more complex vocabulary, character development, plot, and themes (perhaps one of the reasons librarians, parents, and teachers alike have historically encouraged young readers’ consumption of “books in a series” while heavily discouraging the reading of often more-digestible “series books”). When I was young, I loved getting lost in the magical world of Harry Potter and the chilly woods and grassy plains of the Little House books. But The Baby-Sitters Club series had a particular hold on me—constructed, as it was, to include as many elements as possible that were specifically tailored to me as a consumer, engineered to captivate and interpellate the growing girl. This specific and commercially-minded tailoring makes the study of “series books” particularly useful in examining the values, ideals, fixations, and hegemonies of our society.
In *Turning the Pages of American Girlhood*, Emily Hamilton-Honey articulates some key developments in the history of American girls’ series literature that led to the popularity and mass distribution of series like The Baby-Sitters Club (and, I would argue, the development of girls’ “series books” as a category distinct from “books in a series”). First was the formation of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which was ultimately responsible for the publication of some of the most well-known American children’s series, including The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew.\(^1\)

Edward Stratemeyer, who Hamilton-Honey credits with the transformation of series books from “luxury items” to “highly desired commodities,” was born two years after the dime novel hit American shelves in 1860.\(^2\) One reason dime novels were so successful was the advent of the printing press, which allowed for easy distribution as well as low prices that made them widely accessible to readers.\(^3\) Stratemeyer himself worked writing dime novels as a young man.\(^4\) Doing so was a common way to augment a low salary—editors employed a “fiction factory” system in which they would create a basic plotline and then hand it off to one of many writers employed by their firm, who would flesh it out.\(^5\) Hamilton-Honey observes that dime novels’ reliance on “formulaic plots and characters” not only made their production more efficient, but also contributed to the novels’ appeal—readers found the familiarity and predictability comforting.\(^6\) Dime novels marked a shift in selling an *author* to selling a *character*—many

\(^1\) Hamilton-Honey, *Turning the Pages*, 4.
\(^2\) Ibid., 84.
\(^3\) Ibid., 87.
\(^4\) Ibid., 86.
\(^5\) Ibid., 87.
\(^6\) Ibid., 87-88.
of the books were written under pseudonyms, and readers purchased them not out of a desire to read the work of a given author but to read the story of a given character.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1906, the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate was born.\textsuperscript{24} Before its purchase by Simon and Schuster in 1984, it would put out around 1500 books under supervision of Stratemeyer and, later, his two daughters.\textsuperscript{25} Authors for the Syndicate were impelled to sign contracts giving up rights to their work and promising that they would remain anonymous, names concealed by pseudonyms.\textsuperscript{26} To make the company a success, Stratemeyer employed techniques he already knew from his work on dime novels along with newly invented marketing methods.\textsuperscript{27} Stratemeyer developed a system of having the narrator of each book give a brief introduction at the beginning to remind or familiarize readers with characters and previous events in the series.\textsuperscript{28} He also used the covers and backs of books to print lists of books and advertisements for other series, and mailed out promotional postcards and catalogs.\textsuperscript{29}

Hamilton-Honey notes that Stratemeyer hoped to “produce quality books for the middle class” while ensuring they were still affordable enough for children to buy,\textsuperscript{30} although I would add that the books were still only affordable enough for middle and upper middle-class children. Stratemeyer’s series books for children cleaned up some of the seedier plot elements of dime novels meant for adults: Hamilton-Honey calls his characters “moral, middle-class, educated, and patriotic.”\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 99-100.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 92.
Despite the purported moral value of these texts, many librarians weren’t keen on their introduction to American children’s shelves. In fact, some librarians refused to stock Stratemeyer’s series books for much of the twentieth century, looking down on them as “trashy, poorly written, and a threat to the morals of young readers.”

I would point out that removing books from libraries would have been another deterrent to economically marginalized children being able to access them, putting them even more squarely in the readership of middle and upper-middle class children. This development traces the origins of children’s series fiction as a firmly middle-classed genre, both in its characters and its readership. While Stratemeyer was financially unscathed by librarians’ boycotts of his material—the books’ removal from library shelves actually increased sales—it is clear that series books are rooted in an ongoing history of deep disparagement and cultural ambivalence marked by concerns around their quality and moral value. Hamilton-Honey points out that even Louisa May Alcott disparaged series books in her writing. Jo March in *Little Women* makes money writing for story papers, the predecessors to dime novels, but later realizes—at the suggestion of her father and later, her husband—that they are immoral. This is particularly notable because Alcott herself wrote story papers under pseudonyms earlier in her career. This irony calls to mind a recurring struggle in the much-later Baby-Sitters Club books: Claudia constantly hides Nancy Drew books around her room because her parents, one of whom is a librarian, disapprove of such reading material.

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32 Ibid., 93.
33 Ibid., 93.
34 Ibid., 94.
35 Ibid., 94.
36 Ibid., 94.
The 20th century hailed a boom in material consumption that translated into a societal emphasis on the cultivation of personality via consumer choices and material goods. Hamilton-Honey notes that “women were seen as the primary consumers for households” and, therefore, advertisers began to target women and girls. This consumption may have been enabled by funds provided by male partners or fathers, but Hamilton-Honey argues that it also resulted in increased agency for females. Whether empowering or not, the new conception of (again, likely white, middle and upper class) women and girls as valued consumers undeniably shaped the formation of American feminine identity. Series books became a commodity engineered to get young women to buy things regularly. At the same time, the heroines of the series in question increasingly relied upon consumption to “exercise…agency” and “develop… individuality.”

Hamilton-Honey asserts that

Series books were only one of many products designed to ‘hook’ young people, especially young women, into making repeated and steady purchases of a particular item. Department store owners and managers, fashion houses, publishers, soap companies, makers of kitchen products, and myriad other businesses looking to make a profit were all vying for the attention of married women and their daughters, and females all over the country responded eagerly. Series books became a tool to tout the benefits of consumption and indoctrinate readers into a consumer society. But they also themselves became the commodities. The prolific nature of series books, revolutionized by Stratemeyer, allowed them to be sold quickly, en masse, and for a profit. Series books written and marketed for young women

37 Ibid., 105.
38 Ibid., 106.
39 Ibid., 5.
40 Ibid., 5.
41 Ibid., 100.
42 Ibid., 106.
became a market category, both “hooking” girls and women into making frequent purchases of material goods and responding to their desire for reading material that reflected their specific demographic.

Other girls’ series books took off long before The Baby-Sitters Club was born, and the use of Stratemeyer’s techniques can be observed in many of them. The immensely popular Nancy Drew books, released by the Stratemeyer Syndicate just as Stratemeyer himself was dying in 1930,\(^43\) marked the introduction of another crucial feature of many such series: the idea of freezing characters in time.\(^44\) If the characters never grow up, more books can be published about their escapades without the passage of time getting in the way. Nancy has remained a teen, living at home and dating the doting Ned Nickerson, from her conception in 1930 until today.\(^45\) Many other beloved characters are frozen in girlhood, including the seven babysitters in The Baby-Sitters Club, who despite multiple cycles through summer vacation, attendances of their middle school Halloween dance, and first days of eighth grade, never make it to high school. The characters can have infinitely repetitive adventures without having to evolve or change, and readers can return to the same static and comforting world no matter whether they are picking up the first or the hundredth book in the series.

When the Baby-Sitters Club books first began coming out in 1986, they filled an interesting niche in girls’ series fiction in America.\(^46\) In *Sisters, Schoolgirls, and Sleuths: Girls’ Series Books in America*, Carolyn Carpan asserts that in the 1980s, the dominant genre of

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 223.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 228.
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 229.
girls’ series literature was romance.\footnote{Carolyn Carpan, *Sisters, Schoolgirls, and Sleuths: Girls' Series Books in America* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2009), xv.} Sweet Valley High, one of the most popular series of that decade, focused on the romantic escapades and soap-opera style dramas of high school life.\footnote{Ibid., xv, 123.} The Wildfire series consisted of single-title books about high school love.\footnote{Ibid., xv, 123.}

While these books were likely consumed by teens and preteens alike, their focus on mature topics like love and sexuality meant they were probably intended for the high school reader. The Baby-Sitters Club books were different. They might have appealed to the same girls who later devoured Sweet Valley High, sharing certain key elements—both series were focused on girls’ emotional relationships and followed the stories of the same characters from book to book. However, The Baby-Sitters Club wasn’t just Sweet Valley High for the younger set. In contrast to Sweet Valley High, many of the girls in The Baby-Sitters Club aren’t yet focused on dating. While crushes and one steady (though tame) romance are featured occasionally, the ups and downs of the girls’ own friendships, family life, and babysitting careers are much more likely to take center stage.

While girl characters in Sweet Valley High and Wildfire series may form and assert their identities through the formation and navigation of romantic connections, the younger babysitters do so largely through the navigation of friend and family dramas, the confrontation of babysitting challenges, and the production and presentation of fashion and style choices.

In keeping with the character of series books, the creation of The Baby-Sitters Club itself was rooted in marketing rather than in the pursuit of art. In the early 1980s, Scholastic editor Jean Feiwel noted that a children’s novel about a babysitting job sold
through Scholastic’s Arrow Book Club was taking off in sales, despite the fact that it wasn’t prominently advertised in Scholastic’s book club catalog. Quoted in a Publisher’s Weekly article, Feiwel explains “I realized that what must have been attracting readers was the notion of babysitting.” Feiwel pitched the idea of a series focused on a babysitting club to children’s author Ann M. Martin, who penned four books in what was supposed to be a miniseries. The books sold well enough for Scholastic to request two more. Soon, the publishing schedule was sped to a book a month, and ghostwriters were recruited to help Martin keep up. After book ten in the series, Martin froze the main characters in time. Now they could spend as many carefree afternoons babysitting as they wanted, without high school or college getting in the way. By the year 2000, there were 131 books in the Baby-Sitters Club series alone and myriad more in spinoffs—Publishers Weekly writes that there were four spinoff series, though I count six, including mysteries, “Super Specials,” and the twelve-book “Friends Forever” series conclusion. Not only that, but there was a briefly aired Baby-Sitters Club television show, a Baby-Sitters Club movie, and a plethora of varied Baby-Sitters Club merchandise. As of 2016, around one hundred and eighty million copies of the books had been sold.

50 Lodge, “The Baby-Sitters Club to Reconvene.”
51 Ibid.
53 Lodge, “The Baby-Sitters Club to Reconvene.”
54 Ibid.
57 Lodge, “The Baby-Sitters Club to Reconvene.”
58 Hauser, “The Feminist Legacy.”
The premise of The Baby-Sitters Club series is simple. In a pastoral, fictional Connecticut suburb called Stoneybrook, four middle-school girls who love to babysit pool their talents to form a business: the Baby-Sitters Club. Kristy, Claudia, Mary Anne and Stacey quickly build a loyal clientele of neighborhood families. The girls hold weekly meetings, pay dues, and hold officer positions within the club. Over the course of the series, they expand their ranks to include Dawn, Mallory, Jessi and Abby. (Because Abby arrives very late in the series and isn’t a major player in most of the books, I will refer to “the seven babysitters” throughout this thesis.) When they aren’t babysitting, the club members have sleepovers, go shopping, giggle about their crushes, and plan activities to do with their charges. The girls have varied interests, some of which are more manifest than others in their actual day-to-day activities—for example, Kristy loves sports, Claudia loves art, Dawn loves healthy vegetarian eating. They deal with friendship problems and the occasional conflict within the club. Family dynamics play a large role in the books—several of the girls have divorced parents who remarry during the series (two of them to each other, making Mary Anne and Dawn stepsisters) and the girls also deal with siblings, pets, grandparents, and cousins.

Each Baby-Sitters Club book is narrated by one of the club members in the first person. However, the narrator of a given installment will also track the experiences of a few of her friends, a device that is enabled by the inclusion of “entries” in the club notebook where each club member details her sitting jobs. Each book generally consists of two main plot threads. The dominant plot pertains to the story’s narrator. It might center on a personal problem or event in that girl’s life or on a baby-sitting problem that particular girl is trying to tackle—for example, Claudia copes with the death of her
grandmother, Mallory deals with a pair of mischievous twins, Mary Anne gets a boyfriend, Kristy sits for a girl who has autism. The secondary thread in each book usually has to do with the antics of the other children the club sits for, or perhaps an event that concerns the club members as a group—for example, the children of Stoneybrook become obsessed with mail-order advertisements, the babysitters help the kids put on a talent show, two children construct a “time machine” in their basement, the babysitters run a summer play group, three siblings become terrified of strange noises in their new house and the babysitters help them get over their fears. Additionally, there are often other, more episodic anecdotes sprinkled in about individual sitting jobs that do not further either of the main plot arcs—Claudia bakes cookies with her young charges, Kristy plays make-believe with her stepsiblings, Stacey and her charge read stories together. The group of sitting charges that come up in the books is vividly rounded out and as familiar to the regular reader as the group of babysitters itself. Several babysitters even have a special favorite child to sit for and vice versa.

Since the publication of *Kristy's Great Idea*, the first book in the Baby-Sitters Club series, girls growing up in the United States, including myself, have been identifying themselves alongside and through characters in this formative and still culturally relevant series. In this project, I will examine the specific and often contradictory ways identities of American girlhood are presented in the books and what those popularly marketed identities can tell us about the ideas and values that surround girlhood (as a precursor to womanhood) and femininity in the United States.

Media plays a significant influence on the construction of identity and formation of self for children and adolescents. Books, in particular, help shape our perceptions of
growing up—what adult woman who grew up in America doesn’t remember reading about first periods in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* or first dates in *Sweet Valley High*, imagining herself in the position of the main character? In spite of this, literature for children, especially serialized literature, is often overlooked in academia or dismissed as less important than books for adults. Sherrie Inness observes not only that “girls’ reading has long been considered unimportant,” by comparison to adult literature, but that

Girls’ series books have been quadruple outcasts from critical circles because they are written for young readers, are targeted at girls, are popular reading, and, even worse, are series books, which often have been regarded with disdain by literary critics.59

By studying children’s media, we can learn much about what is captivating to a growing generation, as well as the lessons the preceding generation wants to instill. Literature marketed towards girls aged eight through eighteen is particularly useful to examine as an indicator of the cultural messaging girls receive during this formative time in life.

Literture not only reflects but shapes our cultural messages. Books marketed towards this age group are crucial to study in order to better understand the ways our society forms youth into adults and specifically the way femininity is constructed and represented for young girls. How do books like *The Baby-Sitters Club*, ones that are so strongly focused on the presentation of a variety of personalities and identities of girlhood, work to both model and influence these constructions? What elements of identity are the books implicitly or explicitly selling to young readers? What can we learn here about the kinds of identities that are attractive to readers? The kinds that are being hegemonically enforced by adults? What specific elements are included as central to the

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identities of the characters, and what can this tell us about the elements around which girls are expected to construct their identities, as well as the elements of identity that may feel central, important, and resonant to girls? What can we learn from the slippages and contradictions in the identities presented? What kinds of identities are excluded from the books, and what can we learn from these exclusions? In what ways are young readers positively or negatively influenced by the representation of identity in the media they consume? What do these books tell readers and scholars about what it means to grow up as a girl in modern America?

I have selected this series in particular to help me investigate questions of identity construction, representation, and “selling” to American girls because it was so formative to my conception of identity during the years I spent thinking most intently about who I was and who I wanted to become. In addition, my reading, research, and informal conversations with others have convinced me that I am far from the only girl who was deeply affected by The Baby-Sitters Club. Another reason I find it useful to analyze these books as a series (rather than investigating standalone novels, for example) is precisely because of their nature as a commercial product. Patterns are easy to observe given that the books are so numerous. Reading over one hundred Baby-Sitters Club books and noting the themes that recur throughout, often in almost every book, is an excellent way to learn more about why American girls of the late 1980s through the early 2000s were buying them—and, moreover, what kinds of ideas the books were selling to those girls.

The Baby-Sitters Club deeply affected my conception and construction of my own identity, in large part by modeling various modes of considering identity via the seven main characters and the various ways in which they conceived of their own
identities. But the books’ construction of identity may be subtler and more insidious than mere differences in handwriting and the idea of being “shy” versus “bossy” versus “laid-back” versus “mature.” Additionally, the ostensibly “diverse” group of main characters might have more in common than it appears at first glance, suggesting that the books may transmit or construct not just individual identities but hint at some common identity of girlhood. Beyond superficial differences in personality, handwriting, and clothing choice, the main characters share certain suspiciously homogenous qualities, such as interest in babysitting, interest in boys, and relationship to their bodies and food. This suggests that a societal concept of girlhood is more deeply rooted in certain hegemonic tropes of femininity than it seems at first glance. I want to investigate the way identity is produced and represented in The Baby-Sitters Club, both implicitly and explicitly, to find out more about the complicated and often contradictory ideals presented to young women in America as they become and create themselves.

In this project, I examine, in depth, several aspects of the main characters’ identities as I see them presented in the series. First, I investigate the central activity of the series—babysitting—and as an extension, the characters’ emotional and logistic caregiving for family members and each other. In the second chapter, I examine the characters’ relations to their bodies, first via style play, then via discussion of weight and food choices, and finally via a discussion of sexuality and romance. Finally, I investigate the role (or lack thereof) of race and social positionality in the books. By exploring The Baby-Sitters Club via autoethnographic examination as well as scholarly analysis, I hope

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to gain a better understanding of the pressures, tensions and innovative solutions navigated by American girls coming of age in the 20th and 21st centuries.
1. “More Than Just a Business”\textsuperscript{61}: Entrepreneurs or Caregivers?

It is impossible to talk about The Baby-Sitters Club books without discussing their central task: babysitting. Babysitting is the axis around which the club revolves and is the one activity that all the main characters—who possess otherwise diametrically opposed interests—share an almost obsessive devotion to. It is clearly also the source of at least some of the obsessive devotion of Baby-Sitters Club fans—certainly it was in the case of my own young readership. Babysitting is both an area of skill and a source of empowerment for the club members, leading to their successful business as well as to independence and confidence for each of them. However, caregiving is also central to the inner lives of the main characters in ways that may be insidiously constraining. Examining the role of babysitting in these popular books may shed light on ideas about gender, labor and care that shape the roles and behavior of girls and women. How is female identity in these books constructed around babysitting both as a business and as an ethos, and what can this tell us about the tensions of identity girl readers might have faced and continue to face?

In book one in the series, \textit{Kristy’s Great Idea}, Kristy Thomas comes up with the idea to form a babysitting club one night when her single, working mother struggles to find a sitter for Kristy’s younger brother, David Michael. Kristy is already committed to babysitting for another child that day. Neither of her older brothers is available, nor are her childhood friends and fellow babysitters Mary Anne and Claudia. Though Kristy and her two older brothers share equal babysitting responsibility for David Michael in their home, Kristy is the only one of the siblings who also babysits outside the house—her

brothers are busy attending sports practices. When Kristy sees her mother struggling to find a sitter, it suddenly hits her—wouldn’t it be so much easier for her mother to call only one number and reach multiple babysitters at once? Thus, the Baby-Sitters Club is born.

Kristy quickly recruits Mary Anne and Claudia, who introduces the girls to her new friend Stacey. The four of them, led by president Kristy, quickly devise the rules and system that result in an efficiently run business and remain in place throughout the series. Club meetings are held three times a week, from 5:30 to 6 in the evening, in Claudia’s room because she is the only club member with her own phone line. All the girls gather there at the appointed time—Kristy is a stickler for both attendance and timeliness—and wait together for phone calls from clients. The girls assign themselves officer roles within the club—president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. New club members join throughout the series and each one is also assigned a title—“alternate officer,” “junior officers,” and even two “associate members” who don’t attend club meetings but remain on call. Stacey, the treasurer, collects weekly dues which are used to pay for supplies, transportation and advertising—as well as the occasional pizza party or sleepover. Mary Anne, the secretary, keeps detailed records of everyone’s schedules and writes down all sitting jobs in the club record book. When they receive a phone call from a client looking for a babysitter, the one who answers the phone takes down the necessary information, then consults Mary Anne, who looks at the record book and lets everyone know who is free for the job. After they democratically decide who takes the job, they call the client back and let them know who will be sitting that day. All the girls

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are required to write down a summary of every single sitting job they have in the club notebook (different from the record book!), which the other club members are then required to read so they can “learn about each other’s experiences” as well as keep abreast of any problems that might be arising among the children they sit for.64

A perfunctory Google search of the words “Baby-sitters club” yields such returns as a 2016 New Yorker article entitled “The Feminist Legacy of the Baby-Sitters Club” and a 2017 Bustle Digital Group article called “10 Feminist Lessons We Learned From the Baby-Sitters Club.”65 As recently as October 2018, a Smith college student who attended a panel on the success of the series was quoted as saying the books are “feminist by design.”66 Clearly, adult women who enjoyed the books as children continue to regard the characters as top examples in the media of female leaders. In book three in the series, The Truth About Stacey, Stacey neatly defines herself and the rest of the club members by their shared vocation as early as page two. She explains: “We’re good babysitters. And we worked hard to get our business going.”67 Here Stacey makes it clear that babysitting is central to her and the other club members not just as a hobby but as a business. Indeed, The Baby-Sitters Club is about a group of middle-school girls who single-handedly run a successful business with a sophisticated, complex system. From their officer positions to their record-keeping systems to their ability to orchestrate complicated side projects like seasonal festivals and talent shows with minimal to no

64 Ibid., loc. 669 of 1462 Kindle.
67 Martin, The Truth About Stacey, loc. 29 of 1590 Kindle.
adult assistance, these girls can clearly lead. Not only that, but the girls take babysitting seriously and they are confident in their abilities to do it well. Their leadership efforts in direct interaction with their charges are just as impressive as their administrative abilities in running the club. These feats would be impressive if they were performed by much older, more experienced people, let alone a group of seven middle-school girls. The club is in charge in every sense of the word—clearly, a group comprised of independent, enterprising, and committed individuals. Some of the “feminist lessons” listed in the Bustle article are “Teenage girls can start a business, create the rules, and be the boss,” “Leadership doesn’t look one way,” and the more oblique “If there isn’t space, make it.”68 The way this article depicts it, the girls of The Baby-Sitters Club are practically breaking the glass ceiling before they even reach high school. One understands where those “feminist lessons” like “teenage girls can be the boss” come from—the “boss” of the club, Kristy, is fearlessly outspoken and unafraid to assert herself in almost any situation. And the other sitters, even mousy Mary Anne, find it within themselves to take charge in a crisis—whether that crisis is a roomful of unruly children on a rainy day or a feverish child.

The girls also pride themselves on loving kids. It’s important to them not just to be business-savvy babysitters, but good babysitters, which is to say caring babysitters. They each pack a “Kid-Kit”—another one of Kristy’s famous great ideas—filled with their old toys and books plus art supplies and other items to bring with them on sitting jobs to entertain the children. They are far from the stereotype of disengaged teens who babysit to use the phone, raid the fridge, and watch TV, paying little attention to their

68 Foley, “10 Feminist Lessons.”
charges—these babysitters are practically focused and emotionally clued-in both while on the job and off the clock. Whether or not the main arc of the book directly concerns babysitting, each book is replete with opportunities for babysitting escapades that often consume and preoccupy the babysitters well beyond the relatively short duration of each sitting job. They read, play, do art projects, and help their charges with homework and other tasks. They take their charges to the park and on other outings. They often organize group activities for multiple children they sit for—talent shows, concerts, even fundraising festivals and other events. They are adept at crisis management and handle even the most chaotic situations with a much cooler head than many real-life adults could manage. Frequently, one sitter cares for multiple children at once, sometimes including a baby or toddler, and generally keeps a handle on the situation with impressive grace. They do deal with chaos such as misbehavior or messes, but they always resolve things with minimal adult interference.

The sitters’ involvement with their charge’s lives is diligent and deep. They are not just good at their job, but almost preternaturally caring and skilled at helping the children they sit for in ways large and small. Though as we will see later, it may also carry the disturbing implication that young women’s primary passion and responsibility should be caring for others, there is no denying that this emotional sophistication and skill is impressive. At club meetings, they read each other’s meticulous accounts of events on the job and discuss any particular issues that might arise among the children. This kind of documentation, discussion, and rumination is beyond the pale of what might reasonably be expected of a group of middle-schoolers looking to earn some extra cash.
in their spare time. For example, during one meeting, the girls discuss how they might help one of their charges, nine-year-old Shea, with a recent diagnosis of dyslexia:

“He thinks he’s stupid and hopeless and dumb. Dopey, that’s what he called himself.”

“Shea’s not dumb!” said Stacey indignantly. “Anybody who’s spent any time with him would know that.”

“That’s right. In fact, his mother told me he’s above average in intelligence.”…

“…I’m not sure what we can do.”

“Give him lots of praise and encouragement,” suggested Jessi.
Mary Anne nodded. “That’s a good idea. But it has to be genuine, or Shea’s going to think we’re just trying to make him feel better.”

“True,” said Kristy. “And that would be even worse.”

Taken out of context, this conversation almost sounds like it could be held by a group of concerned elementary school teachers or at least assistant teachers. Instead, it happens among seven eleven-to-thirteen year old girls. Though Shea’s parents and teachers are also, of course, working to help Shea succeed in school and feel better about himself given his learning disability, the club becomes involved right from the get-go. Both Shea’s mother (implicitly, by asking for the girls’ help with tutoring) and the girls themselves (explicitly) expect the girls to take on responsibility in helping Shea. At the end of the book, Claudia ends up being the one to get through to him and help him feel more confident and comfortable with reading and writing—rather than Shea’s teachers, parents, or a learning specialist. This isn’t the first time one of the babysitters becomes a tutor for one of their charges. In an earlier book, Mallory tutors a different child and helps him succeed in reading using a sophisticated and dynamic lesson plan.

On the one hand, these accomplishments on the part of the babysitters are truly impressive. The sitters are intelligent and thoughtful in their consideration of Shea’s

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problems and come up with truly innovative solutions to help him learn. Not only that, they employ this engagement, creativity, and problem-solving completely without adult guidance, demonstrating independence and leadership on top of everything else. Yet the babysitters’ expertise in these ways may also carry hidden and upsetting implications about the responsibilities and expectations on the shoulders of young girls. The idea that Shea’s parents ask a group of preteen girls rather than an expert tutor or learning specialist for help getting through to Shea suggests that it is taken as a matter of course by everyone involved that the girls should be responsible for the formidable task of helping a child with a learning disability connect with his schoolwork. Claudia herself struggles in school, yet she must focus not only on getting her own grades up but on coming up with solutions to help Shea. All the club members discuss the situation at length in conversations like the one quoted above. Is it possible that these discussions, rather than simply modeling commitment to their job, are modeling concerningly high standards for female emotional labor? Shea is only two to four years younger than the sitters—why is it their job to help him improve his self-esteem? And is their commitment to that task reflective of both internalized and externalized expectations that it is the responsibility of girls and women to help others feel more self-confident and learn the skills they need? Certainly, assisting others when they are struggling is a positive and healthy pursuit in itself. But there are no male tutors in The Baby-Sitters Club books, no boys present for the lengthy discussions of how to help Shea overcome his problems. The girls take on the brunt of such labor and rescue Shea Rodowsky and Buddy Barrett from academic failure with cheer and unflagging determination. While
their care and investment appears to be a positive quality, it is also an introduction to the idea that emotional labor is primarily the responsibility of women and girls.

The implicit sense that teaching, caregiving, and emotional labor are female responsibilities is constrictive and unfair. Not only that, engagement in these activities sometimes comes at the expense of the babysitters’ other passions, interests, and identifications. Caring at such a deep level takes up time, and seems at times to eclipse other elements of who the sitters are in concerning ways. In Jessi’s Secret Language, the club gets a call from a mother who needs a regular sitter for her two children, one of whom is profoundly deaf. Eleven-year-old Jessi, in between a grueling ballet schedule and academic responsibilities, somehow manages to become nearly fluent in American Sign Language so she can better communicate with her charge. After she does her homework and attends dance lessons, Jessi reads her ASL book in bed, suggesting again a sense of implicit responsibility to be a good, focused and capable caregiver even when she is technically off the babysitting clock.71 Like Claudia and Mallory’s tutoring efforts, this is certainly an impressive undertaking (impressive to the point of unbelievable—what eleven-year-old could be reasonably expected to have the skills and self-discipline to teach herself an entire language in only a couple of weeks?). But such an endeavor may come at a price. At the beginning of this book, Jessi defines herself by her skills, modeling self-confidence and an expansive set of values: “…a good dancer, a good joke-teller, a good reader, good at languages, and most important, good with children.”72 Though she puts her role as a dancer at the top of the list of her defining skills, she says that being “good with children” is the most important quality among them.

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72 Martin, Jessi’s Secret Language, loc. 117 of 1265 Kindle.
passage sets the stage for Jessi’s priorities throughout the rest of the book. Her truly impressive achievements in dance take a backseat to her newfound role as a caregiver. In the book, she earns the lead in her prestigious ballet school’s performance, even though she is the youngest dancer in her class. Yet she says she feels “more nervous” about doing a good job on her first babysitting job for Matt than she does in rehearsals. Jessi is a vastly talented ballerina, yet being good with kids is “more important,” and her focus on caring for Matt, while in itself doesn’t seem like a bad thing, seems to overtake her focus on the equally important and impressive personal achievement of dancing the lead part in her ballet performance. The girls of The Baby-Sitters Club all have varying degrees of interest in hobbies outside of babysitting, yet they prioritize babysitting, suggesting that caregiving is universally the most important engagement for girls.

The series’ outward narrative of female empowerment and business success is thus tempered in insidious yet significant ways. Most stories in the books exemplify not only the babysitters’ extreme emotional aptitude and the ways babysitting may eclipse their other interests and hobbies, but the idea that the relational element of babysitting is ultimately more important to the babysitters than making money. Not only do they define themselves first and foremost as babysitters, it is important to them to self-define as caring over moneymaking. Later in The Truth About Stacey, the babysitters confront the appearance of a (short-lived) rival business: the Baby-Sitters Agency, run by high schoolers who are eager to make quick cash. In one scene, Stacey is babysitting for one of her favorite sitting charges, seven-year-old Charlotte. Charlotte, who has no friends in school, is devastated because the younger sister of a member of the Baby-Sitters Agency told her that babysitters, including her beloved Stacey, don’t actually enjoy spending time
with Charlotte—they only sit because they get paid. Stacey reassures Charlotte that, even though “‘of course the money’s nice,’” the first and foremost reason she babysits is that she likes kids. Stacey tells Charlotte: “‘But I like you…I wouldn’t babysit for just anybody. And I’ll tell you something. If your mom and dad called me and said, “We need you to sit for Charlotte tonight, but we’re broke and we can’t pay you,” I’d come anyway.’” Stacey also iterates the difference between her and the other members of the club and the older, much more careless members of the Baby-Sitters Agency. She points out to Charlotte that while girls from the Baby-Sitters Agency do their homework, talk on the phone, and watch TV while babysitting, Stacey plays with Charlotte, reads to her, and takes her on outings. “‘That’s being a friend, isn’t it?’” Stacey asks.

Here Stacey asserts that moneymaking is a secondary benefit to her babysitting, rather than its primary purpose. This is not merely something she tells Charlotte in order to assuage the younger girl’s concerns about the authenticity of her friendship with Stacey—it is, indeed, backed up by Stacey’s apparently genuine enjoyment in being an engaged babysitter, and the emotional closeness she develops with Charlotte over the course of the series. By contrast, the Baby-Sitters Agency in this book serves as a moral indictment of the kind of babysitting where money is a central concern. The club quickly discovers that the girls of the Agency are not only money-hungry, but lax caregivers in a variety of ways—one of them lets a three-year-old play outside unsupervised in the cold, another invites her boyfriend over without permission, and another leaves a cigarette burn on a client’s chair. At the end of the book, the Agency is dissolved when the club

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74 Ibid., loc. 1092-1111 of 1590 Kindle.
75 Ibid., loc. 1118 of 1590 Kindle.
76 Ibid., loc. 1047, 1169 of 1590 Kindle.
encourages their sitting charges to speak up to their parents about their new sitters’ behavior. The good babysitters in this book—the club—are largely unconcerned about making money except as a fringe benefit to the true joys of caring for children. The bad babysitters—the Agency—are not only concerned with making money but engage in various kinds of deviance while on the job. In this way, a moral equivalency is produced: to be a good caregiver is to be a good person. And to be a good caregiver, one must care more about the intrinsic pleasures of caregiving than about financial gain. A primary focus on moneymaking is equated with such immoral behaviors as smoking on the job and ignoring one’s sitting charges. While the babysitters are businesswomen, in order to be truly good at their business they must eschew caring about money in favor of caring about people.

Several scholars have raised alarm at the feminized nature of the work the babysitters do. Mary Bronstein claims that The Baby-Sitters Club series “implicitly denote[s] what is impossible or unacceptable for an American girl,” describing it as “a portrait of girls who only exist in relation to one another and who find power in their ability to perfectly perform domestic duties.” She asserts that the books present “to the reader a message that women have been receiving for centuries: do for others before yourself.” She refers to the books’ presentation of baby-sitting as a business model as “manipulative” because of the way this rhetoric elides the nature of baby-sitting as a highly gendered, “traditional and highly oppressive women’s work.”

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78 Ibid., 216.
79 Ibid., 220.
out that all the girls of the club, despite varied interests, personalities, and presentations of femininity, enjoy babysitting and are natural caregivers. This, she argues, implies that necessary to all kinds of girlhood is a love of babies and caregiving: “The message is that all girls of all types are capable of loving [babysitting] and that it is a natural and innate skill.”\textsuperscript{80} She raises concern that the illusion of babysitters as industrious businesswomen covers up a dangerous message that indoctrinates young girls into “realiz[ing] their place in a man’s world,” “a primer for a hegemonic and heteronormative future.”\textsuperscript{81} Bronstein also notes—restating the words of Stacey herself and using the Baby-Sitters Agency incident as an example—that to the sitters, money is “non-essential” and the intrinsic reward they gain for doing good for others (not themselves) is their primary concern.\textsuperscript{82}

Bronstein is not the only one to turn a critical feminist eye on The Baby-Sitters Club. In “Reading Towards Womanhood: The Baby-Sitters Club Books and Our Daughters,” Jill Laurie Goodman describes her abject horror at the prospect of her own young daughters reading these books, the ethos of which, to her, is so clearly rooted in self-subordination, learning to care for others at the expense of all else. Goodman begins her 1993 article (penned during The Baby-Sitters Club series’ initial commercial heyday) with this perhaps overly dramatic rhetorical opener:

Your daughter may look safe, even fetching, curled up in a chair or sprawled across a bed, far from the perils of adolescent drugs, sex, and heaven only knows what horrors the 1990s may offer. After all, she’s reading. That has to be good, right? Wrong. If I were you, I’d take another look.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 219.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 221.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 220-221.
Here, the dangerous texts Goodman hyperbolically equates with the evils of underage sex and drugs are not violent slasher books nor steamy romances but The Baby-Sitters Club books. Goodman sums up the “meaning” of the books in one succinct, disturbing sentence: “Life’s work is assigned according to gender, and women’s work is caring, nurturing, worrying about relations, making things right, and feeling guilty.” Despite the slightly paranoid ring of Goodman’s opener, her criticisms are grounded in structural features of the texts. She points out that the sitters not only baby-sit, but in their free time, “spend their days maneuvering among the shoals of household relations,” navigating complex and often shifting emotional dynamics within their own families.

These middle-schoolers are emotionally capable beyond their years (and, as Goodman points out, “beyond the capacities of most sane adults”) and spend lots of time managing the physical and emotional care of not only the children they sit for, but their own families.

One book that exemplifies these dynamics in their most troubling form, lending weight to Goodman’s assertions, is Stacey’s Choice. In the book, Stacey is caught in the middle of a dilemma between her two recently divorced parents. At the time the book takes place, Stacey resides in Stoneybrook with her mother and the rest of the club, while her father lives and works in their hometown of New York City. The book begins when Stacey receives an ecstatic phone call from her father, who informs her he’s just been promoted to vice-president of his company and invites her to be his date to a special dinner in his honor, as well as spend the rest of the weekend in the city with him.

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
celebrating. Stacey goes to a club meeting right afterwards, where she shares the exciting news with her friends:

“…My dad called this afternoon. He’s being given a huge raise and a promotion in his company. He’s going to become a vice-president. And his company is honoring him with a dinner.”
“Awesome,” said Dawn.
“I know. I can tell Dad is really pleased. And he invited me to come to New York and be his date at the dinner. It’s a week from Friday…Oh, and he told me to buy a new outfit.”
“That’s fantastic!” exclaimed Claud, “Hey, let’s celebrate. Let’s go shopping on Saturday. We’ll all come with you, Stace, and help you choose an outfit, and then we can eat downtown.”

It’s unclear whether Claudia means they will celebrate Stacey’s father’s promotion or his instruction for her to choose new clothes for the dinner. Either way, all the girls seem genuinely excited at both. However, their joy doesn’t last long, because Stacey’s mother soon comes down with pneumonia. Mallory’s mother, Mrs. Pike, picks Stacey up from school and helps Stacey’s mother, Mrs. McGill, home from the hospital. But after that, Stacey and her mother are on their own. Stacey is a model nurse, cooking dinner for her mom and bringing her pills on a strict schedule. Stacey is so diligent in her care, she even has trouble sleeping:

Each time I returned to my bed, I just lay there, one ear trained in the direction of my mother’s room. No wonder new parents don’t get much sleep, I thought. When they aren’t up feeding the baby, they’re probably lying awake listening for the sound of crying.

Stacey makes the executive decision to stay home from school the next day, informing her mother, “‘Mom. I’m not leaving you. You have pneumonia.’” Her mother weakly

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89 Ibid., 51.
protests, telling Stacey the neighbors will drop by to check on her throughout the day, but ultimately allows her daughter to stay home and nurse her.

Stacey soon realizes that her mother’s illness poses a problem: what will she do about her big New York weekend with her father? She has already selected an outfit and doesn’t want to disappoint her father—but, she wonders, how can she leave her mother at home sick while she enjoys a special weekend? This dilemma—Stacey, caught between two people who both need her care in one form or another—forms the crux of the book’s conflict. The plot revolves around Stacey trying to make a decision that will please both her parents; attempting to care for and support both of them at once. The choice isn’t framed in terms of what Stacey might want to do but only in terms of managing both her parents’ feelings: her sense of responsibility to honor her commitment to her father and her sense of duty to care for her mother just as, she muses, her mother cares for her when she is sick.

Curiously, all the adults in the book seem to take the adult responsibility Stacey places on her own shoulders throughout the story as a matter of course. It is only at the end of the book, after the decision has taken place, that both her parents remind her admonishingly that she is only thirteen, cannot be everything to everybody, and must sometimes consider her own needs in making a decision. Stacey initially decides not to go to New York and that it’s too important to her to stay with her mother. When she calls her father to deliver the news, he acts heartbroken:

“You’re what?”
“I’m—I’m going to have to miss the dinner.”
“But Stacey, this is important. Besides, you’re my date for the evening.”
“You could invite someone else,” I suggested. “There’s still time.”
“No,” said Dad, sounding choked up. “That’s not it. You’re all I have. I don’t know anyone else to invite. Just you...you’re all I have,” he repeated.\(^{90}\)

In this passage, thirteen-year-old Stacey’s father delivers a guilt trip that would feel more suited to an interaction with an adult romantic partner. He sees that Stacey already feels burdened by having to care for her mother and adds to her burden with his own tears. Rather than suggesting a practical solution to the problem or empathizing with his daughter’s concern over her mother’s health, he pleads with her in desperation to come support him anyway because she is “all he has.” It seems he expects his daughter to assume both the domestic labor of caring for her mother and running the household while as well as the emotional labor of being her father’s one and only support at this important event—to leave her mother, show up looking pretty and spend the evening in admiration of her father’s achievements. At the end of the conversation, he hangs up with a quiet “‘I understand,’” but Stacey is uncertain as to whether he actually does.\(^{91}\)

The guilt this conversation understandably leaves Stacey feeling is enough to propel her to come up with a new, revised plan: she will go to New York just for the dinner, but return to Stoneybrook and her mother the next morning. Stacey’s mother seems to share the idea that the burden of her care belongs somehow to her daughter. Mrs. McGill allows Stacey to spend lots of time on an elaborate chart keeping track of the neighbors who come over to sit with Mrs. McGill when Stacey goes back to school, including measuring out pills and writing out instructions for each neighbor. And, while Mrs. McGill gives her blessing for Stacey to leave town, she again leaves it in her

\(^{90}\) Ibid., 65.
\(^{91}\) Ibid., 65.
daughter’s hands to line up “Mom-sitters” for the entire time Stacey will be away. Mrs. McGill doesn’t ask Stacey to do this, but she also doesn’t protest.

It’s true that Mrs. McGill is ill and probably doesn’t feel up for much of anything, including either lining up care for herself or making sure the onus of responsibility isn’t on her preteen daughter’s shoulders. But single parents frequently become ill and must figure out what to do to recuperate while also making sure their children are cared for. Mrs. McGill isn’t socioeconomically disadvantaged or socially isolated. In fact, Mrs. McGill repeatedly mentions that she can call on Mrs. Pike for help, then instead allows Stacey to manage things. Mrs. McGill could also presumably put in a call to ask her ex-husband for support, either in the form of hiring a visiting nurse or taking time off from work to come into Connecticut and care for Stacey—they are still co-parents, after all—but both parents implicitly and explicitly expect Stacey to step in and handle matters herself.

Though Stacey is independent and self-reliant to the extreme, the expectations her parents place on her throughout the course of the story trap her in a world where she is forced to manipulate herself in multiple directions, serving as a surrogate nurse to her mother and surrogate girlfriend to her father, while she is still a child herself. This is not the story of a family who is desperate or lacks resources, forcing Stacey to step in and pull more weight than a financially advantaged child might have to. This is the story of a well-resourced family who simply expects Stacey to serve the logistic and emotional needs of her parents. She is forced by her femininity into filling the two highly gendered roles of nurse and “date.” The only time in the book when Stacey thinks about her own wants and desires is when she chooses a slightly unexpected outfit to wear to her father’s
dinner. Stacey’s efforts to take on adult responsibilities of care and sense of guilt at her inadequacy in doing so are normalized by the fact that she seems to exist in a world where these efforts are a matter of course—meanwhile, Stoneybrook’s boys, such as Kristy’s older brothers and Mary Anne’s boyfriend, Logan, are busy attending sports practices and learning to drive. These boys fulfill their family obligations, such as babysitting for younger siblings, but it is difficult to imagine one of them taking on such outsized burdens as the ones Stacey confronts here as a matter of course. The message here is that caring is women’s work—and not just the caring that forms the glue of their entrepreneurial enterprise, but the caring of family life that goes unpaid and often unappreciated.

Goodman is anxious about her daughters’ fixation on books like this one that center so heavily on girls negating their own needs and feeling guilty about their inadequacy in caring for others. In re-reading *Stacey’s Choice* as an adult, I, too, wonder why I might have been so obsessed with this book as a child. This specific installment of The Baby-Sitters Club was one of my particular favorites. I read a variety of books, but I was much more interested in Stacey’s dilemmas with nurses’ schedules and train timetables than I was in reading—for example—tales of Nancy Drew solving mysteries or Meg Murray adventuring in *A Wrinkle in Time*. In my nine-year-old mind, Stacey’s sense of responsibility to care for both her parents and constant anguish over whether she is doing an adequate job equated to impossible maturity and sophistication, just like the hot pink silk outfit and stylish jewelry she wears to her father’s important dinner. The ability to care for others seemed to me to be an intrinsic part of growing up and into a beautiful, confident and capable teenage girl, and it transfixed me.
Evidently, I was not alone in equating Stacey’s caring skills with strength, maturity and feminine appeal. Feminist psychologist and scholar Carol Gilligan defines a female morality focused on care and intimacy in her book *A Different Voice*. She describes the “conventional feminine voice” as “defining the self and proclaiming its worth on the basis of the ability to care for and protect others.”

Likely the scores of other girl readers of The Baby-Sitters Club were similarly captivated and impressed by the main characters’ extreme aptitude for caregiving, which, according to Gilligan’s theory, marks all of the main characters as highly moral and worthy under a female concept of ethics. Both Bronstein and Goodman cite Gilligan’s work in their indictments of The Baby-Sitters Club. Goodman describes the idea that female identity is constructed around relationships, caring, and responsibility as “a thesis [that is] made manifest in the Baby-sitters Club,” and that is “troubling in a number of ways.”

Goodman criticizes Gilligan for “veer[ing] away from critical analysis,” of this reality of feminine identity and instead celebrating the “different voice” in question. Goodman perceives The Baby-Sitters Club books as a similarly dangerous celebration of the centrality of caring to female identity.

Goodman raises an important point about the damaging and dangerous social expectation that taking on guilt and serving others’ needs before one’s own is women’s work and women’s work alone. But her indictment of Gilligan and The Baby-Sitters Club as “celebrating” a feminine ethics of care dismisses too quickly the possibility that perhaps what we need is not different textual representations and messages for girls, but

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93 Jill Laurie Goodman, “Reading Toward Womanhood.”
94 Ibid.
baby-sitters for boys, too. Wouldn’t it be good if all of us cared more for people than for money? Does the answer to a better world lie in women eschewing the ethics of care and learning to focus on personal advancement and monetary gain? In many ways, the girls of The Baby-Sitters Club model an ethics system based on morality, support, and care that all children would do well to emulate, regardless of gender. While the books may not be the perfect paragons of feminism that the Bustle article and other online sources celebrate, perhaps they depict a feminism based around a set of ethics that we would all benefit in learning from.

Carol Gilligan studied, recognized and put into words a reality for many girls and women, myself included. Her acknowledgement of a different female ethics and construct of identity based on relationships rather than on the self is groundbreaking. Describing this reality is not the same as saying that it is endemic to all women, nor is it a claim that biological sex differences are the basis of different concepts in morality. It does imply a socialization so ingrained in American culture that it is impossible to tease out where the gendered difference in conception of a moral hierarchy begins. Goodman refers to The Baby-Sitters Club books as a manifestation of Gilligan’s “troubling” thesis. It strikes me, rather, that the success of The Baby-Sitters Club demonstrates how deeply Gilligan’s thesis resonates with girls as young as six. Some of the books’ appeal may lie in the fact that, for many girls, relationships and caring are central to identity. Maybe the books convey this to girl readers as a “message,” but girl readers also gravitate towards the books because they mirror what already feels like a reality, one created by socializing forces much deeper and more pervasive than The Baby-Sitters

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95 Ibid.
Club series. Rather than labeling the texts as “bad” or “good,” “feminist” or “regressive,” I think we would do well to examine why their often-contradictory narratives of both empowered and entrapped feminine identities have captivated so many young women, what these popular narratives capture about the nature of growing up female in American society, and the ways they might simultaneously encourage and constrain the girls and women who are exposed to them.
2. “Mary Anne’s Makeover”; The Body of a Babysitter

As I mention in the introduction to this thesis, I loved most things about The Baby-Sitters Club as a girl. I loved the funny antics of the babysitting charges of Stoneybrook, the relational dramas among the babysitters and their families, and of course, the babysitting itself. But the feature of the books that captured my young attention the most strongly was the specific and numerous descriptions of each character’s clothing and style choices. Even before returning to the books as an adult, I could have described many of the sitters’ ensembles from memory—vivid images of laid-back Dawn wearing clogs and an oversized blue and green button-down, boyish Kristy in a baseball cap with a collie on the front, sophisticated Stacey in a hot pink off-the-shoulder sweatshirt and jeans with plastic zippers up the sides. I couldn’t tell you which specific book these descriptions came from or why they stuck with me, but the babysitters’ outfits, each reflective of the wearer’s personality, seem indelibly stamped on my mind.

Scholar Debra L. Gimlin observes that “what women looks like becomes symbolic of their characters—indeed, of their very selves. The link between the body and identity is more explicit among women because for them, more than men, the body is a primary indicator of self to the outside world.”96 Central in the Baby-Sitters Club books, and specifically in describing and defining the main characters’ identities, are descriptions of their outfits, bodies, and consumption choices—consumption not only in the sense of material goods, but also of food. And while sexuality is largely absent from the pages of the Baby-Sitters Club, presumably given the young age of its main

characters and even younger readership, it is replaced by plenty of discussion of crushes and romance as a kind of precursor to the sexual embodiment that may follow with age.

The Baby-Sitters Club models a variety of ways to successfully and creatively navigate the pressures of female embodied life in a consumer society. Some of these strategies might be seen as productive, healthy, and realistic models for young readers—for example, I am still grateful for the way that reading about Claudia Kishi taught me to have fun with my appearance and not to fear standing out from the crowd. But the way the girls of the club use their bodies to reflect, perform and construct identity can be examined more closely to draw conclusions about the kinds of bodily identities that were and are sold to young readers, and the kinds that might have been implicitly or explicitly excluded.

Each of the different books begins with a variation on the same introduction of the structure of the club and of its individual members. Whichever character happens to be the narrator describes herself and all her friends, situating unfamiliar readers and reminding existing fans of the cast of characters. In addition to personality traits and appearance, each girl is described in terms of her personal style choices. Each girl’s individual style is first described in general terms that seem deeply connected to her personality—Dawn, for example, is a West Coast individualist whose friends refer to her style as “California Casual.” Kristy is sporty and as such doesn’t care much about clothes. Claudia the artist creates outlandish DIY ensembles and Stacey the sophisticated and mature New Yorker always looks chic. But it doesn’t end there—detailed descriptions of each girl’s outfits are sprinkled throughout the book. In one book that made a particular impression on me as a girl, several of the babysitters travel to the local
shopping mall to get their ears pierced. At the end of the book, they gift each other with earrings that are perfectly selected to reflect some element of the personality of the recipient. California girl Dawn (who ends up with two holes in each ear as a reflection of her individuality) gets two pairs of earrings, one in the shape of oranges and one in the shape of her home state. Artistic Claudia gets artist palettes. Dancer Jessi gets ballet shoes. The girls’ appearances—in this case, their ear piercings—are thus constructed as a central tool used to reflect who they are, including qualities that would otherwise be imperceptible from their looks alone. Style is heavily relied upon for the presentation of each girl’s identity. This allows young readers to choose one or more main character with whom they particularly identify or strive to emulate in style. It also demonstrates to them the importance of navigating and producing one’s own identity through style choices from a young age.

The character Claudia Kishi is known for her artistic and avant-garde outfits, often described as “wild.” Claudia’s style is widely admired both in the texts and in Baby-Sitters Club fandom (her outfits are so legendary that they’ve inspired much internet attention from now-grown readers, including a blog called What Claudia Wore). Claudia walks the narrow line between establishing individuality and still looking cool. She is an artist and her clothing choices are clearly presented as a reflection of who she is inside—she dresses in outlandish, flashy ensembles that, the books are quick to

remind the reader, she pulls off better than anyone else. Here’s Mary Anne giving a
typical description of Claudia:

…she has a fantastic sense of fashion. She can put together the oddest collection
of clothes—a slouch hat, a sequined vest, an oversized button-down shirt, stirrup
pants, and lace-up boots—and she looks stunning. If I dressed like that, people
would laugh. I want to know how Claudia does it. Is she just beautiful, or can a
person learn to look sensational?\textsuperscript{100}

At thirteen, the character of Claudia has somehow already figured out how to
flawlessly navigate the tensions of young adulthood elucidated in Jennifer Smith Maguire
and Kim Stanway’s “Looking Good: Consumption and the Problems of Self-
Production.” Maguire and Stanway describe the way in which in “working on their
appearances,” teens are always balancing the goal to “to fit in and be accepted” with the
equally important aspiration to “stand out as an individual.”\textsuperscript{101} Claudia walks the line
between establishing individuality and being accepted—in fact, not only is she accepted,
but she receives lots of positive attention for her ensembles. No one but Claudia could
pull off her wild looks, and not only does she pull them off, she looks incredible.

Claudia’s individuality and outlandish style choices are almost never mentioned
without acknowledging, in the same breath, her model’s figure and “silky jet-black
hair…perfect skin and almond-shaped eyes.”\textsuperscript{102} In this way, even Claudia’s
unconventional style choices are bound by rules, reminding readers that she still
conforms to certain beauty standards that allow her to be received positively for
deviating from the norm. Even though Claudia expresses herself through style in ways
that are freeing and push back against social norms, the reader is never allowed to forget

\textsuperscript{100} Ann M. Martin, Mary Anne’s Makeover (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1992), loc. 168 of 1255 Kindle.
\textsuperscript{101} Maguire and Stanway, “Looking Good,” 64.
\textsuperscript{102} Martin, Mary Anne’s Makeover, loc. 168 of 1255 Kindle.
that she is accepted and celebrated for her beauty in ways that are anything but unconventional. Her beauty allows her to make the bold clothing choices she is so fond of, demonstrating to young readers the importance of balancing individuality with social acceptance and desirability.

The Baby-Sitters Club doesn’t just present style as a reflection of static identity. On several occasions, the girls in the books use style and consumption choices to reinvent themselves, creating the identity they desire for themselves and demonstrating the efficacy of self-production via consumption. Maguire and Stanway assert that “consumer culture offers both the problems and the solutions to self-production.”\(^{103}\) In The Baby-Sitters Club, consumer culture is certainly presented as the solution. In the aptly named *Mary Anne’s Makeover*, Mary Anne makes a New Year’s resolution to “be the best person [she can] be, in all possible ways.”\(^{104}\) Mary Anne is known for being shy, sensitive and romantic. She is more soft-spoken than the other babysitters and (surprisingly, readers are usually reminded) the only one of them to have a steady boyfriend. As it turns out, the way Mary Anne acts on her resolution is replacing her long brown hair with a chic short haircut, buying bolder, more stylish clothes, and starting to wear makeup. Her self-reinvention is a trip to the mall with her father, where she gets her hair cut and goes shopping. After the haircut, Mary Anne muses “This was the new Mary Anne…I did look like a new person. I felt like one, too. I could see my grin growing and growing in the mirror.”\(^{105}\) Next, Mary Anne’s normally strict father treats her to a makeover in a fancy new makeup store and lets her buy some expensive clothes.

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\(^{103}\) Maguire and Stanway, “Looking Good,” 64.

\(^{104}\) Martin, *Mary Anne’s Makeover*, loc. 25 of 1255 Kindle.

\(^{105}\) Ibid., loc. 405 of 1255 Kindle.
from a hip store, including a new dress for the upcoming school dance that “the old [Mary Anne] would never have dreamed of wearing.” Her new look allows Mary Anne to conceive of herself as a whole new person.

Fascinatingly, the author Ann M. Martin tells readers in a letter at the back of the book that she “decided to give Mary Anne a makeover because [she] wanted Mary Anne to assert herself.” On the one hand, in making the choice to get a dramatic haircut and wear bolder clothes, Mary Anne is asserting herself—deciding what she wants and going after it, defying the expectations her friends, family and boyfriend have of her as relatively timid and staid-looking. On the other hand, Martin makes it sound as if going shopping and getting a haircut that lets her feel the breeze on her neck is the only way Mary Anne could assert agency when in fact, Mary Anne has asserted herself in plenty of other ways in previous books despite being quiet and shy. She is a responsible babysitter and in one book even deals with taking a sick child to the hospital. She stands up to her strict father and gets him to loosen up some of the arbitrary ways he still treats her like a little girl. She communicates to her boyfriend when she feels like his actions are smothering her and even breaks up with him for a while, until he can better understand how to allow her to make her own decisions. All the girls are generally fairly agentic, often handling very challenging problems with relative maturity for thirteen-year-olds and asserting themselves frequently throughout the books in ways that are more subtle and complex than simply making consumer choices, yet Mary Anne’s makeover is

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106 Ibid., loc. 442 of 1255 Kindle.
107 Ibid., loc. 1227 of 1255 Kindle.
109 Ibid.
treated as the ultimate example of such assertion. The production of her “new self” comes from a shopping trip—communicating to young readers that consumption is a sure way to construct a new identity. The agency Mary Anne gains from looking more conventionally attractive or stylish actually seems questionable, since it causes her lots of newfound social attention, resulting in rumors that threaten her relationship to her boyfriend and the rest of the club. Yet the book clearly comes down on the side of the makeover as a successful act of both assertiveness and self-production.

One might argue that the series’ focus on fashion and style choices could be damaging to young girls. Certainly, the books depict the struggle of girls to assert their identities in a consumer society and do present certain messages that reflect social pressures and conventions they might do well to be rid of. The fixation on Claudia’s exotic beauty as a tempering force to her outlandish outfits and the idea that Mary Anne becomes an independent agent solely via consumer decisions are only two examples of the slightly concerning ideals reflected by the books. Indeed, the emphasis on style at all may be seen as perplexing—if they’re books about babysitting, why do they need to include so many descriptions of outfits? Couldn’t stories of young girls navigating relational issues while running a successful babysitting business hold our attention without regular reminders of how many holes each one has pierced in her ears?

Perhaps they could. But issues of personal style and self-production are not only central to the lives of most preteens, they are often inextricably linked to each other. By focusing so strongly on style and fashion, Ann M. Martin is identifying and empathizing with a struggle that her readers have experienced or will likely experience. Preteens deal with issues of personal style presentation just as they deal with divorce or friendship
feuds, and these issues are often particularly prescient on the cusp of the teenage years, during which time many preteens will be making style decisions for themselves for the first time. For preteen girls especially, concerns of fashion and style presentation are central in navigating the complicated path towards adulthood. The exploration of these issues in the books likely contributes greatly to their popularity with a young readership.

The series overall provides a relatively nuanced view of the many ways a young girl can begin to express herself through style choices. In general, the sitters dress based on who they are and what they like, and as a club they provide several models of what this can look like—for example, tomboy Kristy is perfectly happy in her baseball cap and jeans, suggesting that there is more than one way for young girls to self-produce via style choices. There is also a marked lack of clothing as a status symbol—while fictional stores are occasionally named, no real clothing labels are ever mentioned in the books. This stands in contrast to a few more contemporary girls series books like The Clique, which features a group of wealthy middle-school friends who constantly try to one-up each other with the designer labels they sport, like Prada and Chanel.111 The babysitters do shop and care about the way they look, but, for the most part, they seem more interested in creating cool and interesting outfits than displaying clothing as an expensive status symbol. I clearly remember deciding around age nine that I wanted to be like Claudia and dress “wild.” I spent the next four years inventing the most outlandish outfits I could come up with, heavily inspired by descriptions of Claudia. Reading books like The Baby-Sitters Club inspired me to value creativity and individuality and

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experiment with my outfits in a way that relieved some of the strict social pressures and norms of middle school.

All young people are beginning to confront questions of identity construction and their own style presentation, whether they prefer baseball caps or sequined sweatshirts. The Baby-Sitters Club series addresses these conundrums and the ways they play out for seven thirteen-year-old girls in ways that reflect the pressures of life in a consumer society. However, this reflection of consumer pressures is also reflective of, and contributive to, a restrictive definition of female identity construction. The implication that a makeover is Mary Anne’s main tool for reinventing herself in a positive way is limiting and regressive. One wonders what steps a girl like Kristy (who is supposedly uninterested in clothing, hair, and makeup) or a boy like Mary Anne’s boyfriend Logan might be expected to take if they, too, wished to assert their agency and become a better person in some way. Logan’s outfits are certainly never described in exhaustive detail, even when he does attend the occasional club meeting. Even Claudia, who in many ways allows herself freedom from constricting standards of conventional feminine presentation, remains bound by constructing individuality largely through her appearance rather than other avenues. While Claudia inspired me, as a girl, to use clothing to express my own individuality rather than to conform, she and the rest of the club members also reinforced the idea that clothing and identity are, for girls and women, inextricably intertwined.

The babysitters not only work on their identities through style choices, they also manage their bodies via far subtler forms of control. In *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature*, Beth Younger analyzes the representation of
body image in young adult novels about females. Younger notes disturbing trends in representation of the female body in books about teenage girls a bit older than the sitters of The Baby-Sitters Club. Younger observes that many young adult novels “reinforce the contemporary ultrathin standard of beauty” and notes that “YA fiction [often] encourages young women’s self-surveillance of their bodies.” One might assume that such representation and reinforcement of these damaging norms and standards would begin with media for teens, but the babysitters are not exempt. They survey each other’s bodies and their own in every book. Though this surveillance is perhaps not overtly destructive or negative, its pervasiveness in the text reflects the pervasive need for female body management introduced to American women starting in childhood.

Descriptions of each girl’s relationship to food are sprinkled throughout each Baby-Sitters Club book. These descriptors seem at first glance to be casual, incidental asides, until it becomes clear that almost every book reiterates them in some way. Snacks are central to club meetings. Claudia’s room, the location of all meetings, is stuffed with contraband—not only Nancy Drew novels but hidden junk food, neither of which her parents approve of. Each girl has a different relationship to food and to her body, and each of these relationships is reiterated almost every time snacking is mentioned. None of the girls “diet” as such, nor do they mention watching their weight or trying to maintain thinness for aesthetic reasons. Yet several of them practice restrictive eating. The text seems to imply the necessity of managing and restricting food intake for these girls, even as they are doing it for nominally acceptable and even healthy reasons. Stacey

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112 Beth Younger, Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature (Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature, no. 35. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 4.
is diabetic and can’t eat junk food or any sugar at all. Dawn is a vegetarian who is passionate about healthy food. Jessi has to watch her weight because she is a ballet dancer. All these qualities, in isolation, may seem at first to represent a diverse cross-section of girls and their relationships to food and eating, but when taken together present a concerning portrait of the relationship between girls and food.

Stacey’s diabetes is particularly striking as what seems like a positive representation of a young person living with health problems. She deals with this chronic illness throughout the series. At one point, she is hospitalized; at others, she has to negotiate responsibility and independence with her sometimes-overprotective parents. Stacey also must give herself insulin shots every day, advocate for herself in new situations to make sure she can eat the food on offer, and demonstrate impressive will power for a thirteen-year-old girl to avoid being tempted by the sugary snacks that could send her into a diabetic coma. Even Stacey’s friends admire her maturity and stoicism in dealing with the disease. Jessi notes of Stacey:

Stacey’s life might seem glamorous, but it hasn’t been easy. Especially when you consider that on top of everything else, Stacey has a disease called diabetes. She has to stay on a strict no-sweets diet and give herself (oh, ew) daily injections of something called insulin. All in all, though, Stacey copes pretty well, even when she isn’t feeling too great.113

Ann M. Martin herself is quoted in Elle magazine as saying that she introduced Stacey’s diabetes because she “wanted to help people talk more openly about” the disease. “I got a few letters from kids who thanked me, and then a few letters from kids who had diagnosed themselves and gone to the doctor; in one case they’d caught it just in time. From some of the kids, it felt like I was feeling relief,” Martin muses regarding the reader

response to Stacey’s character.\textsuperscript{114} In her use of the word “relief,” Martin suggests that young readers with health problems of their own may have felt uniquely heard and validated by the inclusion of diabetes in Stacey’s story and by the normalization of life with a chronic illness. Stacey is not defined by her disease: she is stylish, sophisticated, good at math, and—of course—good at babysitting. The idea that such a strong character and compelling role model might also be chronically ill is unique, realistic, and clearly valuable to at least a few young readers. Moreover, if Stacey’s fictional diabetes resulted in potentially lifesaving diagnoses for even one real child, let alone several, as Martin claims, it would seem that its presence in the books is only a good thing.

However, detailed descriptions of the sitters’ relationships to food do not stop at Stacey’s medically necessitated dieting. Another recurring theme is Dawn’s passion for health food, which produces a disturbing narrative of constant dietary regulation under the guise of a harmless personality quirk. Again, Dawn’s focus on health food in itself may seem not only innocuous, but a positive representation of an alternative lifestyle—while most of the babysitters eat red meat and dessert, Dawn is a vegetarian who proclaims herself committed to sticking to her beliefs and working to save the environment. In one scene, Dawn describes her reaction when a “‘cute guy’” offers her a hot dog at a cookout: “‘I said, “Yuck! Pig carcasses and carcinogens!”’”\textsuperscript{115} Her unwillingness to compromise her values and beliefs even for an attractive male is somewhat refreshing. But there is an obsessive quality both to Dawn’s assiduous management of her diet and to the continued textual references to the diet and Dawn’s


\textsuperscript{115} Ann M. Martin, \textit{Mary Anne Breaks the Rules} (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1990), loc. 398 of 1249 Kindle.
efforts to maintain it. Occasionally, these moments provide comic relief, usually when one of the other babysitters is disgusted by one of Dawn’s trademark health meals. But more frequently, Dawn’s food choices are slipped into the text as a matter of course. In one book, she attends a baseball game with her family, but makes sure to bring along “healthy baseball game food” to eat as an alternative to the hot dogs her father and brother enjoy.116 Dawn never eats any of the snack food Claudia and the other babysitters partake in, but eats separate healthy snacks Claudia makes sure to have on hand. While the other babysitters eat Milk Duds, Claudia pulls out “two bags of sesame-seed-covered, low-sodium, oat-bran pretzels” for Dawn and Stacey.117 Dawn’s interest in health food may be a mark of her individuality, but it is also a concerningly restrictive dietary model for a growing teen. Her efforts to eat only healthy food veer past commendable to being overly rigid, preventing her from being able to enjoy occasional treats with family or friends. Though Dawn never states a sense of anxiety or rigidity about making healthy choices, the fact that her food choices are mentioned so many times throughout the texts—on the level of descriptions of specific “healthy” substitutes for “unhealthy” foods—suggests that on some level, she is constantly on guard in managing her eating. In this way, one of the central facets of Dawn’s identity—her interest in healthy, vegetarian foods—is constructed around a constant process of restricting and controlling her food intake.

117 Martin, Mary Anne’s Makeover, loc. 186 of 1255 Kindle.
While Jessi—only eleven—is not ill and has no particular affinity for health food, she also manages her weight via her diet because she is a ballerina. Stacey describes a club slumber party in a passage that exemplifies many similar, recurrent moments:

Then Claud and Mal attacked a package of Oreos (hidden in the closet), Jessi delicately took a single Oreo (she watches her weight to stay in shape for dancing), and Dawn and I passed up the junk food. We braided each other’s hair instead.\(^\text{118}\)

Jessi also mentions ordering fruit when she goes out to ice cream with her friends because “when [she’s] dancing in a show [she] really watches what [she] eats,” even though she is “dying for cherry cheesecake.”\(^\text{119}\) Jessi is only eleven, yet everyone takes this dietary management as a matter of course. No one in her family registers concern that she is too young to be dieting or that an eleven-year-old child shouldn’t be restricting her eating habits in this way. Jessi’s passion for ballet renders this type of dieting acceptable, safe, and even positive, just as Stacey’s diabetes and Dawn’s innate love for healthy eating render their restrictive diets accepted and “healthy.” None of them, ostensibly, are dieting solely to lose weight. Therefore, it is not only admissible but presented as a matter of course that they would spend so much time managing their food intake.

One wonders why such meticulous descriptions of these girl’s snacking habits must exist as such an integral facet of the text. The constant reminders of several of the girls’ modifications to each day’s snack makes it seem as if this management and modification is both central to who they are and practiced as a matter of course. There is no eating without some form of control, whether that means directly restricting food


intake or conveniently modulating one’s junk food habit by having a naturally skinny body. In this context, even Stacey’s diabetes seems almost to be a vehicle for her dieting—one of the reasons for her slim, blonde, and glamorous appearance. The representation of a struggle with chronic illness is also the representation of a constant and familiar struggle to many girls and women: the struggle to restrict and manage their eating.

Stacey, Dawn, and Jessi make up only three out of seven of the babysitters. Even if descriptions of their healthy diets seem to dominate the text, there are still four other babysitters: Claudia, Mallory, Kristy and Mary Anne—who don’t restrict their eating habits in any way. However, the lack of restriction in the diets of the remaining four girls is mitigated by reminders of their acceptably small physical stature. Younger observes that there is a default body type in young adult fiction for females, and that default is thin. She notes an “unacknowledged assumption about weight,” asserting that

If a character is presented and no reference is made to her weight, the reader assumes a ‘normal’—read ‘thin’—weight. Most often weight is mentioned only if the character is considered abnormal, i.e., fat or chubby, or if the character is thin as a reminder of the importance of being slender.\textsuperscript{120}

Indeed, none of the babysitters are overweight or even close. It is not only Claudia whose eating habits are rendered acceptable by constant mentions of her model-like figure. Though Kristy, Mary Anne, and Mallory aren’t necessarily junk food fanatics like Claudia, they enthusiastically partake in snacks at meetings. Both Kristy and Mary Anne are consistently described as being small. For example, in one book Jessi notes that “For someone with such a big personality, Kristy is very petite,” and that Kristy and Mary

\textsuperscript{120} Younger, \textit{Learning Curves}, 5.
Anne “…even look sort of alike. Mary Anne is also on the small side…”\textsuperscript{121} Descriptions of Mary Anne and Kristy’s similarity in appearance and small size appear in almost every Baby-Sitters Club book alongside reminders that Claudia looks like a model despite her copious consumption of junk food. The only babysitter who is infrequently, if ever, described in terms of her physical size is Mallory (also the only babysitter who is often described as being unhappy with her looks: “Mallory doesn’t consider herself pretty…but I think someday she’ll be prettier than anyone imagines, and there’s so much goodness inside Mallory that after you know her awhile, she starts to look pretty,” notes her best friend, Jessi.)\textsuperscript{122} Though it is perhaps telling that Mallory is the only babysitter who is never described as small, skinny, or long-legged and also the only babysitter who registers feeling negatively about her looks, Mallory is also implicitly not overweight. In the books’ cover illustrations, Mallory is portrayed as just as slim as the rest of the babysitters. Younger notes that in young adult novels, thin female characters are often implicitly “confident, assertive, and responsible,” in contrast to heavy characters, who are frequently represented as “passiv[e]” and “irresponsibl[e].”\textsuperscript{123} While this observation obviously speaks disturbing volumes about cultural values that conflate female thinness with virtuosity and female fatness with slovenliness, it is notable that none of the main characters of The Baby-Sitters Club are fat or even chubby at all. Because all the main characters are all “confident, assertive, and responsible,” perhaps so too are they thin.

All of this may still seem innocuous, particularly by comparison to other girls’ series literature. Other girls’ series feature descriptions of main characters’ insecurities

\textsuperscript{122} Martin, \textit{Jessi and the Awful Secret}, loc. 13 of 1289 Kindle.
\textsuperscript{123} Younger, \textit{Learning Curves}, 7-8.
about their own bodies, while none of the babysitters ever overtly express discomfort with their weight (even Mallory’s self-criticisms generally apply to her glasses, braces, and lack of pierced ears, features which are not related to Mallory’s actual body but to outside accessories). In *The Clique*, a main character constantly diets in order to lose weight so she can be as slim as her glamorous friends, though her weight is not unhealthy. Both Gossip Girl and Pretty Little Liars, series about stylish, socially confident, and wealthy high schoolers, include a main character with bulimia. Those books present not a realistic portrayal of a difficult struggle with eating issues, but a romanticizing of eating disorders as a viable form of weight management for thin, glamorous, and popular girls. In Pretty Little Liars, bulimia enables one character’s transition from dumpy and awkward to the “most sought-after girl” at her high school and the “skinny and gorgeous” girlfriend of the boy she has had a crush on for years but could never obtain when she was chubby. The Baby-Sitters Club series, in contrast, does not glamorize an unhealthy and dangerous disorder. (In fact, when Jessi does confront a classmate with an eating disorder, Jessi shares her concerns with their dance teacher and is able to assist her friend in getting help, positioning Jessi’s own restrictive eating habits as comparatively healthy and normal.)

The Baby-Sitters Club is more insidious but no less dangerous, and representative of the damaging normative identity that is both attractive to and sold to young girl readers. The exhaustive details of the thinness and dietary habits of the babysitters make an early start on inculcating the “damaging and stereotypical ideas

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124 Ibid., 11.
125 Harrison, *The Clique*.
127 Martin, *Jessi and the Awful Secret*.
about the standard of beauty and body image” that Beth Younger describes reflected in books for older young adults.\footnote{Younger, \textit{Learning Curves}, 5.}

The books both reflect and further unrealistic and unattainable standards for bodies and beauty—to young readers who, on the cusp of puberty and adolescence, are likely just beginning to attempt to figure out their own relationship to both these things. Younger cites a 1986 study in which 81 percent of ten-year-olds “reported that they had dieted at least once.”\footnote{Ibid., 5.} Perhaps it is fitting, then, to learn that the first Baby-Sitters Club book was published in 1986—released to a crowd of girl readers who were learning preoccupation with their bodies and weight. It is no wonder that the descriptions of each character’s dietary habits and body type became a central feature in these highly marketed books. Younger also observes the prevalence of eating disorders among young girls and women.\footnote{Ibid., 6.} While it might seem alarmist to argue that media like The Baby-Sitters Club may have played an active role in facilitating eating disorders, it certainly provides an example of the pervasiveness and continued perpetuation of exacting and dangerous hegemonic cultural norms of body size for girls and women. Moreover, the centrality of descriptions of thinness and food management in these books that purportedly have nothing to do with either communicate a kind of unspoken cultural assumption that food and body management are central to female identity, regardless of age.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[128] Younger, \textit{Learning Curves}, 5.
\item[129] Ibid., 5.
\item[130] Ibid., 6.
\end{footnotes}
Carolyn Carpan notes that romance and sexuality were central to girls’ series fiction as a genre around the time The Baby-Sitters Club first hit shelves. The Baby-Sitters Club filled a different niche in the series market, as a friendship story for younger readers rather than a romance story for teens. The primary emotional drama of the books lies in relationships with friends and family rather than romantic relationships, which stands to reason given that the seven main characters are only in middle school. One of the reasons the series has been hailed as a kind of introduction to feminism may indeed be its focus on females whose primary relational focus is other females rather than male interests (the Bustle article noting “10 Feminist Lessons” learned from the series credits “female friendship” as “the driving force behind the BSC’s success”). Crushes and romance, though, are far from absent from the series, even as they take a backseat to more prominent themes. The role of crushes and romantic interests in the lives of the various girls in the club suggests several intriguing and, in some cases, contradictory ideas about the relationship between romance and identity for young girls.

Among the common personality characterizations of the main characters is the division between “mature” and “immature” (a pattern Mary Bronstein also notes and critiques extensively). Within the club, Stacey and Claudia are noted as being “mature” and sophisticated (“the most sophisticated of all us members,” according to Jessi), while Kristy is marked as “immature.” Mary Anne shifts position throughout the series,
described as immature alongside Kristy early in the series but shifting into being considered, if not on Claudia and Stacey's level, at least somewhat more mature than Kristy and than she herself used to be. For girls teetering directly on the cusp between childhood and the teen years, maturity is an understandable preoccupation. All middle schoolers are confronting, for the first time, their constantly shifting place on the path between child and adult. Yet maturity in the universe of The Baby-Sitters Club has a distinct and specific definition that hinges on certain criteria that the reader is reminded of over and over. Stacey and Claudia, the “mature” ones in the club, are interested in clothes and boys. Throughout the series, Stacey and Claudia have crushes on and go out on dates with a variety of boys—including, in Stacey’s case, Kristy’s high school brother Sam. Mary Anne’s interest in both clothing and boys increases over the course of the series. In book 10, she gets a steady boyfriend named Logan. As the series progresses she moves from dressing “in a babyish way,” to “car[ing] much more about clothes than she used to” and finally getting the eponymous makeover in book 60 of the series. As such, she is considered increasingly mature as the series progresses.

Kristy is an interesting example. She remains resolutely uninterested in clothing throughout the series and maintains an ambivalent relationship to boys. Kristy and her friends both frequently assert her immaturity in conjunction with her lack of interest in these two things. Jessi describes Kristy as such: “Kristy is also just a little immature compared to her friends. She’s not too interested in clothes yet, she never wears makeup, and she doesn’t date.” Here, “maturity” is summed up in three key qualities—interest in makeup, interest in clothing, and dating. In some ways, Kristy could be considered

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135 Ibid., loc. 151 of 1169 Kindle.
136 Ibid., loc. 136 of 1169 Kindle.
one of the *most* mature members of the club—she is a natural leader, keeps the club running, is excellent at managing large groups of children, and takes on a large amount of family responsibility given her many younger siblings and pets. She also single-handedly coaches a children’s softball team. Yet she will not be considered mature until she begins taking an interest in her appearance (Jessi’s use of “yet” is telling here, as if being interested in fashion is an inevitability of womanhood) and in boys.

A female eighth-grader who does not date and takes no interest in boys actually seems fairly typical of many middle schoolers. While I had crushes on boys from afar, I certainly didn’t have a boyfriend or go on any dates at age thirteen. Nor did many of my friends—especially friends who, it turned out, were actually interested in dating girls, not boys. Today, my smart and self-possessed eighth-grade cousin (despite being, like Stacey, raised in “sophisticated” New York City) much prefers volleyball practice, studying, and sleepovers with her friends to pursuing dates or even talking about crushes. So, notwithstanding its odd equation with immaturity, the inclusion of a female character who does not conform to traditional feminine norms or yet care about romance is a refreshing reflection of elements of identity for many real girls.

However, despite the fact that this is Kristy’s purported and often-reported identity, Bronstein points out that “Kristy betrays her prescribed role of staunch tomboy several times in the first few books in significant ways.” This kind of slippage in Kristy’s tomboy identity is expressed, in part, through conflicting and ambivalent statements about her relationship to boys and dating. Kristy’s friends often mention her lack of interest in boys. However, this is frequently accompanied by some sort of

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137 Bronstein, “I Like Sports,” 212.
that [Mary Anne and Kristy] seem younger than Claudia or me (they don’t care much
about clothes or boys yet—although Kristy did just go to her first dance [with a boy as
her date]).”138 And after Jessi characterizes Kristy as “just a little immature” and notes
that Kristy doesn’t date—she qualifies: “But she does like a boy in her neighborhood!
His name is Bart and he’s very nice.”139 It seems the idea of Kristy having no interest in
boys is so unimaginable that she must have crushes on and even attend dances with boys,
even as she “doesn’t care much” about them. No interest, in fact, means some interest—a
baseline level of heterosexual dating practice that even those who supposedly don’t want
to date participate in. Indeed, Kristy attends dances with more than one boy over the
course of the series. In the book Bronstein cites, *Claudia and the Phantom Phone Calls*,
Kristy readily agrees to go to the Halloween Hop with Alan Gray, a boy who has spent
the majority of the book harassing her with creepy phone calls and who she previously
refers to as “disgusting” and “horrible.”140 Later, in *Kristy’s Mystery Admirer*, she receives
romantic interest from Bart Taylor, the coach of another children’s softball team in
Stoneybrook, and actually asks him to accompany her to another school dance (also the
Halloween Hop!).141 Bart and Kristy go out together and are even referred to as a couple
recurrently throughout the series, even as Kristy is concurrently described as not being
ready to date.142 ("Boys are not high on her list of interests—except she does like Bart
Taylor, who coaches a rival softball team,” says Jessi in a characteristic observation that

140 Ann M. Martin, *Claudia and the Phantom Phone Calls* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1986), loc. 127, 917 of
1482 Kindle.
asserts and then immediately negates Kristy’s lack of interest in dating.\textsuperscript{143} Bronstein raises a compelling point that this is hardly a portrait of a girl who “has no interest at all in boys” and “thinks they are gigantic pains.”\textsuperscript{144} Kristy’s feisty tomboy nature and cheerful renouncement of all things related to romance is refreshing indeed, but her character belies an implication that even the least girly and least “boy-crazy” girls must still situate themselves in relation to a male love interest.

The babysitters represent a variety of models of relation to the idea of dating boys, from “boy-crazy” Stacey to committed girlfriend Mary Anne to ambivalent Kristy. Absent from the text is any mention of the possibility of interest in dating females. For such widely commercially distributed texts, it is perhaps unsurprising that none of the main characters are overtly or even implicitly queer or questioning. However, any mention of queerness at all is conspicuously absent from the texts. The babysitters care for children with disabilities and families from various cultural backgrounds, yet they encounter no families headed by a same-sex couple. Strikingly, Ann M. Martin herself is revealed to have been in a long-term romantic partnership with a woman.\textsuperscript{145} But the universe she has constructed is one of “compulsory heterosexuality,” in which even those girls who are not interested in boys have boyfriends and queerness seems not to exist.\textsuperscript{146} The universe of The Baby-Sitters Club is also implicitly and compulsorily cisgender. Transgender or nonbinary characters are not present or mentioned in the

\textsuperscript{143} Martin, \textit{Jessi and the Awful Secret}, loc. 150 of 1289 Kindle.
\textsuperscript{144} Martin, \textit{Jessi’s Secret Language}, loc. 133 of 1265 Kindle.
books either. The books do not provide any avenues for a concept of girlhood beyond one that is straight and cisgender, nor do they depict a world in which non-straight, non-cisgender identities exist.

In some ways, the characters in The Baby-Sitters Club represent a variety of healthy models for approaching embodiment, consumption, style, and romance. And their struggles accurately reflect those of many middle-school girls confronting some of these tensions for the first time. However, on closer inspection, the texts also reflect the influence of constrictive and compulsory norms of identity for young girls. Deviations from norms of feminine dress, careful weight management, and the pursuit of heterosexual romance are nominally included, but they are mitigated by factors that keep the identities represented much closer within normative territory than they may initially seem.
3. “I Don’t See Them As Black”: Colorblind in Connecticut

Ann M. Martin herself lauds The Baby-Sitters Club series as “diverse.” Indeed, it includes characters with a wide variety of family backgrounds. A majority of the club members do not live with both biological parents under the same roof. Claudia is Asian-American, and Jessi is black. It is important to note that the books take place in a community of relative affluence, in which no family—regardless of race—seems to be hampered by issues of economic insecurity. Class is never explicitly discussed in the books other than to note secondary characters who are rich, i.e., live in mansions or attend private school. All of the babysitters and their surrounding friends and neighbors take economic security for granted; all of their families own homes and cars. These factors conjure a socioeconomic universe in which the characters experience little to no economic anxiety or adversity. Any racism that takes place in this suburban universe is vastly different than the kind that might also accompany economic marginalization.

Nevertheless, the characters do confront racism in certain books, which stress a narrative that everyone deserves equal treatment no matter their cultural origins. Especially given the era in which the books were first published—well before the onslaught of today’s We Need Diverse Books and #ownvoices movements, both of which specifically address issues of diversity and representation in literature for young people—one

147 Ann M. Martin, Welcome Back, Stacy (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1989), loc. 249 of 1171 Kindle
might consider The Baby-Sitters Club’s inclusion of people of color and discussion of racism to be progressive and positive in and of itself.

However, in returning to the books as an adult, I recognize troubling complexities of representation with regard to racial identity. The Baby-Sitters Club may be “diverse,” but is its diversity superficial? What racial identities does it privilege? Which ones does it misrepresent? How might readers of color have read the narratives of race and class differently than I did, or been differently affected in their conceptions of their own identities via the books? Are the books “relatable” to every girl, or to a very specific girl? How might young readers make sense of the representation and discussion of race in the books? What can they tell us about the dominant voices in American society and the kinds of identities that are implicitly or explicitly presented as desirable?

There are two nonwhite club members—Claudia Kishi, who is Asian-American, and Jessi Ramsey, who is black. Otherwise, the rest of the sitters and the vast majority of supporting characters in the series are white. Though this might actually present the opportunity for interesting and productive tensions to be explored, the overwhelming whiteness of Stoneybrook is not interrogated or explicated in a meaningful way. The books come close to presenting a realistic and valuable representation of the large and small ways white teens and teens of color alike may confront racial identity and come to terms with the privileges and biases that come with being white and living in an all-white community, but ultimately fall short of doing so.

The sitters themselves describe Stoneybrook as a predominantly white town—Jessi is the only black student in her grade and one of “only about six black kids in the
whole school.”150 When Jessi Ramsey’s family moves to Stoneybrook in the series’ fourteenth book, they are forced to contend with racism and prejudice from their all-white neighbors and classmates. No one shows up to the Ramseys’ doorstep with the “Welcome Wagon” or with housewarming gifts or tips for the new neighborhood, as they did when (white, blonde) Stacey and Dawn moved to the neighborhood.151 In one scene right after Jessi moves to town, Dawn—who also recently moved to Stoneybrook—and Kristy come close to confronting some of their white privilege when they interact with Jessi:

“Do you like Stoneybrook?” asked Dawn. “I do. I’m glad we moved here.”
“It’s—I…” Jessi paused.
“Not everyone has been exactly friendly,” [Mallory] tried to explain.
“Oh,” said Kristy suddenly, looking slightly embarrassed. “I see.” Thank goodness the phone rang then.152

In this passage, the white babysitters are introduced for a moment to the reality that their happy existence in idyllic Stoneybrook may be contingent, at least in part, on the color of their skin. New white families are welcomed to the community with open arms and feel “glad” they moved to Stoneybrook; new black families receive no such overtures. However, before anyone can dwell on this unhappy realization for too long, or critically unpack what it might feel like for Jessi to be welcomed into a group of friends who so lack understanding of her experience, the babysitters are saved by the ringing phone and the conversation turns to other topics (“thank goodness”!). Tellingly, this scene and Jessi’s introduction to Stoneybrook are narrated not by Jessi herself but by Mallory, her white best friend. The representation of Jessi’s experience as a black teen in a mostly-

151 Ibid., loc. 876 of 1182 Kindle.
152 Ibid., loc. 1027 of 1182 Kindle.
white community throughout the series continues to follow this pattern. Occasional moments of genuine tension, nuance, discomfort and insight are quickly followed up with distractions, platitudes, or reassurances.

In the first book Jessi narrates herself, she introduces herself and her family to readers:

My family is black. I know it sounds funny to announce it like that. If we were white, I probably wouldn’t have to, because you would probably assume we were white. But when you’re a minority, things are different.153

Here Jessi displays a sophisticated awareness of a default identity in her community. Beth Younger describes this default as it appears in young adult literature: “…white often serves as a ‘default’ for race. When the race of a character is not specifically named, white is assumed.”154 In spite of Jessi’s critical remarks about assumed whiteness in her world, the books themselves fit Younger’s description. Jessi and Claudia are always described in terms of their racial difference, while the other babysitters and characters in the series are white by default. Even as Jessi is purportedly aware of this problematic default identity, the books do nothing to challenge or invert such norms. The use of the word “minority” seems to serve as an explanation for the dearth of people of color in the books. Jessi describes having moved to Stoneybrook from an integrated community in which everyone who lived on her street was black and her school and dance classes were equally populated with white and black students.155 A deep exploration of the experience of a black or brown girl trying to navigate a cataclysmic move to an all-white community and facing racism on a micro or macro level could be fascinating and

155 Martin, *Jessi’s Secret Language*, loc. 46 of 1265 Kindle.
realistic. But the depictions of the racism Jessi (and, to a lesser extent, Claudia) faces feel surface-level and flawed in a variety of ways—written by white voices for white readers, and quick to absolve white readers and characters from their role in propping up systems of discrimination and oppression.

In *Hello, Mallory*, the book in which Jessi moves to Stoneybrook, Jessi’s family is disappointed to discover that their neighbors are less than welcoming due to the color of their skin. At the beginning of the book, this is understandably upsetting for Jessi and her younger sister, Becca. Jessi gets teased in school, no one wants to play with Becca, and Jessi even considers giving up her beloved ballet lessons because she is worried the color of her skin will prevent her from being chosen for parts. However, by the end of the book, “things are changing”—Jessi becomes friends with Mallory and joins the Baby-Sitters Club, Becca makes friends with a girl in the neighborhood whose family invites the Ramseys over for dinner, and Jessi decides to take ballet lessons and discovers that everyone in her class is “super nice.” Even the boy who previously teased Jessi by shooting rubber bands at her in class stops. In books that follow, the difficulties the Ramseys face in getting acclimated to Stoneybrook are repeatedly referred to in the past tense. Here is one example of numerous instances in which one of the babysitters asserts that the Ramseys have stopped facing racism:

They moved to Stoneybrook near the beginning of the school year, and they’re one of the few black families here. A lot of people gave them a hard time at first, but things have gotten better.

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157 Ibid., loc. 804, 1056 of 1182 Kindle.
In this way, Jessi’s family’s confrontation with racism is constructed as an unfortunate but temporary period that they have left in the past. Using vague terms like “things have gotten better,” the babysitters and Jessi alike imply that racism is no longer an issue that the Ramseys have to face. This constructs a disturbing false narrative that racial discrimination usually “gets better” and, in fact, goes away completely after a person of color has had time to adjust to a new situation and get to know their neighbors. The books acknowledge the existence of racism and even allow the characters to contend with it in highly limited and regulated doses, but they avoid acknowledging the pervasive, persistent, and systemic nature of this form of oppression, quickly covering things over with the Band-Aid of “it got better.” This may make the idea of racism easier to stomach both for white authors and white readers, but it is a grossly misguided and unrealistic representation of systemic oppression. It strikes me as highly dubious that racism ever could so quickly and completely “get better” in the real world, especially in the lives of a black family living in an all-white community.

There are even more deeply troubling implications in the specific stated reasons why things improve for Jessi’s family. Of course, one of the reasons is that the Ramseys finally make new friends—Mallory, the rest of the club, and another family who invites the Ramseys over for dinner. Surely making new friends would ease the transition to a new place and perhaps even make it at least somewhat easier to bear racist hostility from other, less friendly neighbors. But the other and more prevalent message that the babysitters repeat is that once people see the Ramseys for who they truly are inside, they stop being uncomfortable with the Ramseys’ race. Here, Stacey describes the reason things have improved for Jessi’s family in a sentiment that other characters repeatedly
express throughout the books: “[At first,] the people of Stoneybrook…didn’t look closely enough to see what a nice family they are. They only saw their dark skin.” In other words, once the neighbors look a little more closely and recognize the Ramseys as effectively white on the inside, they are able to overlook the Ramsey’s blackness and accept the new family into the neighborhood. Rather than being accepted for and because of their blackness, Jessi and the Ramseys are accepted over and over again in spite of their blackness. It is only after their schoolmates and neighbors see that they are good people in spite of being black that the racism they face seems to magically stop.

Implicit in this construction of racism as misunderstanding is the idea that to be anti-racist—or perhaps simply to be not racist—is to not see color. The babysitters explain their own acceptance and embrace of Jessi by noting that they don’t see her as black. Stacey observes in one book when referring to one of the only other black families ever mentioned in the series, “I don’t think of them as black, just as people…I don’t see [Jessi] as black, just as an eleven-year-old baby-sitter who’s Mallory Pike’s best friend.”

According to Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*, Stacey is in company with prominent “civil rights leaders” who are “quick to assure the public that when we reach a colorblind nirvana, race consciousness will no longer be necessary nor appropriate.” Alexander notes that civil rights advocates attempting to fight against racism mistakenly uphold colorblindness as a “worthy goal” for society. It is certainly common enough practice to teach young children the evils of racism by telling them that “we are all the

160 Ibid., loc. 62 of 1171 Kindle.
162 Ibid., 228.
same on the inside.” Surely, the idea that humans are all the same on the inside is not necessarily untrue, but its extension to not seeing color and not acknowledging race is deeply damaging and reflects ideals of identity that are rooted in upholding racism and white supremacy. Alexander argues:

The seemingly innocent phrase, ‘I don’t care if he’s black…’ perfectly captures the perversion of Martin Luther King’s dream that we may, one day, be able to see beyond race to connect spiritually across racial lines. Saying that one does not care about race is offered as an exculpatory virtue, when in fact it can be a form of cruelty. It is precisely because we, as a nation, have not cared much about African Americans that we have allowed our criminal justice system to create a new racial undercaste.\(^{163}\)

Alexander observes that colorblind ideology has helped to enable the mass incarceration of black and brown people because

\[\ldots\text{the public consensus supporting mass incarceration is officially colorblind…It purports to see black and brown men not as black and brown, but simply as men—raceless men—who have failed miserably to play by the rules…The fact that so many black and brown men are rounded up for drug crimes that go largely ignored when committed by whites is unseen.}\(^{164}\)

Mass incarceration, here, is just one example of the “racial and structural divisions” and inequalities based in race that pervade our society and, Alexander argues, at least partially masked by a rhetoric of colorblindness. In other words, if we “don’t see color,” this allows us as a society to also blind ourselves to the realities of mass structural inequalities based in race. Mass incarceration of black and brown bodies is unseen because the blackness and brownness of those bodies is cruelly unseen. Injustice faced by those individuals can thus be constructed as a personal problem, something they brought upon themselves through their individual behavior rather than systemic cruelty and racism enacted \textit{upon} them.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 228.  
\(^{164}\) Ibid., 228.
The universe about which Alexander writes is far from an affluent Connecticut suburb, and the stakes of racism and of colorblind discourse are much higher in the context in which Alexander situates them. The black and brown people from economically marginalized communities about which Alexander writes face the risks of unjust incarceration and outright bodily violence, even death, as a result of racism. Jessi’s family, in these books, never fears such outcomes. Being excluded from neighborhood events and snubbed by neighbors, while undoubtedly painful and wildly unjust, is a racism operating on a vastly different scale. Still, when Stacey and the other well-meaning babysitters blithely proclaim that they don’t see Jessi’s color, they make themselves blind to the realities of oppression that Jessi and her family do face. They can only accept Jessi if they make themselves blind to the reminder that she has brown skin and continuously reiterate to her and to each other that she is, effectively, white on the inside. Jessi herself reassures the reader of all the positive, nonthreatening qualities she possesses outside of being black, as if she is asserting to herself and to readers that she is effectively white just like them:

I…am not scary or awful or anything except just another eleven-year-old kid, who happens to have dark skin. (And who also happens to be a good dancer, a good joke-teller, a good reader, good at languages…and good with children…). 165

Of course, Jessi’s point that she does have an identity beyond her skin color is well taken. But how heartbreaking that a child should have to justify her blackness by listing all her good qualities as if counterbalancing the unfortunate fact of her brown skin. The reality implicit in Jessi’s discourse is that it is only desirable or even acceptable to be black if you can prove your goodness in spite of the color of your skin.

165 Martin, *Jessi’s Secret Language*, loc. 117 of 1265 Kindle.
Not only does this erase and invalidate a large part of Jessi’s identity, it turns racial discrimination itself into an individualized and personal problem, minimizing both its scope and its damaging effects. The discrimination Jessi and her family face in the books is depicted not as systemic, but rather as occurring at the hands of certain misguided or cruel individuals. Race is portrayed as just another quality or point of difference that someone might be “teased” for, rather than a central element of identity that vastly influences an individual’s advantages, disadvantages, privileges and opportunities. In one scene, Kristy babysits for Jessi’s younger siblings. Jessi’s little sister, Becca, expresses her sadness and frustration that when she first moved to Stoneybrook, many people wouldn’t play with her because of the color of her skin:

“You know what?” said Kristy. “Everyone has trouble fitting in sometimes.”
“Everyone?”
“Everyone. You know Matt? The boy your sister is sitting for now?”
“The deaf one?” asked Becca.
“Yeah. Well, at first the kids in his new neighborhood didn’t like him because he’s deaf. And last summer I moved to a new neighborhood where no one liked me.”
“Didn’t like you?” repeated Becca, mystified. “But there’s nothing wrong with you. I mean, you’re not deaf or anything. And you’re white.”
“But I’m not rich. My mother married this millionaire and he moved Mom and my brothers and me into his mansion on the other side of town. The kids all knew where I’d come from, and they made fun of me…what I’m saying is that everyone is the odd one out sometimes. You’re the only one in jeans at a fancy party, or the only Japanese kid in school, or the only diabetic in your class. See?”
“Yeah. Being called names still hurts, though.”

In this dialogue, Kristy exhibits another form of colorblindness, equating being teased for one’s skin color with being teased for being the only one wearing jeans in a room full of dressed-up people. Of course everyone has trouble fitting in sometimes, and of course this idea is probably a healthy one to expose to young readers. But there is

166 Ibid., loc. 1045 of 1265 Kindle.
a difference between people who have trouble fitting in in a given moment because they are wearing the wrong outfit and people who have trouble fitting in because they are systemically oppressed as well as treated unfairly on an individual level due to their race. Clearly, Becca has internalized the idea that something is “wrong” with her due to the color of her skin. Rather than listen more closely to what that feels like for Becca, Kristy immediately shares with Becca that she herself was teased when she moved into a mansion. (Incidentally, Kristy and her family moved to a wealthy neighborhood from a comfortable, middle-class suburban neighborhood, the same one where Claudia and Mary Anne’s families live.) By positioning her struggle as directly analogous to Becca’s struggle, Kristy turns race into a personal problem, one that can be equated with being teased for owning a scrappy collie dog instead of a four-hundred-dollar cat—the issue that Kristy and her family faced when they moved to their new neighborhood. Becca’s identity is one with a centuries-long history of being subjugated, oppressed, and treated with unspeakable violence and cruelty. Kristy’s identity is quite normative and representative of the dominant hegemonic American narrative of middle-class whiteness. As such, the experience Becca has in this situation when she doesn’t fit in because of the color of her skin is rooted in a completely different and much more sinister and damaging context than Kristy’s experience. Portraying the experience of racism as a universal one that everyone faces when they “don’t fit in” renders racism itself as an issue of manners, no more problematic than being teased for owning a decrepit old pet dog.

Turning racism into an issue of individualized and personal misunderstanding also absolves all the white babysitters (and their white families and friends) of any
complicity in upholding racist systems. Since no part of the racism as portrayed in the books is systemic, the sitters are almost constructed as saviors who are actively combatting racism as opposed to simply doing the bare minimum while still contributing to and upholding societal values that are based on racial stratification. Rather than internally questioning whether they could be doing more to combat the racist forces in their town, directly asking Jessi what she and her family might need, or even just spending more time talking with Jessi about how she feels regarding the discrimination she faces daily, the babysitters congratulate themselves for not seeing color. Meanwhile, Jessi does not register frustration at lacking friends who are people of color or even at lacking friends who make a deeper attempt to understand her experience. She, too, appears to perceive her friends’ actions as more than adequate and expresses nothing but gratitude at having found friends in the first place. Though one might expect Jessi and her family to feel angry about the racism they face or even just about the sense of alienation at being the only black family in their whole neighborhood and one of the only black families in the community, they never seem to express anger, only a sense of sadness. Implicit here, then, is the idea that it is the job of people of color not only to contend with racism without much support from white allies, but to carefully titrate their feelings about the discrimination they face. Meanwhile, white people are absolved of any deeper complicity in racist systems as long as they express that they themselves are not racist—they have no responsibility to work to dismantle racist systems or interrogate how they might be contributing to those systems without knowing it.

Claudia’s race and Japanese heritage is discussed even less in the books than Jessi’s race. Mary Bronstein actually addresses the subject of Claudia’s race, providing the
basis for a “complete analysis on the subject of race” in the Baby-Sitters Club series but noting that such an exploration “would be beyond the scope of [her] chapter.”¹⁶⁷ (Jessi is not included in Bronstein’s chapter, which appears to be focused on the earlier books in the series prior to Jessi’s arrival.) However, Bronstein does provide some troubling observations about the depiction of Claudia’s identity. In the introductory section of each book, readers are informed that Claudia is Japanese-American. Like Jessi, Claudia seems to be one of the only Asian or Asian-American members of her community, but this point is not explicitly discussed or explored. Bronstein points to the idea that, much like Jessi, Claudia is constructed as white in all but physical appearance:

Claudia is of Japanese descent, which is mentioned anytime Claudia first enters a book and is one of the first traits Claudia tells readers about herself. This information is always paired with the caveat that she is not an immigrant, was born in America, does not speak Japanese or have an accent, and is therefore as American (or white) as any other character...her friends’ insistence on always mentioning that she is really American communicates that this point of inclusion matters and that she is acceptable because she is not actually foreign...¹⁶⁸

Just as readers are reminded that Jessi is acceptable in spite of her blackness because she is just the same as the others on the inside, meaning she is basically white, they are reminded that Claudia is acceptable in spite of her Japaneseness because she is American on the inside. She is Japanese in looks only. Claudia’s appearance, as such, is frequently described as “exotic”—her friends point out her model-like beauty, smooth complexion, and “long, silky, black hair,” terms in which Bronstein claims “no other character’s facial beauty is evaluated or objectified.”¹⁶⁹ The fact that being Japanese apparently makes her

¹⁶⁹ Martin, Jessi’s Secret Language, loc. 151 of 1265 Kindle; Bronstein, “I Like Sports,” 215.
physically beautiful serves to further mitigate the negative elements of her ethnic nonconformity. Because she is model-beautiful as a result of being Japanese, it is more acceptable that she is foreign and that her appearance is not one of whiteness. Jessi is black on the outside, but her friends don’t see her as such because she is kind, a good babysitter, and tells jokes. Claudia is Asian on the outside, but her friends don’t see her as such both because she is so typically American and because her Asianness only serves to make her more physically beautiful. In this way, the only two characters of color in the series are constructed as almost as white as the other members of the Baby-Sitters Club. Over and over again, acceptance of both Claudia and Jessi is contingent upon mitigating reminders of their conformity to white norms. (Claudia only faces racism once in the series, in a later book called Keep Out, Claudia!, in which a new babysitting client requests that neither Jessi nor Claudia be deployed to sit for her children. The incident, like Jessi’s previous brushes with racism, is isolated and unsubtle; the sitters unanimously decide to stop sitting for the new client altogether and the incident, as far as I am aware, is not discussed again.)

Ultimately, the selection of “diverse” identities in the Baby-Sitters Club is actually homogenous in important ways. Even though two club members are technically people of color, they are presented over and over as being essentially white despite the color of their skin. The books construct a reality that is highly palatable to the white reader, one in which most everyone is just like them, in which racial discrimination is a minor rather than major problem in the lives of people of color, and in which all white people who purport themselves to be non-racist are not complicit in upholding racist systems but are

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congratulated and celebrated for their tolerant perspective. It is a world that white readers can imagine themselves into without difficulty; a world that continues to center, celebrate, and uplift white identities; a world constructed around the operating principle that everyone is white on the inside. Margaret Mackey notes the books’ singularity of voice despite their variety of narrators: “Each [character] speaks with exactly the same voice…every character speaks from the perspective of the white middle class.” From black Jessi to Asian Claudia to New Yorker Stacey, everyone “think[s] and speak[s] alike.”

I return to the thousands upon thousands of girls—myself included—who loved and continue to love the Baby-Sitters Club in part because of the endless fun in defining oneself as one or more of the characters. When I considered as a child whether I was a Stacey or a Claudia or a Dawn, it was easy to see parts of myself in almost all the babysitters. On some level, all of them were just like me. Even the characters of color had more or less the same life experience as the white characters. Although the books purport to celebrate diversity, in fact, they communicate specific ideas about what kinds of “diverse” identities are attractive and marketable and which ones may not be. They celebrate whiteness and homogeneity and only accept and uplift difference when it falls within specific parameters. Here I wonder, then, about actual black and brown readers of these books. Would it have been as easy for them to cheerfully self-identify with one or more of the sitters? How might they read and relate to these overwhelmingly white texts?

172 Ibid., 486.
In her evocatively titled study “We Don’t Want No Haole Buttholes in Our Stories: Local Girls Reading the Baby-Sitters Club Books in Hawai‘i,” literacy professor Donna J. Grace speaks to this question as it played out in a particular sociocultural context. Grace conducted a weekly book group in which she read a Baby-Sitters Club book with third-grade girls growing up in Hawai‘i. Grace and the girls’ schoolteacher…

…sought to understand how these young ‘local’ girls engaged with a book series privileging white, middle-class, mainland values, and how they located themselves within dominant ideologies related to race, culture and gender.173

The girls Grace worked with were nonwhite Hawai‘ians with “varying shades of brown hair, eyes, and skin” from a close-knit, rural community in a town called Ka‘ao.174 The girls’ classroom teacher had expressed ambivalence and concern about their passion for reading The Baby-Sitters Club—she worried the texts could “‘change the readers’ outlook toward themselves, their culture, and their ethnicity in negative ways’” (emphasis in original).175

During the course of the study, Grace read Kristy and the Snobs with the girls, documented their reactions to the text in various forms, and administered questionnaires such as asking the girls to describe their idea of a beautiful girl (including skin color) and asking them about their opinions of the Baby-Sitters Club books. Rather than being negatively influenced by the dominance of white, middle-class identity in the books, Grace concludes that the girls actually “openly rejected some of the images and identities privileged in the book.”176 While they enjoyed reading about members of the club who, according to Grace, are “slim and fashionable, with skin and hair that is typically long

174 Grace and Lum, “We Don’t Want No,” 422, 431.
175 Ibid., 423.
176 Ibid., 433.
and blond,” when Grace asked them to describe the skin and hair color of “a beautiful girl,” most of them responded with shades of brown and black.177 Haoles, or white people, were “most often the object of ridicule or scorn” in her discussions with the young readers.178 Grace suggests that instead of becoming interpellated by the cultural messaging of the texts, the girls used “alternative discourses” to enjoy the storylines but construct their own meanings from the text that “allowed them to resist and negotiate some of the ideologies presented in the texts.”179 In other words, the identities constructed in the texts did not restrict or cause harm to the girls’ constructions of their own very different identities as people of color. In some ways, the idea that the girls were able to enjoy these texts while exerting their own agency of critiquing and interpreting the somewhat narrow definition of racial and other forms of identity they represent is a hopeful one.

However, the cultural specificity of the situation means this study cannot necessarily be broadened as a form of understanding mainland American girls’ interaction with The Baby-Sitters Club and other similar texts. The common alternative discourse shared by the girls did not come out of nowhere but from the girls’ “small Hawai’ian community” in which white people are largely disdained and beauty standards are markedly different from those dominant in mainland culture. The girls in question were supported by their own cultural context—quite different from that of the mainland United States—in reading the texts through alternative discourses that upheld their own identities. Because the dominant, normative and desired identity in their cultural context

177 Ibid., 442.
178 Ibid., 446.
179 Ibid., 450.
was nonwhite, the Baby-Sitters Club books did not necessarily represent cultural messaging they were receiving from other places and did not uphold the cultural messages they were receiving. The “dominant ideologies” outside the texts, for these girls, are markedly different from the dominant ideologies of mainland America. I doubt that a similar study conducted with a group of mainland American girls who were not white or middle-class but were subject to a different set of cultural values celebrating whiteness and middle-class identity would yield the same results.

Additionally, the Hawai’ian girls’ resistance to dominant ideologies privileging whiteness does not mean they didn’t crave reading about identities closer to their own. The title quote of the study is telling. When Grace invited the girls to create their own fictional baby-sitting club and illustrate the characters, she noticed that the characters they drew all had brown or black skin, hair and eyes. Grace wondered if they might like to include other ethnicities found in Hawai’i, such as Japanese or haole (Caucasian mainlander). One replied “ ‘We don’t want no haole buttholes in our stories!’ ” (emphasis in original). Even as the girls in question clearly enjoyed reading Baby-Sitters Club books, comments like this one belie an underlying frustration with the outsized representation of white people in their reading material. It is telling that when invited to create their own versions of a fictional club, the girls revealed a lack of interest in stories that focus on a narrow slice of identity so different from their own and a desire to create an alternative narrative. Certainly, the ideological resistances these girls generated towards the Baby-Sitters Club books are inspiring and fascinating. But what if they didn’t need

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180 Ibid., 442.
them? What if they didn’t have to read stories told almost exclusively for and about “haole buttholes”?

The Baby-Sitters Club reveals troubling slippages in our cultural conversations around “diversity,” “representation,” and “multiculturalism.” Though at first glance the series appears to present a multicultural and nonracist universe, ultimately, the central identity that is celebrated, sold and represented over and over again in the books is one of whiteness and sameness. In disturbing ways, the apparently progressive Baby-Sitters Club series appears not to have evolved beyond the whitewashed universes of famously titian-haired Nancy Drew and the blond Sweet Valley Twins. While the Baby-Sitters Club technically represents different racial and cultural identities, it doesn’t do much more than that, and in fact seems to contribute to harmful conceptions of racial identity and racism reflective of dominant white-privileging discourses in American society.
Conclusion: “Friends Forever”

The tensions of identity presented by The Baby-Sitters Club books are not easily untangled. The job of babysitting both empowers and entraps the main characters in the series. The books’ portrayal of embodied life via sartorial choices, weight and diet management, and romantic inklings reveals a variety of contradictory ideas. The books’ claim to diversity both represents and deeply misunderstands racial and cultural identity. The portrait of American girlhood in these books is both subversive and deeply hegemonic, empowered yet constrained, expansive yet restricted—contradictions specific to the Baby-Sitters Club series, but generalizable to an American postfeminist sensibility of female life.

Over the course of researching this thesis, I have read countless celebrations of the Baby-Sitters Club series as “feminist.” These are largely unequivocal and uncritical, lauding the series as an excellent representation of female empowerment. At the other end of the spectrum, I have read numerous academic arguments that criticize the series’ portrayal of girlhood as regressive, disempowering, and even dangerous for young readers. Both extremes fail to acknowledge the vast gray area in between. Perhaps the books, neither a feminist fable nor a sexist horror story, can tell us something important about the often-contradictory opportunities and demands of female-identified life in the United States and can give us a jumping-off point to rethink and expand our conceptions of female identity.

I grew up in a world that somehow resulted in me becoming obsessed with both babies and clothing long before I was old enough to read. In some ways, the struggles, creations, and values of the girls of The Baby-Sitters Club as they form their identities
seem to reflect the reality of growing up as a girl in twentieth and twenty-first century America. Perhaps the books are complicit in an indoctrination to hegemonic femininity, but I believe they are also reflective of life in America, at least for white, straight, cisgender young women. I enjoyed reading these books because the central concerns of my life were also the central concerns of the characters’ lives. These girls showed me it was possible to love clothes and babysitting and also be kind, smart, thoughtful, creative, and a good leader. When I read The Baby-Sitters Club, I felt seen. I felt listened to. I felt that my interests and values were important. And judging by the books’ astronomical sales rates and continued popularity, I was not alone.

In some ways the books were echoing interests and representing the reality of life as a girl in America in a positive and arguably somewhat unprecedented way (generations of girl readers loved reading about Nancy Drew’s adventures in solving crimes, but how many girls were actually undergoing car chases in their neat blue roadsters?). Yet in other ways, the books clearly present a narrowly defined and hegemonic girlhood, furthering ideals and systems that insidiously work against girls even as they appear to be celebrating them. Interest in babies, fashion, and boys should not in isolation be considered a negative thing for any child regardless of their gender. But in many ways that I have explored in the preceding chapters, The Baby-Sitters Club constructs a reality in which all girls, from supposedly varied backgrounds and interests, care about these things and use them to define and construct themselves. The series also narrowly defines other elements of identity.

The American preteen girl presented in the Baby-Sitters Club is caring, kind, loving, and emotionally intelligent, but has also learned to put others’ needs before her
own and to take on burdens of guilt over events for which she is not responsible. She is responsible, independent, and a good leader, though most of these skills are applied primarily towards babysitting and caring for children. She is confident in using her style of dress to reflect her interests and personality characteristics, though constricted by the fact that clothing and consumer choices are two of her main tools for expressing herself. Though she is generally confident in her body, she is thin or average weight and already adept at managing and monitoring her food intake, never allowing her food consumption to veer into bodily excess. Receiving interest from boys is always of excitement to her and a heteroromantic interest is nearly always present in her life, even if this contradicts her stated level of interest in dating. She is cisgender. She is middle or upper-middle class and most likely white. If she is not white, she is nonetheless all-American, and is accepted in spite of her race because she is just as kind, smart, and nonthreatening as her white friends. If she is white, she “doesn’t see color” and doesn’t understand why her friends of color are not always accepted by society or mistreated due to their race.

Surely there is value to all readers in learning to be responsible and care for others—but what value lies in learning how to be thin, straight, and white? And in presenting yet another iteration of media that privileges thin, straight, white voices, how could The Baby-Sitters Club not be at least somewhat complicit in the indoctrination of young women into believing that they will only be celebrated and uplifted if they can fit themselves into these cookie-cutter categories? My experience of feeling seen and heard by the books was surely partially or fully contingent upon the fact that I am white,
straight, cisgender, and thin. What about the many thousands of girl readers who are not all or any of those things?

Useful to considering some of the disturbing tensions and insidious indoctrinations of The Baby-Sitters Club is the framework of postfeminist critique. Scholar Rosalind Gill defines postfeminist texts as contradictory, noting “the entanglement of both feminist and antifeminist themes within them.” Postfeminist media is defined by an emphasis on individuality, and postfeminist texts appear to be defined by a curious separation from the political and the sociologic. It is a sensibility that justifies regression from feminist ideals with the idea that feminism is now a matter of course. As such, what might have once been considered sexist and regressive aesthetics and behaviors for women make a resurgence under the guise of personal desire and girl power. Gill lists several “interrelated themes” characterizing postfeminist texts, including “the notion that femininity is a bodily property…an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline…the dominance of the makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference.” Gill also cites in her definition “an emphasis on consumerism” and “stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and disability as well as gender.” In Gill’s 2017 return to the term, she observes that “like neoliberalism…postfeminism has tightened its hold in contemporary culture and has made itself virtually hegemonic,” describing it as “the new normal” and thus “all the

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183 Ibid., 147.
184 Ibid., 149.
“more troubling” for its effortless interweaving into the fabric of our culture. This sensibility, as Gill refers to it, may help us conceive of both some of the more vexing contradictory elements of identity presented in The Baby-Sitters Club and of their firm embedment in our culture today.

The question remains how we can collectively move past this seemingly inescapable hegemonic postfeminism that permeates so much media directed at women and girls, even media that also produces some level of positive or subversive feminism. A first step, I believe, is studying and taking seriously media geared toward children and teens—like The Baby-Sitters Club, often maligned by scholars and librarians alike as not “serious” enough. The rampant popularity of such texts should be enough to tell us that they are indeed serious, and that we can learn much from their content about both what is important and what is being made important to people just beginning to figure out how to define themselves. Moreover, we can recognize that there are elements in these texts—even elements that may seem unfeminist or regressive—that hold value. A societal structure that is built around caring and collective uplift rather than on moneymaking and personal progress is a radical and positive model. The fact that this structure, as depicted in the books, is so appealing to so many young girls may actually be reassuring on some level. Surely, however, we must take a critical eye and work to deconstruct the destructive norms of femininity. Texts like The Baby-Sitters Club work—and are worked on by—young readers on multiple levels, both reflecting and affirming aspects of girlhood and interpellating young readers into a structure of tightly-

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bound and highly specific expectations of female identity. Studying the texts more closely calls for a need to lean into and examine both the books’ positive elements and their troubling implications and exclusions.

While working on this project, I have been surprised at just how much the books are both reflective of and literally present in 2019 cultural consciousness. Late in the writing process, in February 2019, I traveled to New York City to attend a live recording of The Baby-Sitters Club Club podcast—the podcast described in the introduction in which two adult men discuss every one of the books in the series, generating screwball fan theories and using the books as a jumping-off point for hours of banter. The event itself drew fans from as far as California and Canada, mostly white women who love not only the books themselves, but the podcast and the complex web of inside jokes made up by its hosts and related—sometimes only tangentially—to the world of The Baby-Sitters Club. The live show seemed, to me, unmemorable and overlong, trending more toward riffs of inane and obscure humor than toward any sort of analysis or even nostalgia. But I was vastly outnumbered in this opinion, surrounded by the legions of fans for whom it seemed any discussion of The Baby-Sitters Club was better than none.

While in New York for the podcast show, I spent the night with family. There, I chatted at length with my nine-year-old cousin Lila, who has never read or heard of the original series but is an avid fan of the more recently released and skillfully adapted graphic novel versions of The Baby-Sitters Club. After I impressed her with my knowledge of Baby-Sitters Club trivia, she looked at me thoughtfully, turning her head to one side.
“You know, you look kind of like Stacey after she gets a haircut!” she exclaimed. Then she told me her best friend, Benny, is just like Claudia—Benny is Japanese, has amazing outfits, and is an excellent artist (I met Benny the next day—her zebra-print combat boots seemed to confirm the theory at least from a sartorial point of view). I asked Lila which club member she feels she is most like. She hesitated only a moment before declaring that she is a Dawn—long blond hair and loves the environment.

Clearly, the delicious pleasures of identifying with Baby-Sitters Club members are as familiar to Lila as they were to me, my friends, and the countless girls and women who came before us. Though it takes a different form, the series is alive, well, and enjoyed for the same reasons as it was three decades ago. Not only did the books shape the identities and experiences of girls growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, but something about them remains intensely appealing, even seductive, in 2019. The identity of American girlhood I describe above as presented by the books is being presented and consumed over thirty years later with very little change.

So—is there room to move forward, both uplifting and learning from the elements of The Baby-Sitters Club that celebrate love, care, connection and friendship while also freeing all children from the elements of the texts that both produce and reflect a narrow construction of feminine identity? The 2019 first book in a new modern but self-consciously Baby-Sitters Club inspired series, called Best Babysitters Ever, at first appears to take a few steps in this direction, but ultimately falls short of constructing a more positive and expansive identity of girlhood. In the book, a twelve-year-old girl named Malia and her friends find an old copy of Kristy’s Great Idea and become inspired to start their own babysitting club, motivated not by any love for or experience with
caring for children but a desire to earn money so they can throw a special thirteenth birthday party. The text is peppered with references that feel purposefully specific to 2019—emojis, glitter, Marie Kondo—and the pre-internet system of weekly club meetings gives way to YouTube videos, websites, and email listserv blasts. Malia—the girl who spearheads the formation of the club and is pictured in the center of the three girls on the book’s cover—is black. Allowing a black girl to have the “great idea” seems like a step forward, although the zany and humorous tone of the book doesn’t seem to allow for much exploration of themes like racism. But Best Babysitter’s Ever’s primary departure from the original books is the main characters’ lack of interest and expertise in childcare and caregiving in general. They begin babysitting primarily as a moneymaking venture and ultimately learn to handle childcare not by forming bonds with the children they care for but by bribing their charges with sweets. Unlike Ann M. Martin’s sitters, these girls do not value caregiving over making money, which even extends to their relationships with their families. Parents take a backseat role in Best Babysitters Ever, and the main characters solve problems that are entirely their own, rather than their families’. No one would accuse these girls of being entrapped in the practice of feminized labor or of spending too much time caring for others at the expense of their own needs. However, the girls’ actual interests and engagements do not necessarily replace caring with more productive or varied interests. All the girls are very focused on clothes and shopping, and want to make money so they can throw a birthday party for themselves. One of them is brainy and a coder, but the other two girls’ respective passions are glitter, cats, and Taylor Swift (for one) and a crush on a boy in her class (for the other). Even
the coder girl is described as “ridiculously—almost unintentionally—pretty.” An interest in caregiving, here, seems replaced with other stereotypical and in many ways less nuanced interests than the interests of those in The Baby-Sitters Club. While their antics are certainly very humorous, the girls in *Best Babysitters Ever* ultimately come off as somewhat shallow and self-absorbed—not a clear forward progression from the more regressive ideals presented by The Baby-Sitters Club. Overall, *Best Babysitters Ever* makes a few promising departures from the original texts, but many more that are just as concerning as the most disturbing elements in The Baby-Sitters Club.

Not a month after my trip to New York, and after most of this thesis had already been written, Netflix announced its decision to turn The Baby-Sitters Club into a ten-episode television show. The show, which will come out sometime in 2020, aims to modernize the adventures of the seven sitters. Here, then, is ample opportunity to complicate the books’ original presentation of identity, uplifting the aspects of the books that are positive and progressive and at the same time deconstructing some of their most damaging elements. What if we could use the books to learn how to create a more inclusive, expansive, and empowered American girlhood? What if all children—girls, boys, nonbinary—could learn from and see themselves in the members of the club?

We don’t know how or what the Netflix show will change about the original books. A quote from Netflix’s vice president of children and family programming states that it aims to modernize the original “‘storyline and adventures’” of the books to “

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188 Vivinetto, “‘The Baby-Sitters Club.’”
‘reflect modern-day issues.’ Perhaps—and hopefully—the show will complicate issues of identity in ways the texts and graphic novel reboots have failed to do. Several online articles express hope for a lesbian Kristy. I wonder how the sitters would react to the Black Lives Matter movement and climate change. What if one of them was an undocumented immigrant? Transgender? Or what about subtler changes—what if Kristy could more explicitly articulate her ambivalence around wearing dresses or going out with boys? What if she were able to spend more time playing on sports teams like her brothers did? What if Stacey’s parents no longer demanded feminized labor from their daughter as a consequence of their divorce? What if we got more of a sense of Jessi’s experience of being surrounded by whiteness? Or more information on the role of being Japanese in Claudia’s family and sense of self, rather than constant mitigating reminders of the Kishis’ Americanness? What if restrictive dieting could be excised completely from the canon? Could we embrace a collective cultural longing for stories about friendship, love, independence and caring; stories that celebrate girlhood; and stories that honestly and explicitly depict the tensions, pressures, agencies and constrictions of growing up female in America?

In my own youth, reading The Baby-Sitters Club both provided me with blueprints for innovation and agency in forming my identity within the constraints of a sexist society and at the same time reflected some of those constraining ideas, often in insidious ways. I hope there is room in the future for girls’ series that can hold the same power and joy for young girls, that can hold the same radical celebrations of kindness,

\[189\] Ibid.
care, and the pleasures of femininity, but contain more room for a variety of girls within their pages and for an expanded concept of girlhood.
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