Reading the Culture of Girlfighting

SARA, A TWENTY-YEAR-OLD COLLEGE STUDENT, sits forward in her chair in a way that suggests earnestness. Her wavy dark hair is pulled back in a ponytail; her intense brown eyes hold my gaze whenever she comments or answers a question. She has an air of self-assurance. I think about this as I stand before this classroom full of students, mostly sophomores like Sara; a room full of adolescents here to learn about adolescence. I recall her paper; it’s somewhere in the pile I’m handing back today, still speaking to me, pulling at me. The assignment was autobiographical, to explore a significant moment in early adolescence. Sara chose to reveal her painful, protracted search for popularity:

It was in fourth grade that I discovered what popularity meant . . . friends, security, and the envy of my peers. . . . I started to associate myself with the popular girls. I worked my way in slowly, quietly, and took a back seat to the “leaders” of the group. I dressed like they did, walked like they did. . . . I remember using a valley girl voice for the second half of fourth grade, placing “like” in between almost every word. It was difficult and drove me and my parents crazy, but it was necessary in order to attain rank.

By fifth grade I was there. I was popular. I made sacrifices along the way, losing touch with my best friend who didn’t fit the “mold,” using my allowance to supplement the clothes allowance my parents gave me in order to buy the designer clothes, spending my winter recesses freezing on the playground because wearing a hat wasn’t cool, sleeping over at strangers’ houses where I wasn’t comfortable because the hostess had popular status, and putting down others in order to ensure my place at the top.

Talking behind “friends’” backs became second nature, and I became an excellent liar to deal with the rare occasions when people confronted me about my inconsistencies. . . . They called us the “clan,” even the teachers did, and I always thought of it as a fitting
and endearing title. It gave us an aura of being elite, exclusive, and that was exactly what we were. . . .

On the surface, I assumed everyone loved me by the time I reached sixth grade. I was no longer the quiet one, the follower; I had become the leader who was being mimicked by twelve insecure followers. The strange thing was, I loved my friends dearly. We had slumber parties where we stayed up all night talking. We went on bike rides together, shopped together, even studied together. The times I treasured most were those that I spent with these girls as individuals. As a group we were a magnificent force whose wrath was feared by our unpopular peers. . . . We cut down others because we didn’t know how else to ensure that we wouldn’t be the ones teased relentlessly. We were selective about who we hung out with so others would feel privileged if we accepted them. . . .

As the leader, I encouraged my friends to find fault in others. I didn’t see any other way for us to maintain an image of perfection unless others were imperfect. In this way I wanted to ensure that I would remain the leader of our group. I’d seen others fall from the throne, finally seen for their conniving and hurtful ways, and I worked overtime to be sure that didn’t happen to me. I was a liar, able to deceive anyone, and lucky for me I was good at all of this. After two years of practice at being just the right amount of nasty, I had everyone convinced that my life was perfect.

Within the group, I picked one target to put down, seeing in her the goodness and the ability to reveal to the others the type of person I was. I made her days difficult, finding her sensitive areas and using them as ammunition against her. She was from a home where her mother had a mental illness and her father was an alcoholic, something that I knew was abnormal and easy to justify as faulty. Despite the fact that such things were out of her control, the others followed my lead and teased her as often and as harshly as I did. I was successful; she finally left the group and didn’t reappear until the eighth grade when she was ready to confront me.

Sara can reveal this not so pretty story of her girlhood, in part because hers is a tale of redemption. At the end of sixth grade, a teacher falsely accused her of a misdeed, saying, “I know deep in my gut that you did this. You are the type of person who would do this.” This floored Sara—the jig was up; unbeknownst to her, others had seen and
judged. Slowly she began to awaken to the fact that “my peers despised me; they all wanted to be me, but they hated me. . . . Everyone treated me with respect, wanted to gain popularity by associating with me, but they were all talking about me behind my back.”

When Sara pulled away, she “found that I was quickly replaced.” And worse, she was now the target. The popular group she had once led

came back for me with a vengeance. They were still a powerful force and were able to convince the entire school to hate me. There were notes on my desk when I got to class that read ‘DIE BITCH!’ and I couldn’t get so much as a look from any guys. They ruined me, devastated me to the point of missing nineteen days of school in eighth grade and I felt I deserved every minute of it.

Until fairly recently, bullying and aggression have been seen as boys’ issues. In the spring of 2001 I went to the foremost national conference on educational research and attended a number of panels on bullying, all so crowded that the audience flowed out the doors and stood in the hallways, straining to listen. Not one panelist addressed girlfighting or girl bullying, of the sort Sara describes, in any significant way. The clear assumption, among professionals at least, was that it was a boy problem. The same was true for the many articles in newspapers and magazines that followed the spate of school shootings. Identifying a bully really meant identifying the characteristics of a boy bully—and a white boy bully at that.¹ In fact, it’s true that only one of the twenty-nine school shooters has been a girl, and the more visible signs of bullying such as fist fights, pushing, and harassing and threatening behavior, were more likely to involve boys.

When it came to fighting or bullying, girls were a different matter or perhaps no real matter at all. There have been books written on girl gangs and violent girl behavior, but because such depictions of girls have been racialized—stereotyped and marginalized by the popular press as a problem of urban girls of color—educators have tended to dismiss the larger realities of girls’ anger and aggression these books address. Instead, the prevailing assumption has long been that girls are good at relationships; that their friendships and peer relationships, in particular, are responsive and healthy and, in spite of petty bickering and minor conflicts, devoid of really serious problems. Social science
research on friendship has confirmed this for the most part. Intimacy is central to girls’ friendships and girls rely heavily on their best friends for love and support. Adolescent girls spend more time with their friends than do boys, have smaller groups of friends than boys, expect and receive more kindness, loyalty, commitment, and empathic understanding from their best friends than do boys, and are more likely than boys to have open, self-disclosing relationships with their female peers.

But there has also been a prevailing view that complaining and bickering, deceit, and back-stabbing are normal aspects of growing up female and thus not worthy of serious scholarly attention. Girls are simply, by nature, catty and mean to one another but compared to, say, shooting their classmates, this is nothing. When it came to really serious bullying behavior, girls were the victims, not the perpetrators. This cultural misconception has enormous power. When Carol Gilligan and I wrote about girls’ struggles to hold onto their thoughts and feelings at early adolescence, their loss of voice received all the attention. No one seemed particularly interested in the younger outspoken girls or the girls who fought back and resisted “the tyranny of nice and kind.” Popular books like *Reviving Ophelia* reinforced the image of a girl-victim crumbling under the weight of a girl-toxic culture.

What a difference a few years make. First of all, no one likes to feel like a victim and in time girls began to write and edit their own books: *Girl Power, Ophelia Speaks, Listen Up!* and *Adios Barbie.* It’s not that simple or one-sided, the young authors explained—we speak, we fight back, we don’t just consume, we create; no one story or experience defines us. These books joined the work of a growing collection of feminist psychologists and “Girl Studies” scholars who have been attending to the day-to-day realities of being a girl, writing about alternatives to the victim story, and exploring new versions of girlhood connected to social and cultural context, history, and the material conditions of girls’ lives. Taking their lead, writers of more popular books have attempted to reclaim pejorative terms directed at girls and women and to question their persistence in the culture. My shelves display a series of titles that would shock my mother: *Cunt, Bitch, Slut,* and the less provocative *Promiscuities* and *Fat Talk.* Part of the process of reclamation is an appreciation of how these terms are used by girls and women to control and undermine other girls and women.
It’s perhaps not surprising, given these developing views of girls as more active and complicated and culture as less monolithic and absolute, that new versions of girlhood have emerged—girls as smart, strong, athletic, brave, resistant. Out of these versions, a new popular ideal, some might say a counterideal, has developed: girl as fighter. In response to girl as victim, which fed off stereotypes of femininity as passive and vulnerable, girl as fighter is assertive, usually smart, psychologically tough, physically strong. Again, there have always been girlfighters, but they have been easily dismissed as outsiders to ideal (white and middle-class) femininity: the delinquent, the violent gang girl, the tough streetwise girl. This dismissal, of course, was a way of defending the white ideal against the ever-encroaching reality that things were more complicated. This new version of girl as fighter places a desire for power and visibility firmly within the cultural definition of femininity. The girlfighter is now just as likely to be the girl who does well in school, who plays sports, the girl teachers like, the girl next door.

But there’s something suspicious about this shift from victim to fighter. In the media there’s been a pendulum swing—girlfighting was way out; now it’s so in. TV offers us a range of smart fighters from Alias and CSI to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Charmed, and Birds of Prey, while movies are filled with the likes of Lara Croft and Charlie’s Angels. Like girl as victim, the girlfighter maps too easily onto familiar assumptions about femininity. She’s more in than outlaw because her fighting is mediated by qualities that make her pleasing—and sexually appealing—to men. She redeems herself through her beauty, occasional vulnerability, and her romantic relationships. Indeed, if we consider the rise of the girlfighter in popular culture, I think we can see how she reinforces as much as she challenges long-standing assumptions about the “nature” of girls and women.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

It’s odd that just as girls began to assert their complicated realities and just as girlfighting, fraught as it is, emerged in the popular press, we became obsessed in this culture with the “mean” girl. Mean girls began to surface in the news media in the mid-1990s, as real concern for girls’ anger and aggression collided with the titillating nature of girlfighting.
A young writer for YO! asked, “Are girls turning meaner?”12 The Boston Sunday Globe announced, “Schools see rise in girls fighting.”13 An article entitled “Mean Streak” in the Chicago Tribune claimed “girls have a knack for cruelty.”14 Girls’ Life asked, “Do mean girls finish first?” and advised readers to “beat a bully at her own game.”15 A New York Times Magazine special “How to” issue featured a nasty fight between two popular high school girls.16 Newspaper articles reported that a Texas beauty queen was stripped of her crown for threatening cheerleaders’ lives, while a Canadian beauty queen lost hers for assaulting another contestant. An article in New Moon Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams was entitled simply, “In Seventh Grade, All Girls Are Mean to All Other Girls.”17 At the same time, reports began to show that even if the total number of girls committing violent crimes is still small compared to boys, physical girlfighting and girl-initiated violence have increased exponentially since the mid-1980s or so.18

In response to such articles and reports, psychological research on relational forms of aggression or what some refer to as alternative aggressions, long buried under the “girl as victim” stereotype, started to garner public attention.19 Relational aggression, more typical of and more stressful to girls than boys, is characterized by such behaviors as gossiping or spreading rumors about someone or threatening to exclude or reject them “for the purpose of controlling” their behavior.20 Relational aggression is often indirect. In fact, as Sara and her friends illustrate, the goal is to hurt another person in such a way that it looks as though there has been no intention at all. It’s a strategy used more often by those with less power because it protects one from retaliation or from punishment by those in control. It’s a very useful strategy for girls because it provides a cover for unfeminine emotions like anger.

But equating girlfighting with relational aggression again pushed girls’ violent behavior and physical fighting to the margins: now meanness was “normal” but physical fighting was still deviant, unredeemable, outside the realm of typical girl behavior. This new view of girlfighting as psychological and relational warfare has thus done little to challenge feminine stereotypes. Indeed, popular books on the issue seemed to undermine their own attempts to affirm the power of relational aggression to cause girls long-term emotional and psychological damage. Adding pejorative labels like “fruit cup girl” to the lengthy list of dismissive terms adolescent girls already have for one another, even with the best of intentions, only reaffirmed girlfighting as trivial.21
When rooting out girl meanness becomes a goal in and of itself, we risk losing the bigger picture. Let’s catch, label, and fix “it” and then what? We’ll have our girls back? And which girls are we talking about? Clearly the Barbie doll-like images and the advice about raising a “gamma girl” that prevailed recently in the flurry of magazine articles about girls’ relational aggression indicate that the concern is really about middle-class white girls. Moreover, neither the literature on relational aggression nor the popular accounts of the ways girls enact it on each other seem to address the larger issue of power. Little consideration has been given to the fact that a girl’s social context, the options available to her, and the culture in which she lives will affect how she aggresses. No substantive consideration has been given to the fact that girlfighting might have something to do with the range of injustices and indignities girls experience in their daily lives.

The view of girlfighting as trivial is all too familiar. Girlfighting still gets our attention when it takes extreme forms, as it so often does in the media. Real-life conflicts such as those between Nancy Kerrigan and Tanya Harding, Amy Fisher and Mary Jo Buttafuoco, Monica and Linda made headlines and allowed us a voyeuristic look inside girlfighting. Because fighting among girls or their adult women counterparts is considered at once shocking, shameful, and funny, it’s laced with eroticism and becomes the fodder of sitcoms, talk shows, and soap operas. This is the motivation behind women’s prison movies, various forms of female wrestling, stories about cheerleaders or beauty queens who go awry, soap opera back-stabbing and Jerry Springer-type “bitch-slapping.” As one high school girl explains, “guys see two girls fighting and think they’re getting passionate and maybe the girls might start kissing and maybe the guys can get in on it.” “Guys invented the concept of jello-wrestling,” another young woman agrees, “so that they could watch girls fight.”

It becomes hard to take the issue very seriously. The Canadian beauty queen who took out her competitor ended up on the cover of Playboy wearing only boxing gloves. In the 1980s women in the nighttime soap, Dynasty, tore each others’ clothes off in a public fountain to huge ratings. The ad for a more contemporary night-time soap, Titans, advertised the thinly veiled animosity between the two female leads: as the women walk by each other smirking and rolling their eyes, the voice-over announces, “If you can’t say anything nice, pull up a chair.” Peruse the channels and it seems that every man in prime time wants to
watch a girlfight. When a physical fight breaks out between Rachel and her sister on the sitcom *Friends*, Phoebe shouts, “Oh my God, shouldn’t we stop them?” Joey responds, “Are you out of your mind? Let’s throw some Jello on them!” When the slapping and hair pulling finally ends, Chandler, after publicly shaming the women, leans over and whispers, “By the way, that fight was totally arousing.” You don’t even have to enjoy a girlfight to get the significance. As two female friends fight for his attention, Will, the gay leading man on the sitcom *Will and Grace*, commiserates with his gay friend Jack about the erotic subtext: “Too bad this is lost on us.”

It’s important to appreciate how the culture, from a very early age, sets girls up for girlfighting. When I ask fifteen-year-old Bahtya why there’s so much infighting in her school, she says simply:

It’s the popular thing to do. TV, media, newspapers, it’s like they teach girls you’re supposed to fight. And if anybody had any common sense in their head, they’d know you don’t have to fight with the girls in school. . . . Like I mean, you watch TV, you watch MTV, you watch anything, and there’s always a fight going on between the popular girls at school. A lot of it is, I mean, you get into a fight and the whole school knows about it. Therefore your popularity goes up. You become more widely known. You’re the girl that’s in the fight with the other girl. It’s like the attention, whether it’s positive or negative. It’s a constant competition or race for attention.

What strikes me about Bahtya’s analysis is how closely entwined media messages and school behavior are for her—how she moves from one to the other without missing a beat. And yet she also doesn’t quite believe the hype; she has “common sense in [her] head.” Of course socialization is not that simple—girls meet these messages with a range of questions, responses, and viewpoints—but there’s no doubt that the increase in images of girlfighting on TV and in movies contributes to the normalizing of both physical and relational aggression of girls toward other girls. It’s not that girls are fighting more, but that it’s not so hidden, not so pressured to go underground. The boxing legacies of Ali, Frazier, and Foreman, after all, have been handed down to daughters. Rarely is there a contemporary show for kids of any age with a girl, token or not, who doesn’t physically fight or isn’t verbally tough—that
is, if she has any respect or power on the show. Consider the comment from a female lead in the TV show *Birds of Prey*: “Men. Can’t live with ’em. Might as well beat the crap out of ’em.” These girls fight over a lot of things, but they almost never fight for girls’ rights or against the unfairnesses and injustice or cruelty lobbed at other girls.

In fact, fighting itself is not the problem. One can make a strong case for teaching girls how to box or do karate, not only to protect themselves, but so they can experience a full sense of power, physical and mental. Indeed, Simone de Beauvoir, writing in the 1950s, saw the benefits to fighting that transcended competitive sports “which means specialization and obedience to artificial rules.” Such activity “is by no means the equivalent of a free and habitual resort to force,” she argued. Sport “does not provide information on the world and the self as intimately as does a free fight.”

for a man to feel in his fists his will to self-affirmation is enough to reassure him of his sovereignty. Against any insult, any attempt to reduce him to the status of object, the male has recourse to his fists, exposure of himself to blows: he does not let himself be transcended by others, he is himself at the heart of his subjectivity . . . anger or revolt that does not get into the muscles remains a figment of the imagination. . . . This lack of physical power [in girls] leads to a more general tidiness: she has no faith in a force she has not experienced in her body.

It’s this sense of power, this refusal to be reduced to the status of object, this desire to be at the heart of her subjectivity, that so often lies behind both girls’ growing participation in sports and an increase in physical fighting. The problem is that the girlfighting girls see in the media is often enacted in their female relationships and is usually about containment of other girls rather than about testing physical limits. It’s likely to be motivated by desire for heterosexual romance, envy for male attention, or beauty competitions. Stories in which boys’ desires and their realities are central—as they still are in much of the media aimed at children and adolescents—frame girls as competitors who need to please or to prove their desirability.
LIVING LA VIDA MICKEY

The much-touted transition to the third millennium is now behind us, there is talk about third-wave or even postfeminism, and still it is not uncommon to hear, above the general clamor of children’s voices on any given playground, shouts of “girl stain,” threats of “girl cooties,” taunts like “go play with the girls” or “you throw like a girl.” Girls are still seen by boys as pollutants, as contaminators, as carriers of a deadly strain of femininity. These seemingly innocent insults are given cultural weight by the media and socializing institutions like schools, and are engaged with and passed on by children themselves. It is still considered an insult of great magnitude to call a boy a girl; the reverse, of course, is not true.

Television perpetuates such views and the messages come early and frequently. The world of prime-time TV is still largely a white male world—65 percent of the characters are male; 35 percent are female and 75 percent of the characters are white. TV for young children is not much different. Although we have to account for animal characters, boy characters prevail with shows like Clifford, Caillou, Franklin, Little Bill, Stanley, Arthur, Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius, Dexter’s Laboratory, Doug, Sponge Bob, Rupert, Hey Arnold!—the list is seemingly endless. Even PBS, in their proud venture into original programming for preschoolers, missed the obvious. Five of their six “Bookworm Bunch” shows feature male characters. The most striking female character in this sea of interesting and adventuresome boys is “Elizabeth the emotional pig” in Marvin the Tap-Dancing Horse. Elizabeth is a sniveling, self-blaming whiner who consistently annoys the other characters by worrying and crying all the time.

There are some cartoons with girl leads, certainly more than there used to be—Dora the Explorer, The Proud Family, Kim Possible, and The Wild Thornberrys, for example—but mostly they are token girls in a medium still tightly controlled by the assumption that girls will watch boys, but boys will not watch girls. These girl characters—whether yellow monsters, brave Pokémon trainers, clever wizards, or extreme skateboarders—live in a world monopolized by boys and their friendships and interests; and so girls and especially groups of girls or girl-friends are pretty much absent.

But it is not as simple as the percentage of male to female characters. Abundant in movies and television shows for the youngest chil
Children are messages about negotiating heterosexuality and romance in ways that subordinate, objectify, or denigrate girls and pit them against one another. Disney’s remake of traditional fairy tales and folk stories is perhaps the most obvious offender—admittedly an easy target. But the strategic rerelease of these movies as videos makes them perpetually contemporary and ubiquitous. In Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty a girl escapes the cruel world of bitter women to the safety of romance. Chosen by a prince, she’s saved from women’s wrath, deceit, and jealousy. This is a common story that has at its heart the separation of girls from women. Girls are promised happy endings if they sacrifice female relationships. “Happily ever after” is a “fantasy of the fathers,” argue Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen Silber, “only one woman allowed.” At the base, such romance stories “divide girls from each other, from themselves, and from adult women.” The message is clear: Girls must “relinquish ties to other women so that their energies can be harnessed in preparation for the fiercely competitive race toward men’s approval.”

In popular movies evil women destroy and betray girls to rid themselves of female competition, to retain male desire, to be chosen by the powerful. A woman’s power is derived from her cunning, deceit, and duplicity and her ability to undermine another’s reality. Such movies send the message that there is one acceptable avenue to power: be nice, stay pure, look beautiful, act white, be chosen. Come off too bold, say what you think too loudly, take up too much space, express your anger and disappointment, and you risk casting your lot with the evil ones. Above all else girls learn “the patriarchal lesson that other women are not even remotely connected to the health and happiness of growing girls” and that female friendship is dangerous, suspect, or unimportant.

This message is further layered, however—as deeply racialized as it is gendered. Evil women in these stories are dark and ugly, their power is derived from the mysterious and the magical and the primitive. Don’t trust other women, they imply, but especially don’t trust “dark” women. Such images contribute to a deep and historically based mistrust between women of color and white women. On this account, Peter Pan is one of the worst offenders, apparent when Tinkerbell and Wendy and Tigerlilly compete for the attentions of Peter. The white boy who won’t grow up is the object of desire that crosses racial lines and even human forms, causing jealousies, stereotyping, and ultimately
near-deadly betrayal. Most of Disney’s movies follow suit, if not representing women as evil, then representing girls as vain, chattering annoyances who look to boys and men for approval or seek to change them from beast into civilized prince.

Built into the ideal of white femininity, perfect for getting and keeping a prince, are messages about girls’ place in boys’ life cycle: girls are objects to own or cheerleaders to boys’ adventures; they explain and protect the emotional lives of boys. On the cartoon version of Peanuts, for example, Linus points to the Little Red Haired Girl and exclaims, “There she is, Charlie Brown! Just take her.” In stores like Penney’s, AND1 basketball clothing announced: “Your game is as ugly as your girl,” and “I’m gonna take two things, this game and your girl.” In the ubiquitous Christmas classic Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer, a girl reindeer is introduced to redeem Rudolf and urge him on to bravery. A story just isn’t a story, even for the littlest kids, without reshaping it into what psychologist Deborah Tolman calls the “heterosexual script”: the dominant story of romance that promotes boys’ active desire and girls’ passivity, and thus male dominance and female subordination. According to Disney, for example, Minnie Mouse in the new century still doesn’t make her way in the world on her own merit; she’s “living la vida Mickey.”

_She loves to live the Mickey life._
_She’s anything but plain._
_She’s got Mickey on the brain._
_Outside inside out,_
_She’s living la vida Mickey._
_That’s what she’s about,_
_living la vida Mickey._

Three- and four-year-olds heard this parody of Ricky Martin’s hit on the Disney channel four or five times a morning, sung against Mickey’s attempts to escape Minnie’s sloppy kisses, coy behavior, and shopping sprees. Girlhood, it seems, is cute, icky, and associated with chasing a boy who doesn’t want you.

To be sure, this ideal of femininity has evolved in recent years. Disney’s newer movies are an improvement and there are other available images and messages for girls to ponder. But even the few shows with strong girl characters feed stereotypes of girls and gender relations. In-

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indeed, there’s an emerging pattern. While the girls in these shows may be smart, adventurous, and brave, up to the challenges before them, these qualities distinguish them from excessive (annoying, petty, weak) femaleness. Their chosen qualities come at the expense of other girls, their sisters, their mothers. Boys are central and the other girls on their radar screens are, by comparison, ditsy, passive, mean, and shallow—worthy of heavy eye-rolling. There are boy geniuses but no girl geniuses. A full-page ad in the *New York Times Magazine* for the cartoon *Dexter’s Laboratory* reads, “He skips grades. She just skips.” “She” is “a babbling ballerina, otherwise known as older sister Dee Dee.” In show after show lines drop in to remind girls of their place; an endless variation of “Yuck, that’s a girl thing to say, do, wear, feel.”

There are so many examples. Misty, the female Pokémon trainer who accompanies the hero Ash Ketchem and fellow traveler Brock, is clad in short shorts and crop top and worries about her “beauty sleep.” She’s defined in the usual female terms—“bossy” and “caring”—and pitted against her three narcissistic and scantily clad older sisters who tease her in valley girl voices. While she’s accepted as one of the guys, the other girls who show up are objects of Brock’s desire. And then there’s Gary, a rival Pokémon trainer, who travels with his personal harem of giggly cheerleaders.

Self-possessed Helga in the cartoon *Hey Arnold!* is secretly in love with Arnold, and represents all jealous, backbiting, mean-spirited girls. Helga’s mission is to take out all female rivals—usually with her fists, affectionately named “Old Betsy” and “The Five Avengers”—and decide the relational fate of the other girls in her clique. Her personal hell is home and the constant comparison to her “perfect” older sister, Olga. Similarly, part of what makes adventurous Eliza in the cartoon *The Wild Thornberrys* seem so level-headed is the contrast to her spacey, boy-crazy older sister, Debbie.

Being the kind of girl who’s accepted or befriended by boys underscores a girl’s power and sets her against other girls. For example, in *Kim Possible*, Kim—beautiful, thin, and sporting tight crop tops—is described as “your basic average high school girl here to save the world.” She’s smart enough but relies on her side-kick and best friend Ron Stoppable, a “super-brain.” Her biggest threat is not evil, in fact, but the head cheerleader and if girls go to her website they’re invited to choose Kim’s cheerleading moves or play “shopping avenger.” In *Lizzie McGuire*, the level-headed middle schooler does have a female friend,
Miranda, but the smartest person on the show is her male buddy, Gordo. Lizzie’s main problem is, you guessed it, the popular head cheerleader. Reggie, the cool extreme snow/skate boarder in the series *Rocket Power* does have some girlfriends but, inexplicably, she chooses to spend nearly all her time with her younger brother and his best friends.

In the Harry Potter series, the central girl character, Hermione, is smart and brave and yet she’s described as a “bossy know it all,” hissing at Harry and Ron, his friend, “like an angry goose,”36 or “cowarding” in corners; words like “whimpering,” “shrill,” and “panicky” follow her like a house elf through the stories. She gains respect by doggedly working her way into the boys’ favor; there are no other girls worth her time and energy. Indeed, Ginny, Ron’s stereotypically feminine little sister, is the only other girl we know much about. When interviewed on *Dateline*, even Emma Watson, the actress who plays Hermione, couldn’t distance herself fast enough from her character: “We’re completely opposite,” she said. “[Hermione’s] bossy. She’s horrible. I hate her!”37

So while girls are accepted, they are compromised by their barely hidden girlness or set against other girly girls. In such a climate, it becomes almost impossible to imagine a girl hero, alone or with other girlfriends, who would carry the collective imagination of all children like an Ash Ketchum or Harry Potter. In the world of media fantasy, the closest might be the *Power Puff Girls*. These cartoon mutant superheroines, Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup, are the result of their father’s (Professor Utonium) botched attempt to create perfect little girls (he accidentally spilled some chemical X into a vat of “sugar and spice and everything nice”). To be a brave girl is to be essentially, biologically, a boy. And unlike *Pokémon* or the Harry Potter books, the Power Puff superheroes are not marketed to all kids; you’ll find their pink heart-covered T-shirts and accessories only in the girls’ department.

We can no longer generalize that girls learn from the media, in Katha Pollitt’s words, to filter “their dreams and ambitions through boy characters while admiring the clothes of the princess.” Some girls do. But others learn to filter their ambitions through boy characters and dis the clothes of the princess. It remains true that “boys, who are rarely confronted with stories in which males play only minor roles, learn a simpler lesson: girls just don’t matter much.”38 Unfortunately, many girls learn that lesson too. As girls engage in boys’ journeys, learn their
magic, master their battles, they also learn in the process not to like girls, trust girls, respect girls, or take girls very seriously.

Girlfighting, the side effect of such disrespect and distrust, has long been depicted as funny and normal in children’s movies, but it used to be pretty marginal. The only two female characters in *Muppets in Space*, for example, are self-involved diva Miss Piggy and her main competition in work, love, and beauty, actress Andie McDowell. The subplot in which Miss Piggie and McDowell fight for a news anchor job while the real action goes on, underscores to little girls just where they are located in the big picture and what they are supposed to be made of. But in this new era of girl power, girlfighting has taken center stage. Indeed most new TV shows and movies for kids have at least one tough girl character to foil the nice girls or to challenge the boys. While Jimmy Neutron Boy Genius invents things like girl-eating plants, his nemesis, Cindy Vortex, blonde, blue-eyed, and tough as nails, alternates between her crush on the cool boy and kicking alien butt. *Mike, Lu, and Og, Angela Anaconda*, and *Clifford* revolve around rivalries between tomboy girls and girly girls, nice girls and mean girls. Entire cartoon shows like *As Told By Ginger* are based on girl cliques. Fantasies of revenge, jealousies, broken promises, and secrets prevail.

And the differences between the girls matter—invariably, as we’ve seen, it’s the girly girl who’s the target. Francine, the working-class athlete in *Arthur*, for example, is often in conflict with Muffy—a rich and shallow girly girl. While the girls are friends, the young audience is made well aware that Francine, the tomboy, is the better girl—more loyal, grounded, and real. We root for Francine and we collectively dismiss Muffy as narcissistic and mean. Indeed, the nasty or annoying girl that everyone loves to hate is now endemic to kids’ TV—Angelica in *Rugrats* is perhaps the poster child—but girls like her are popping up everywhere. TV shows reflect the impossible pressure on girls like Angelica to perform niceness and perfection in public and, because there is no real critique of the oppressive nature of ideal femininity or the heterosexual script, uses their justified, often covert anger against them, “proving” just how untrustworthy and deceitful girls really are.

These examples may seem trivial—but collectively they take hold. Their power is in the volume and the repetition and also in the uneven reinforcement of these messages in school and family life. In spite of all the options available to young girls today, they still meet up daily with
a tired old dichotomy—femininity versus masculinity. Only now it’s girls playing both roles. These simplistic constructions of gender may have little actual connection to the nuanced lives of boys and girls, but they provide an enticing fiction in which girls with feminine qualities or interests are admired by neither the boys nor the girls watching.

WHO’S THAT GIRL?

As girls move through childhood, the messages about what it means to be an acceptable girl come from everywhere, as do pressures to conform to an ideal beauty image. Consider, for example, one of the most popular book series for girls. In the 1930s when the Nancy Drew mystery novels were first published, Nancy was an intrepid, feisty detective who raced from one exciting adventure to another. In 1959 modifications to Nancy’s character began and have continued over the years, so that the reader is constantly reminded of Nancy’s appearance, her vulnerability, her desire for boys’ attention, and her need for male help. The original version of the *Whispering Statue*, for example, describes a clever, independent escape from harm, while in the revised version Nancy is found and saved by a protector. And in the original versions of the novels Nancy was described simply as “attractive.” Now we read: “The tight jeans looked great on her long slim legs and the green sweater complemented her strawberry-blond hair.” Her friend Bess sighs, “You’ll make the guys absolutely drool.” In story after story, Nancy’s bold nature is chipped away, until she resembles “a boy-crazed social butterfly,” or what Jackie Vivelo describes as “a Barbie doll detective.” The covers of her books, rather than invoking mystery, now look like Harlequin romances or old ads for *Baywatch*.

Girls who watch prime time are “likely to see a beautiful, young, thin, white woman who is intelligent and independent but at the same time adheres to traditional gender stereotypes such as focusing on appearance and being motivated by a desire for a romantic relationship.” Characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Dark Angel, Alias*, and *Ally McBeal* can be strong and fearless as long as they “use their strength while wearing spaghetti-strapped tank tops and short skirts.” Even the women of *Friends*, one of the most popular shows for adolescent girls, periodically let us know how they re-created themselves to fit the part—Monica, once fat, is now emaciated; Rachel has had a nose job,
and Phoebe has re-created herself from a tough girlfighter to a nice but ditsy girlfriend. What girls will do to fit a homogenized ideal of femininity is seemingly endless. And if changing your body doesn’t work, going after other girls to elevate your chances just might. In a culture that tells girls and women that meeting a beauty ideal is all-important and they can willfully re-create their bodies, it’s no surprise that they would use body gossip—judgments about failures to meet such physical ideals—as a weapon to undermine or control other girls. “Boys fight boys, fistfight,” fifteen-year-old Kim explains,

Girls will just taunt each other until they give them an eating disorder or something. . . . They’re very horrible to girls. They’re very good at getting inside people’s heads and like playing mind games and messing them up very well. . . . Girls are very verbal and much more hurtful a lot of the time, because sometimes emotional wounds take longer to heal than physical ones. Most guys fight; that’s it, it’s over. But girls, once you scar them on the inside, it’s not so good.

Shows like Beverly Hill 90210, Melrose Place, and Dawson’s Creek evoke the same beauty images as part of educating girls in the heterosexual script. The world turns around what boys desire and need and good girls know what to do, where to draw the line, and how to suffer. After 90210 ended its long run, actress Jennie Garth expressed her relief about doing something different “after being the 90210 designated victim for a decade. Having been shot and raped and stalked . . . week after week . . . it was just refreshing to have some fun.”

And yet, even as Britney Spears proclaims to girls, “your body is your best asset,” the definition of girlhood is changing; what it means to be female is newly contested territory. Lucy Liu, one of Charlie’s Angels, donned boxing gloves for the cover of USA Weekend as the caption proclaimed, “a new definition of American beauty.” Not a new definition of the American woman, mind you, but of beauty. This is the rub. Power for the millennium girl includes the physical—she can kickbox, do martial arts, or box with the boys—but otherwise, the entrenched myths and social stereotypes about girls and women are intact. “Most of the techniques used by Charlie’s Angels to attain power involve treating people like shit, being competitive, being manipulative, and being violent,” notes one annoyed critic. Says another: “Women are still portrayed as objects of male desire and fantasy, there are two scenes
of women pitted against each other, women of color are exoticized, and big daddy Charlie still runs the show.” Regardless of the actual audience, we know to whom the movie is pitched when the cast is described as “easy on the eyes.” So girls can fight and fighting can give them a sense of power, but it does little to interrupt sexist stereotypes or the ever-increasing pressure on girls to meet others’ expectations. When things go wrong for the superhero Power Puff Girls, the Townsville people chant, “Your fault! Your fault!”

The new perfection for girls is more than just being nice and kind and self-flagellating—it’s nice and kind with a butt-kicking edge. Charlie’s Angels, another reviewer comments, “is a tribute to today’s woman: able, independent and cute—not so much feminist as femi-nice.” When the Angels’ scriptwriter says, “We want the Angels to be strong, but not masculine” or when a reviewer praises the TV movie Jane Doe because “[Teri] Hatcher’s character doesn’t lose her femininity and still holds her own in this action film,” what they mean to say is that today’s woman can be strong and independent as long as she’s drop-dead beautiful, self-effacing, and nonthreatening to men. Young girls in cartoons can have that unredeeming nasty edge because they are basically nonthreatening, but adult women need to find their femi-nice side; they need to know whom to please. In her examination of the increasing prevalence of tough girls in the popular media, Sherrie Inness notes that while there is a greater variety of gender roles now open to young women, a character’s “toughness is often mitigated by her femininity, which American culture commonly associates with weakness.”

Tough women can offer women new role models, but their toughness may also bind women more tightly to traditional feminine roles—especially when the tough woman is portrayed as a pretender to male power and authority, and someone who is not tough enough to escape being punished by society for her gender-bending behavior. . . . When the media do depict tough women, it is often to show that they are exceptions to the rule that women are not tough. The need to be, above all else, pleasing, pleasant, and subordinate to men—what Lynne Phillips calls a “pleasing women’s discourse”—is readily available to girls. The magazines girls read often focus on “how to get a man,” and make clear “that this should be done without seeming aggressive or ‘slutty’—a pleasing woman is always discreet. . . .
Magazines communicated the pleasing women discourse rather explicitly through such tips as how to tilt one’s head, smile coyly, and dangle one’s foot while listening attentively to boys and laughing demurely at their jokes. Reality shows like *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire*, *The Bachelor, Meet My Folks, Bachelorettes in Alaska*, and *Mr. Right* all turn on these performance skills, even as the real thrill comes in those moments when the audience sees what the men don’t: the competitive, slutty, aggressive women behind the scenes. I think this is why, in the final analysis, the movie *Thelma and Louise* was so controversial. It wasn’t the “gratuitous violence” per se, but violence without the pleasing, redeeming romantic love of a man. Thelma and Louise chose their freedom and their loyalty to each other over their fraught relationships with the men in their lives. The further they traveled from convention, the more elusive, ethereal, clear-minded, and beautiful they became—and this was the real threat.

In this way, girls of all ages are bombarded every day with subtle and not so subtle images and messages about what it means to be a girl—a tomboy, a girly girl, a bossy girl, a girl other girls want to be with, a girl boys like, a girl who’s taken seriously, a beautiful girl, an athletic girl, a smart girl, a tough girl, a fighter. This collage creates what might appear on the surface to be a rich array of choices; a new freedom for girls to be the girl they want to be. On closer scrutiny, however, the choices seem more like the refracted colors of a prism, capable of spinning a brilliant but dizzying array of options, beautiful but illusory. In the final analysis, the rich complexity of girls’ experiences is narrowly labeled and voiced-over in this culture and the same old gender dichotomies hold sway: Girls will be girly girls or they will be [tom] boys; they will be good girls or sluts, nice girls or bitches. While the parameters have widened and shifted a bit, the general structure hasn’t changed—both sides provide pathways to power through boys’ attention and acceptance. So girls choose their weapons and face off—the girly girl, tossing her hair and staring indignantly at the tomboy; the tomboy, basketball in the crook of her arm, smirking back; each wearing a T-shirt she bought at the local department store. “Caution: Your boyfriend’s at risk,” says one. “In your face,” says the other.

In the world of popular culture, girls are actively encouraged to choose between these and other stereotypes. Such imagery and messages contribute to a climate in which girls take on the role of policing other girls’ looks and behavior, becoming absorbed with one another’s
failures to match up, dismissing other girls on the grounds of flimsy femininity or arrogant bitchiness, rather than questioning the dichotomies themselves and who they benefit. “Girls are, like, girls,” sixteen-year-old Tamara says, explaining what it all comes down to: “It’s kind of like, when a girl meets a girl for the first time, they automatically hate each other until they learn to like each other.”

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Girls begin an intense competition for a place in the social world at a surprisingly young age. Girls are quick to learn about power—who has it and how to get it—by watching, getting close to, imitating, and pleasing those upon whom it has been conferred “naturally.” However, to be female in a culture so invested in boys and girls being different, while at the same time privileging qualities associated with maleness, offers a girl limited options. The fiction is repeated so frequently as to become reality: she can identify with boys—be “one of the guys”—or she can act in ways that boys find pleasing and desirable. If she’s really clever, she can do both.

These options become most visible and disturbing to girls at early adolescence, when the force of the culture backs these choices and when girls’ attempts to struggle and resist and live more complex lives draws public scrutiny and risks rejection from boys and girls alike. As Elizabeth Debold and her colleagues note, these are publicly sanctioned choices, the “paths of least resistance . . . well-trodden paths that women take into patriarchy. They require that a girl betray herself and her connections with women—but in different ways.” They are both “male definitions of the female self.” These choices make a girl vulnerable to invidious comparisons; each is a setup. If she tries to be one of the guys, as thirteen-year-old Jane explains, she comes off as “obnoxious and out of control,” “too aggressive,” “too tough,” and “self-involved.” If she tries too hard to be a girl guys want, she is, as thirteen-year-old Robin says, an “airhead,” always “hee, hee, heeing,” an “embarrassment to other girls,” or she is, more simply, “a slut.” She is dismissed “as untrustworthy, weak, ridiculously prissy, and too nice.”

While she can attempt to gender pass—copying boys’ behavior and endorsing boys’ interests and values and judgments about girls—of
course a girl can never really be a boy. Signs of her assertiveness, individuality, and competitiveness will be read differently and responded to differently—she’s too bossy, rude, or mean. And by trying to be a girl boys desire, she can never really be or know herself. The competition with other girls and the potential for rejection is intense and requires a careful makeover. Both scenarios demand that she define herself in relation to an unattainable ideal and against herself and other girls. Both scenarios also set the stage for girlfighting, something all girls experience or witness in some form or another, at one developmental stage or another.

And so over time, with the help of media and sometimes family and school, and oftentimes peers, girls struggle with social stereotypes “and too often assimilate the pervasive belief that they are inferior.” Some take this realization out on themselves—eating disorders, self-mutilation, and depression, we know, are gendered maladies. Some take it out on other girls through fighting and ostracism; others idealize maleness and in the process disavow their entire gender, mirroring boys and men in their rejection of femininity, and by association, rejecting girls and women as weak and less important. Some bond with their close friends and reject the pressure and the ideals other girls embrace and embody. Competing with or rejecting girls becomes a way for a girl to separate, to distance herself from the inferior “others” unworthy of her friendship, adult approval, or male desire. In a culture that values masculinity and the characteristics that go with it, separating from other girls—separating from an inferior, weak femininity so incapable of attaining real power and control—is the way to gain the power of maleness for themselves.

In this way, social hierarchies and barriers to trust and loyalty among girls are formed early and nurtured over time. Since it is not “feminine” to openly want or claim power, the subterranean world of “good girls” relationships is rife with competition that results in all kinds of painful and mean behavior experienced by girls and yet seen by no one. This is why girls are such a hard read, and why we dismiss girlfighting as irrational or mysterious. It is simply too dangerous to show your hand, to know what you know. Since “good girls” aren’t supposed to say what they want, those who openly fight for power are, by definition, “bad girls” or “bitches”—girls who don’t play by the “feminine” rules of relationships either because they are too much like boys or because they want boys too much.
Simply put, girls’ treatment of other girls is too often a reflection of and a reaction to the way society sees and treats them. While we may not want to admit or even believe it, girls and women—by their association with conventional understandings of femininity—have less power and garner less respect in our culture. Their voices and concerns are less likely to be heard or taken seriously. Because the power they do have so often arises from qualities they either have little control over, don’t earn, or openly disdain—their looks, their vulnerability, their accommodation to others’ wants and needs, their feminine wiles—they too often take out their frustration and anger on each other. Girls and women derogate and judge and reject other girls and women for the same reasons they fear being derogated and judged and rejected—for not matching up to feminine ideals of beauty and behavior or for being brave enough not to care. Girls’ meanness to other girls is a result of their struggle to make sense of or to reject their secondary status in the world and to find ways to have power and to experience feeling powerful.

This process of assimilation into and personal ownership of a culture that denigrates the feminine is referred to as internalized oppression—when those victimized by oppression and stereotypes assimilate the dominant views and “freely” control themselves and others like themselves. Then, as my colleague Sharon Barker says, “men don’t have to put women down; they can always find another woman to do it for them.” In a form of horizontal violence, girls take out their anxieties and fears about matching up to or resisting ideals of feminine beauty and behavior on each other. They fight—exclude, tease, reject, and torment—other girls over things the dominant culture makes out to be very important, but in the grand scheme of things shouldn’t matter that much—that is, how perfectly nice, thin, or pleasing a girl is.

In the most simplistic sense, this is the classic divide and conquer strategy—divert girls’ attention from the real to the ideal; pit them against each other over trivial matters so they won’t see the big picture—the institutional and cultural inequities, the societal control over women’s bodies, the gendered nature of violence, abuse, and poverty. If we stay preoccupied with our own problems—and women’s and teen magazines and a hugely profitable self-help book market assures us they are our problems—and with each other’s faults, we won’t notice that we are making $0.75 to the male dollar or that we carry the burden of poverty or that what matters most to human survival is secondary in
a capitalist culture. If we believe we are the problem and take that out on each other we can pretty well assume nothing will change. If we don’t trust each other, we won’t talk. And if we don’t talk, we won’t put two and two together.

Such a climate of division and distrust among girls eventually undermines women’s psychological strengths and their political potential. When girls internalize and unquestioningly accept the divisions we make in this culture between good girls and sluts, schoolgirls and airheads, nice girls and bitches, and when they betray other girls in order to be taken seriously or in the name of popularity, romance, and male attention, they perpetuate their own subordination, consolidate their secondary status, become complicit in their own oppression. Those girls who remain loyal and supportive of other girls resist these divisions in spite of the personal and social costs and, through their relationships and commitment to other girls, imagine other possibilities for success and collaboration.

So much of a woman’s struggle to voice her thoughts and feelings, to engage in conflict and debate, to stand with other women, arises from the success or failure of her relationships with other girls in childhood—will she be punished, rejected, excluded, emotionally or physically hurt, or betrayed by other women, as she was by other girls, for speaking her thoughts and feelings, for questioning the way things “naturally” go? We need only to listen to the rhetoric of adult women’s relationships and their public debates over what it means to be a good mother, a successful businesswoman, a “true” woman, or “real” feminist to understand the long-term implications of these early relationships. The pathways begun in childhood all too often consolidate and crystallize in ways that divide women and work against collective efforts toward social change.

Gender socialization as we do it in our culture prepares the ground for girlfighting. A girl of five is already well schooled in the cultural leitmotifs of girls’ and women’s social place in the world. By six, seven, and eight years old, she already looks to boys and men for acceptance and approval, even as she lives mostly in a social world of girls and women. By ten and eleven she may sacrifice other girls for success, popularity, and boyfriends or reject other girls as stupid and wussy. The evil thing is that too many of us are lulled into believing this must be so; convinced by sheer mind-numbing repetition of a particular social reality. We become comfortable. Change becomes threatening and difficult. We
also become unimaginative and predictable and formulaic, like the many bad sitcoms we endure night after night.

That’s why listening to the girls and women in this book is so important. Listening to them talk about their relationships with other girls, especially the often invisible struggle and hurt they experience, invokes the past and yet points to the possibility that history does not have to repeat itself. The fissures and fault lines girls identify can provide the information for new relational groundwork, for a different way of moving through the world, one where girls and women no longer live and enact old stories of deceit and mistrust and competition, but cross boundaries to provide one another with the psychological and social support necessary to demand they be taken seriously and treated fairly. Such a relational shift has both political and social ramifications. When we unravel the complicated nature of gender and power and desire so often at the base of girls’ relational cruelty to other girls—when we alter the relational foundation this way—we prepare the ground for a generation of women comfortable with themselves, with their voices and their power, and capable of, indeed, passionate about, working together for social change.

In the next chapters I map girls’ struggles to claim themselves, protect themselves, and reinvent themselves within and against the stories of femininity and womanhood they have inherited. That so much of their struggle takes the form of girls’ misogynistic behavior toward other girls is both understandable and tragic. Girlfighting reveals a lot about the culture we live in and girls’ desire to escape narrow and negative views of femininity. Because girlfighting is so often about keeping other girls—those who transgress or resist or defy categories—in line, it is fundamentally about maintaining the status quo. When girls go after other girls, a culture rife with sexism—and its relationship to other “isms”—and those who benefit from it are off the hook. Girls’ preoccupation with the ways they and other girls look and speak and act siphons off the energy and creative power they need to form gender collectives, to reinvent current power arrangements, and ultimately to change the world in truly significant ways for all girls and women.

By unraveling the mystery of girls’ and women’s relational lives and revealing the corrosive impact of shallow and relentless messages about femininity, I tap the sources of girls’ relational struggles with other girls. By following their voices developmentally, from childhood
through adolescence, I reveal the slow evolution of a pattern of behavior that is damaging and divisive. By highlighting not only the hard parts, the misogyny and cruelty, but the places where girls resist and friendships between girls are good and healing, I seek to imagine how things might have been different for us and how we can make things different for our daughters. Only by ferreting out the cultural hand behind girls’ “natural” behavior can we understand and maybe even forgive those girls who persecuted us (and ourselves for persecuting other girls), and move forward to create and support other realities for ourselves and the girls and women we love.
they are not, so that genuine friendship in which one can express feelings and engage in a range of activities becomes girl-only territory. The irony, then, is that this apparent all-girl territory so many psychologists tout as “the wonder of girls” is defined from the very beginning by its difference from boy territory, from the power boys have in the physical world and by its relationship to the larger cultural story of romance and desire for boys’ attention. This means that girls’ friendships with other girls, as wonderful as they can be and as important as they are, will be measured time and again against two prevailing ideals—being like boys or being liked by boys; being girls who do what boys do or being girls boys want. As these two culturally sanctioned choices become more defined and encouraged, betrayal and competition, rejection and exclusion will be focused on those girls who challenge these pathways or threaten a girl’s status and power by being a better, more successful traveler on one road or the other.

VOICE TRAINING FOR FRIENDSHIP

If a cultural story about boys’ power and girls’ subordination is at the heart of girlfighting, as I think it is, we should begin to hear the rumblings of trouble in the youngest girls’ stories of friendship. Because girls exude a bold, assertive, and entitled sense of themselves, a finely tuned sense of justice, and a tendency to “speak their minds with all their hearts,” they receive a lot of instruction or voice training from significant adults in their lives, as well as from the culture in the form of the media, about the ways good girls or nice girls should speak and should sound.

Girls as young as three and four years old develop ingenious ways to respond to such instruction. For example, sociolinguist Amy Sheldon finds that girls develop a “double voiced discourse” to resolve their arguments and conflicts. This allows them to balance their own needs with cultural voice-overs that tell them good girls should be caring and put others first. Sheldon illustrates the creative tendencies common among young girls when she records a conflict over a plastic toy pickle between two four-year-olds. It’s worth noting that this short exchange is excerpted from pages and pages of conflict—the girls spend a lot of time working this one out. They do not give up easily.
SUE: Lisa wants it! (the pickle)
MARY: I cut it in half, one for Lisa, one for me, one for me.
SUE: But Lisa wants the WHOLE pickle!
MARY: Well, it’s a whole HALF pickle.
SUE: No it isn’t.
MARY: Yes it is, a whole HALF pickle
SUE: I’LL give her a whole half. I’LL give her a WHOLE
    WHOLE! I gave her a WHOLE one.10

Both Mary and Sue insist on their own positions, illustrating that sense of unapologetic entitlement of young girls. Each is also responsive to the other in ways that open the door to new possibilities—if one could just change perspective, a half pickle could be a whole and everyone could get what she wanted. Mary and Sue stay with the battle, each asserting her wants for so long that we almost forget that the point of the conflict is to appease another girl, Lisa. While they are both strong-willed and forceful persuaders, the girls’ solution is relational and inventive because they have already gotten the message that, as Sheldon notes, “conflict must be resolved, but a girl cannot assert social power or superiority as an individual to resolve it.”11 The girls already know that they can’t just assume a dominant position, grab the pickle, and give it to Lisa. That would be mean.

This is a lesson girls learn early and learn well. Four- and five-year-olds matter-of-factly name the reality of their friendships in ways that are shockingly frank and direct, at least from an adult perspective. When her friends don’t give her anything to play with, five-year-old Rachel says nonchalantly, “I just say to them that they are not being a friend to me.” When Jessie threatens to go home because her friends are not including her, one friend says, “just go home.” Explaining why she and her friend are fighting, Jasmine says, “I said she was a bad person. . . . She got really mad.” “We get mad. I get mad,” Donna says, thinking about a time she fought with her friend. “She said, I hate you, that one time.” Describing her problems with her best friend, Tremaine says, “She’s mean to me. I do mean stuff to her too. Like we push each other and stuff . . . ’cause we get angry, we get so mad.”

But even as they fight openly with their friends, admit their anger, own up to their pushing and shoving, girls are tuning in to the reactions of adults to their conflicts, to their open confessions of meanness, to their feelings of anger and sadness. Friends shouldn’t fight, eight-year-
old Elizabeth explains, not because fighting is wrong or someone could get hurt, but “because the teacher might hear them and then she might get mad at them.” Adults are watching. Girls thus learn to balance their needs and desires with expectations that they should be nice and good and cooperative. This capacity is a strength of young girls’ relationships—most of us would agree that creating a “whole half pickle” is better than just grabbing it. The problem is when they are so encouraged to get along and give up their own needs that they feel they must maneuver below adults’ radar to get them met.

This disapproval of disagreement and squelching of conflict by adults is important because it begins to set the tone for girlfighting. Feeling anger and the desire to aggress, as the psychologist Sharon Lamb says, are part of being human.12 Girls fight, they disagree with each other, they compete. But if they get the message that such human emotions and reactions are wrong or forbidden, they simply do them in private—they move their strong feelings underground or their behavior out of adults’ sight. Listening to groups of three- and four-year-old girls arguing, for example, Sheldon notes that as conflict escalates, the girls’ voices get softer, not louder. Sheldon reports on two four-year-olds, Arlene and Elaine, pretending they are nurses caring for their sick children and fighting over who gets to give the shots to the children and where:

Arlene persists; she intensely, directly, and threateningly orders Elaine to stop: Now don’t you dare! Arlene doesn’t shout but instead mutes her voice by lowering it. As the confrontation reaches its peak of insistence, the girls’ voices get lower and lower with anger, not louder and louder. . . . Elaine directly orders Arlene in an even lower voice:

ELAINE: (voice lowered more than Arlene’s but equally intense) Stop saying that! (pause) Well, then you can’t come to my birthday party!

ARLENE: (voice still lowered) I don’t want to come to your birthday party.13

Other researchers in psychology find that girls this age are more likely to “relationally victimize” their peers than are boys.14 This means that girls learn early to use covert tactics like threatening to damage or control a girl’s relationships with others or to ignore or exclude someone they are angry with. While we associate gossip with older girls,
preschoolers already use gossip to build a sense of solidarity with their girlfriends and to set up “we against others” scenarios. “Go! We want her to go away!” one girl says to another. “We don’t want Alison here to bother us again,” her friend agrees. “We’re very mad at her,” says one. “We are very mad,” agrees the other. The ultimate threat when a young girl feels the wrath of another girl is not being yelled at or hit, but excluded: “You can’t come to my birthday party.”

In this way, adults’ expectations that girls be nice and cooperative and avoid loud conflicts becomes a kind of voice training for friendship and sets the stage for a more opaque, but no less aggressive, form of girlfighting. Girls become more attentive to behaviors that involve the manipulation of relationships. Exclusion becomes a huge issue for the youngest girls. It is the preferred strategy for expressing anger with other girls because it is an acceptably quiet, appropriately feminine way to resolve conflict, to assert your feelings and keep other girls in line. That is, it doesn’t attract the attention, and therefore, the judgment and ire of adults that open arguing and fighting do. And the irony of course is that for those socialized to care about relationships, exclusion is the cruelest punishment. Even preschool girls know the dangers of social ostracism and they engage in protracted power struggles over inclusion. In connection with their pretend play, some preschool girls are already skillful in verbally engineering the ostracism of other girls and some have learned to resist being ostracized or left out by making themselves socially desirable—that is, by being especially good at appearing nice.

This is the early form of what psychologists call “relational aggression,” a kind of aggression more typical of and more stressful to girls than to boys. Relational aggression is often indirect and thus difficult to prove. Because open conflict and competition are taboo for “nice girls,” girls simply find creative ways to disguise their disagreements and conflicts. Even girls as young as three and four learn that their best recourse when they are frustrated or angry or when they feel competitive or jealous is to rely on subtle, relational forms of controlling others—at least when adults are around.

What we might think of as fickleness in girls’ friendships is often, in fact, a sign of the double-voice discourse Sheldon talks about—the effort by girls to get what they need and also to respond to another’s needs. And, like snowflakes, no two relationships are alike. Indeed, the cultural and relational contexts of girls’ relationships can have a pro-
found effect on the ways girls negotiate and balance their friendships. Much of the work on relational aggression and conflict negotiation has been done on white and middle-class girls. We have every reason to suspect that working-class girls and girls of color get different feedback about conflict and the acceptability of their direct expressions of anger in their homes. Growing up working class, direct expressions of anger were pretty much normal in my house. I felt the pressure to tone down my voice and to take my strong feelings underground only when I began attending school.

So even while girls talk openly about being hurt, feeling sad and angry, they know they are less likely to attract attention or cause trouble if they exclude others rather than express their anger more directly and openly. In the midst of such covert threats of exclusion, rejection, or withdrawal, girls learn to read the social world of their friendships and peer relationships like naturalists. If you can’t decide whether a girl is nice or not, seven-year-old Cloe suggests that you “watch how she acts to other people.” Girls pick up nuance and learn how to read the subtly encoded messages contained in their friends’ sharp looks and turned bodies, their raised eyebrows and supportive glances. Young girls are building a repertoire of relational experiences and hoarding a wealth of information about how to get their point across to each other without attracting the negative attention of adults or incurring the wrath—the rejection and teasing—of other girls.

This practice accounts for the off-again, on-again quality of girls’ relationships, the ebb and flow as girls fight and make up on a daily basis. “Who’s your best friend?” I ask Madison. “Sometimes it’s Tara, sometimes it’s Nicole, and then it’s Chelsea,” she responds. “Sometimes I get in a fight with, like, one of them, so those two are my best friends. And then I get in a fight with two of them, so that person’s my best friend. Sometimes I get in a fight with all of them, so I need to choose new ones right now. . . . I suppose I could go make up with one of ‘em so I’d have at least one.” It’s pretty typical to hear a five-year-old yell to her friend at the top of her lungs, “You aren’t my friend anymore. I hate you!” in one instant, and to hear peals of hysterical laughter the next.

In spite of their apparent off-again, on-again quality, young girls’ relationships have staying power. Girls can fight and make up, fight and make up because they know their friends will be there the next day. They are practicing, discovering their persuasive power, exploring the range of acceptable emotions and the possibilities in their friendships as
well as finding ways to be “good girls” who can also express “bad” feelings and desires. But if the adults in a girl’s life and, through the media, the weight of the culture, define good girlness as a certain way of talking and being and looking, she is going to learn what not to say and hide the parts of herself and her relationships that don’t match up. This struggle to match up is likely to be played out with her girlfriends, not only because they are going through the same thing, but because she will be caught in the throes of comparison with them.

Differences and disagreements are part and parcel of everyday life for six- and seven-year-old girls. Friends fight, they say, “cause they see things different,” because “they think different,” because “we’re not all the same. Every person is not the same.” Fighting between friends happens but such fighting doesn’t negate love, anger doesn’t override joy. But it’s important to appreciate the impact of messages repeated to girls over and over again about what it means to be a good girl—nice, kind, sweet, attentive to others, calm, and cooperative. Because conflict is a problem for most adults, girls hear the party line over and over: “communicating is better than fighting,” “be nice,” “don’t make anyone mad,” “don’t make a ruckus or a mess of things.” We begin to hear the results of this repetition when girls translate differences and nuanced feelings into gendered notions of “nice” and “mean,” “good” and “bad,” and when the voice-overs or cultural stories about nice girls start to mute girls’ realities. Talking about her best friend, six-year-old Barbara sighs as she explains how Rachel’s “a friend to everybody.” “That’s pretty nice,” her interviewer comments, “to have people that are friends to everybody.” “Yeah,” Barbara responds wistfully. “But Rachel never sits beside me. . . . She don’t like to.” This difference between the ideal Rachel who’s a friend to everybody and the real Rachel who isn’t a friend to Barbara may coexist now, but when the nice or ideal girl story gains enough weight and power, Barbara may start to lose track of her reality or blame herself for being less than ideal.

This is the voice training for girls’ friendship, the voice over their voice. The irony is obvious. First we tell girls to attend to relationships, and then we expect them to take their own strong feelings out of relationships to protect the feelings of others or to maintain a cover story of girls as nice and “friends to everybody.”20 We ask them, in this sense, to work at relationships that do not feel authentic or real to them. Relationships, friendships, they learn, are not simply what people experience together, alive and inventive as they feel, but something else—
something that conforms to adult expectations, something that reflects the dominant cultural view of what a good girl should be.

When adults voice-over girls’ voices with platitudes and stereotypes, things can get strangely discordant. Girls begin not to trust their strong feelings or to feel ashamed for having them. For example, while it’s true that “it’s good to say you’re sorry,” or to “always share,” when such advice is given without appreciation for the specific context or relational scene it can also be dangerous and disingenuous. Is it good to say you’re sorry when you have been treated badly or unfairly? Is it good to share when you had something first and someone else demands it? Is there never a time to question or disrupt the ways things go? The danger of such gendered platitudes as be nice and kind, sweet and apologetic, is that they so often challenge a girl’s reality and she becomes confused about what she really feels and what a real relationship is. In this light, the word friendship is too often applied to something that doesn’t feel like real friendship, precisely because the thing called friendship is contingent on not fighting and not being mad and not making too much noise. That is, you can’t be in a truly genuine relationship when you are not allowed to have or express common human feelings. Instead, girls are so often taught that friendship is a relationship where everyone is always responsive and everybody is always happy and everybody signs their letters with love or dots their I’s with hearts—even when they don’t feel like it.

POLICING RELATIONSHIPS

The areas where young girls feel the greatest pressure to act in certain ways in order to be liked and included and desired become the very areas in which they begin to police and fight with other girls. That is, girls become relational traffic cops, maintaining order, ensuring that social rules and regulations are obeyed, and preventing other girls from transgressing the good girl code they are led to believe is so important to maintain. With the growing pressure to be a good girl, a model girl, however that is defined in their families and communities, comes the anxiety of failure, of not matching up.

Five-year-old Harriet, watching a video of her swimming class, comments not on the skills she had just displayed, but on her stocky friend: “Deidre looks fat.” When a friend, Jane, asked Anneliese in
private whether she thought another classmate, Carrie, was fat, Anneliese was bewildered. When she didn’t immediately respond, Jane encouraged her: “It’s okay, Carrie says she’s fat all the time. Tell me what you think—pinky swear, I won’t tell Carrie.” When Anneliese said then, yes, she thought Carrie was fat, Jane immediately ran over to Carrie to tell her what Anneliese thought of her.

These comments and interactions are about much more than weight, but given the emphasis we place on girls’ bodies and the importance of being thin, it’s not surprising that this would be the way girls express their insecurities, desire for attention and approval, and their anger. Girls carry these anxieties and feelings into their relationships, in part because it’s easier to see and name the failure in someone else than in oneself and because it is profitable to do so—it elevates one’s own status. This is what girls are after when they report other girls to their parents or teachers: “Mia just told me I couldn’t play with her”; “Lori is being mean to ReAnn”; “Tiana won’t share her toys with me.” Girls tell on other girls not only to receive fairness, but to receive adult approval and love for being a different kind of girl—the kind of girl who is inclusive, nice, neat, who shares; the kind of girl who matches up to the adult’s ideal. Reporting other girls’ bad behavior provides a sense of personal power that comes from being the right kind of girl, the socially desirable girl.

Listening to girls talk about who they are and are not friends with and which girls are bad or mean, conjures up an image that’s awfully familiar: an image of white middle-class femininity. Indeed, this is a process of enculturation. It is thus easy to imagine the girls who do not match up—working-class girls and girls of color who may have different definitions of what it means to be a good girl or to be feminine, or white middle-class girls who have been encouraged to resist such a limited view of “good girl” behavior or appearance—who “brag” or talk too much about what they are good at, who are fat, who are “bossy,” tough, or too assertive in their relationships.

Renee, who is African American, remembers how hard it was for her biracial daughter, Domonique, to be in a mostly white public school. When she was seven Domonique would come home crying, because the other girls “would ostracize her, they wouldn’t play with her. She would come home just getting in my arms crying every day. She had diarrhea; she was really upset.” While Renee would say to Domonique,
“You’ve got to stand up for yourself,” she knew in her heart that it was more complicated.

She’s a little girl. And she wants friends and she wants to be happy, you know. To have people be so mean and turn their backs on you, it’s just not okay. It was mostly white kids, and I found it was the little white girls that I just wanted to strangle because they’d be like, “Well, I’ll be your friend from 10 to 2.” I’m like, excuse me? From 10 a.m. to 2 they’d be your friend and then afterwards they wouldn’t? I’m like, I don’t think so, that’s not what a true friend is. Or they’d come to Domonique’s house and [say], “I’ll stay your friend if you give me this or give me that.” And I’m like, uh, uh. I prayed my daughter knew not to be so shallow. Over the years she hasn’t let herself down.

The ways girls deal with conflict and difference are rooted in gendered and racialized patterns taught by and modeled on their parents.21 Domonique’s “friends” were negotiating their power in the ways white middle-class girls are taught; they subtly and indirectly set the terms for social ostracism. They were asserting their power by carefully negotiating the terms of access and inclusion. To Domonique, caught in a mostly white school context, it’s a cruel and chilling experience. She is reminded through exclusion and offers of friendship carefully meted out in timed chunks, of the power and status of the other girls.

Renee thinks that Domonique was punished by the white girls and also by her white teachers because she wasn’t “a cookie cutter student and I’m not a cookie cutter parent.” Renee was direct in ways that made the white women teachers and administrators in the school anxious: “If I think you’re wrong I’m going to tell you. And get used to it.” As a result, “they all just kept saying that Domonique thought she was special and this, that, and the other.” In other words, neither Renee nor Domonique fit the white version of nice and good. Both were too full of themselves, too confident, too direct and bold. They needed to be shown their place, taken down a notch, but in a “nice” way.

“Cookie cutter” is Renee’s code for white and middle class. White and middle-class femininity is defined by conflict-avoidance, by “niceness”—although as we can clearly see, white girls can be as mean and nasty as anyone, maybe more so because of the pressure to appear so nice on the surface. Girlfriends are chosen because they are “nice,” by
which girls mean “they help me,” “they play with me,” they “say ‘I like you.’” On the other hand, girls who are not nice “tattle-tale on people,” “push and shove,” they brag, or they are “real mean,” or they boss other girls around. This makes perfect sense at first glance—of course girls prefer a friend who says “I like you” to someone who “pushes and shoves” or is “real mean.” But the problem comes when such girls label any outspokenness as “mean” or signs of self-confidence as “bossy” or when they buy into a definition of relationship that has more to do with ideals or expectations than genuine human connection.

Because so much value is placed on being nice by the adults who educate girls, this word becomes, for white girls in particular, a power word, a code word for those who most closely approximate a cultural ideal, and thus niceness becomes a means to judge all girls against a rather narrow standard. In this way being nice picks up and contains all that is associated with being an acceptable or good girl in the dominant culture. As a result, it is a prime motivator for relational aggression. In our interviews with seven- and eight-year-olds, Carol Gilligan and I found that girls used “niceness” to judge the overall quality or goodness of other girls. It becomes a reason for liking or not liking, inclusion or exclusion, and thus threats of not being nice become a form of social control. And while white middle-class girls are more likely to internalize this term and judge themselves against it, girls of color and working-class girls who are raised or schooled in predominantly white contexts learn its power, learn to perform niceness for the right people or pay the price.

But as we have seen, while girls may perform or tout the absolute value of niceness, they do not always feel nice or act nice in their relationships. What’s striking in listening to seven- and eight-year-olds talk about disagreements between friends is that they seesaw between the ideal of niceness—that voice over their voice that says, in Faye’s words, “everybody should like everybody else”—and the real activity of their relationships—the fact that, in life people have “different opinions,” that fights break out because “sometimes people don’t like your opinions” and “try to have their own way.” After all, says Claire, explaining why two friends might have different feelings about another girl, “different people like different things than other people do. Like you can’t just say, you probably like her, too, just because I like her.” Jane agrees, “You can’t like everyone. Some people like some people, and some people don’t like some people, and . . . I don’t know anything else.”
While the girls seem pretty comfortable with both truths and, as Gillian adds, people can disagree “because it’s a free world!” it becomes harder and harder for girls to admit the not so nice parts of themselves or to stay with themselves if they have less than always nice and kind feelings. If a girl was mean, Andrea admits, she “probably wouldn’t admit that she was mean.” While the girls often tell it like it is—say what they like and don’t like in their relationships—it becomes tougher to own and stay with that knowledge. While Dana admits, “I like friendship a lot, but, well, there are some people I don’t like,” she risks being called mean if she says so to the wrong person.

Repeatedly, the white girls I’ve listened to say that admitting they dislike a person is the same as calling that person mean, and to call a person mean is itself a sign of meanness. Being mean is about being too self-centered or “selfish.” And since “it’s better to be nice than not nice” because “you get more friends and relationships,” the choice is clear. But just as the “Just say no!” drug campaign is grossly simplistic and effaces the different pressures and realities of kids’ lives, the mantra “just be nice” serves to override the complexity of girls’ thoughts and feelings, the reality of difference, and the hard work of relationships.

When she was three my daughter would say, “Let’s play. You be bossy and I’ll be sassy.” At five she told me she was worried about bossing or bragging too much because other girls wouldn’t like her, they would think she was not nice. Here again is a most common usage of the word nice: to control other girls. A girl who knows and talks about what she is good at is at odds with what a nice girl ought to be—self-effacing and concerned for others—and so other girls are made anxious and attempt to pull her back to the fold. There is already, as we can hear, an emerging language and cover story that says if you want to be an acceptable girl, well liked and included, then you don’t pull yourself out of relationships by drawing attention to yourself. Girls read such renegade or rogue behavior as mean and hurtful and threatening because the one who brags has blown her cover and she risks betraying all the other girls who need and want that cover to ensure acceptability and love. The bragger must be taught a lesson; for her own good she must know this will jeopardize her position in the group of good girls. “I really don’t like Tina at all,” Jenna complains. “Because she brags and stuff, and gets real mean.” Jenna goes on to describe how she responds to Tina’s bragging by using her own powerful place in the friendship to control Tina:
Like if I don’t give her something, then she says, “Please, I won’t be your friend.” And then I finally give up and I just say, “Tina, just leave me alone, alright?” And then she still doesn’t and I feel really mad at her. She likes me the bestest and she doesn’t want to leave me alone. And guess what? Sometimes she always tries to be the teacher; she tells us what to do and stuff. I feel really sad, and mad at her too. I choose to just walk away from her. But she still follows me. And I feel really mad at her and I say, “Tina stop! I do not like you following me!” But she still doesn’t listen. She says, “I don’t want to listen to kids.” That’s what she says. And I don’t want to listen to her either. And she’s always wrong and she’s just mean that way. . . . At least I can read better than her, too. Her mother’s really mean too, because Tara did not step on her sandwich and that’s what she even told two teachers. And her mom got mad at Tara’s mom. ‘Cause Tina always tells lies. If she does that when she grows up, she’ll hardly have any friends but Rachel, ’cause Rachel’s her only friend. She just says that she has lots of friends but I know she doesn’t ’cause I only see her playing with Rachel.

Tina’s bragging and bossy behavior leads Jenna to catalog a number of other relational violations and personal failures—bossing people around, meanness, lying, not listening, having few friends and a mean mother, and even poor reading skills. Tina, who is white and working class, is literally and figuratively just too much; she is excessive, doesn’t know the good girl code of ethics. She is “not nice,” meaning she’s out of bounds. Tina unknowingly challenges the good girl cover story and threatens the safety at the heart of it and so she makes Jenna and the other girls very anxious. Jenna attempts to teach Tina by showing her the consequences—by walking away, getting mad, not listening to her, and even putting her in her place by doing a little competitive bragging herself.

Disconnecting from or excluding girls like Tina, who are acting in threatening ways, has a powerful effect. We know this because young girls are so open about their feelings when they are left out or left behind. As Karen says, when people leave her out, “I tell them no because they really hurt my feelings and they might do it again.” When she’s asked about a time when she wasn’t listened to, Abbie doesn’t hesitate to tell her story. “Sometimes my friends do that,” she says, “like when I say, ‘Chelsea, I want to talk to you,’ she goes on talking with Nicole,
'cause that’s who she likes best. She hardly likes me. And Meg likes Nicole better than me. . . . It makes me feel sad. I wish they would like me the same as their other friends.” Abbie doesn’t say anything to her friends, however. “I just go off playing with other friends,” she explains. But still she wishes she could say something, something like “I want you to listen to me, please. And I don’t think they would listen to me though.”

Abbie knows that speaking up can put her in further jeopardy. Emmie struggles too when she hears that her friend, who promised to invite her to a sleepover, decided against it. “It makes you mad,” Emmie says, “because it’s not really fair.” She chooses not to speak up for fear that “they, they don’t ever invite you.” The threat of exclusion is powerful and girls often give in to their fears of being all alone and without friends. “We can’t agree on something so we get in a fight,” Mary explains. “That almost always happens when Tara comes over. She’s kind a like, ‘if you don’t like this, I’m not gonna be your friend anymore.’. . . so I do it. . . because she’s one of my best friends.” “I have to follow Frannie’s rules [at recess],” seven-year-old Rosalind explains in a plaintive voice. “If I don’t I won’t have anyone to play with and I’ll be all alone.”

Young girls are taking in and reflecting our dominant cultural views of femininity. Inserting themselves and ensuring they get what they need, they make full use of the avenue to power made available to them: their relationships. They police and protect and ensure the continuation of this culture by excluding and rejecting and ostracizing “other” girls who don’t match up. Girls whose families and cultures do not share these values and ideals come face-to-face with their normalizing power when they attend school, that official gatekeeper of the status quo. Here girls are too often educated in a femininity stripped of color and texture, a kind of one-size-fits-all notion of girlhood.

Of course, different girls react differently to such gatekeeping. But the very idea that there is such a definition of the good or nice girl eats at genuine relationships. Girls find themselves fighting for adult approval and competing for attention with other girls around a very narrow set of characteristics. Already girls know that to aggress, express anger, or compete publicly would ensure exclusion and disapproval. So their remaining option if they want attention is to tell on the bad girls who do these things, to put other girls down, to comment on their shortcomings, to reel them in with threats of meanness and exclusion if they
threaten to take too much time or attention. If they do this well, if they cover their real intentions, then in the eyes of adults they look like the good girls. It is a thin line to walk and a balancing act few can sustain for very long.

A CASE IN POINT

To fully appreciate the intricacies of girls’ friendships, one has to immerse oneself for a time in their rich complexity, to see the relational world as girls see it. The struggle to be loved, to be heard, accepted, and included is such a complicated drama, lived in a particular time and place, filled with the praise and admonishments of adults and the deep feelings of the girls themselves.

Nancy, Meghan, Jill, and Susan are white second graders in a small rural working-class Maine town. Their public school classroom is pretty typical, except for one thing—there are nineteen boys and just the four of them. These four girls find themselves closely bound together in this context, which perhaps infuses the hurt feelings, fighting, jealousies, and also the support and protection they reveal with more significance.

On the surface, the girls are great friends. Yet their respective answers to a seemingly simple question, “Who is your best friend?” is the first sign that things are not entirely fine between them. Meghan, tall and energetic, her long black hair pulled back with a ring of sparkly butterfly clips, answers without pause, “My best friend is Jill. She’s nice. She’s always caring about me.” And Jill, her clear blue eyes sparkling, enthusiastically returns the favor when she’s asked the same question. “Meghan!” she replies. “She plays with me a lot. . . . She’s really nice to me. And she’s kind and she doesn’t treat me like I’m stupid.” Susan answers the question with enthusiasm as well, but her response foreshadows trouble. Like Meghan she also chooses Jill. Swinging her legs in unison she describes her best friend as someone who “loves cats and . . . came over to my house once and we played with my kitten.” Nancy, her brown hair pulled high into pigtails, wisely doesn’t commit: “Well, I have three best friends,” she explains. “One’s name is Meghan, and Jill and Susan. And they’re nice to me and we have a lot of fun together at recess and I invite them over and they invite me over.”

The girls talk easily and frequently about the joys of their four-way friendship—the time they stole M&Ms off Susan’s birthday cake, the
tricks they’ve played on their brothers and sisters, the pets they love, the fun games of chase and freeze tag, and the secrets they share. Each girl acknowledges the weird off-kilter gender dynamics in their class and how it makes them feel. “Sometimes I wish there were four boys and the rest were girls . . . because there are like two million thirty-five boys and four girls!” Jill exclaims dramatically. Well aware that they are outnumbered, they tell stories of supporting and protecting one another. “We always get chased by David,” Susan explains. “One time we were doing this thing, we were sending a letter and I wrote one to Meghan and David. Meghan was sitting right next to David and he kissed her and she told Mrs. Swan and everybody started laughing at her . . . and she ran out in the hall and she was okay out there because Jill went right out there and talked to her.”

Unlike other girls their age who have boyfriends and talk about romance and marriage, these four girls seem overwhelmed by the sheer number of boys in their class and take no pleasure in such fantasies. The boys, Jill explains, are no fun to play with at all because they are “nasty and mean. . . . They play street fighters.” “They have very mean days,” she adds. “They push and shove a tiny bit more than the girls do. . . . We get hit and pushed around a lot . . . by boys.”

Boys, in this case, provide opportunities for the girls to bond, to be brave and protective. Sometimes the girls hit back and sometimes they chase the boys off. But surprisingly, these shows of aggression do little to interrupt messages they’ve received about gender. In spite of their open criticism of the boys’ behavior and their active resistance to being pushed around, the girls describe being a girl in rather stereotypical ways—girls are “nice,” they say, and they “don’t fight.” Moreover, they pass value judgments on other girls for being too “girly.” “Girls are really delicate,” Nancy states unequivocally. In fact, the worst part of being a girl, she explains, is that “you get, you get real delicate when people hit you, you like fall on the ground and stuff, and you don’t like that. And start screaming when people are chasing you, like boys. I hate that.” Instead Nancy admires her older sister who, she says, is into “boys’ stuff” like soccer and karate.

By their own description, these girls fall between the cracks of the usual definitions of girlhood. They are neither wimpy nor delicate and are certainly not always nice, and fighting verbally and sometimes physically is a daily occurrence. Given the choice, they distance themselves from the victim position—the girly girl who screams or falls
when people chase her—in favor of “boys’ stuff.” Of the two stereotypes—girly girl and tomboy—this at least provides them some self-respect. And it locates them somewhere closer to their daily reality because, quite simply, the girls do fight and fighting is a sign that something is real and at stake in the friendship. “That’s what friends do,” Meghan explains, sighing when her interviewer doesn’t seem to understand. “They fight. Like if you weren’t someone’s friend, then you probably wouldn’t fight with them unless they were really mean to you. Friends are supposed to, they fight, you know, because that’s, when you fight with your, with your, like when you fight with somebody who’s truly your friend.” This explains, she says, why she fights with Jill so much and not very much with Susan.

The problem is that fighting is also dangerous. Nancy, in fact, worries about all the fighting because it can go too far. “If we didn’t like each other then we wouldn’t be real friends, and if we kept on fighting every day . . . we wouldn’t be real friends.” It’s the making up that preoccupies Nancy and she makes it her responsibility “to try to cheer a person who is mad” or make the “person that hurts somebody’s feelings . . . say they’re sorry to the person.” The ebb and flow of strong feelings is important to Susan as well, although she has the perspective of a seasoned veteran: “Sometimes we can get mad at each other, but we come back to friends the next day, because we forget about it. . . . We argue but then we get back to being friends again. . . . Sometimes it takes a while to get back together when you have an argument,” she explains. “Me and Meghan have been friends since kindergarten, and we keep on fighting, and we come back to friends again the same day.”

While it seems that fighting comes with the territory of their close friendships, bad feelings do linger and these seven- and eight-year-olds are already well rehearsed in masking their strong feelings. There is more at stake, perhaps, with so few girlfriends to rely on; the risks of being left out or left behind are much greater. When asked if she’d ever pretended to like someone when she really didn’t like them, Nancy responds immediately:

Well, yes, because they were being nice to me and . . . it was Meghan that happened. Because she got all mad at us, because she got out on a . . . on a game and then she says, “thanks a lot you guys, you got me out.” . . . So she starts pushing us and stuff, and then the next day she
says hi to us, and gives us all kinds of hugs and then she comes back to being our friend again. And, and then, and then I try to make her think that I’m still her friend, but I’m really not.

At the time of the interview, weeks later, Meghan had still not said “her apology.” “I’m still mad at her,” Nancy fumes.

The fighting among the girls takes certain forms across their friendships and reveals different motives and anxieties. The relational struggles, it turns out, are primarily between Meghan and Susan, both of whom named Jill as their best friend. Meghan is forceful and direct and Susan sees her as mean sometimes because “she treats us like she is our boss and stuff like that and so, that’s why we’re half her friend.” Yet even bossy Meghan sometimes hides her frustration and masks her feelings. “Like I’m hugging Jill and stuff,” Meghan admits, “but I don’t like her that much.” Susan is in the wings and Meghan can’t afford a fallout with Jill.

Nancy, who sees Susan as “one of my best friends,” also has trouble with Meghan. Asked if she ever wanted to help somebody but didn’t, Nancy replies, “Yes, Meghan. Because she deserved it . . . She was being a jerk and she told me to help her. And I said no, because I told you . . . I asked you to please help me, and you go, ‘No.’ So . . .” It turns out that, in fact, Meghan and Jill collude sometimes to exclude Nancy, who then turns to Susan for support. Again, because there are just the four of them, this exclusion is particularly frightening: “I get so mad because those are my only three friends,” Nancy admits. “So I couldn’t play with anybody . . . so I sat down and I was thinking of them . . . and then they come up to me . . . and they were being really mean to me and I didn’t want to get up.” Nancy talks about how all this feels to her. It’s “like somebody really like hurt you and hurt your feelings real bad and you don’t like it, you were really, really angry . . . and you would go, ‘Come on, play with me please. I have no other friends, you girls are the only ones here that are my friends.’ That’s what it feels like.”

These four girls need each other. Their friendships provide them protection from a seawall of boys. But even this cannot prevent the pairing up, the hurt and exclusion, and it may even exacerbate the fighting. They take the intensity of their feelings out on each other, even as they mask these strong feelings to preserve their relational safety net. Can they really afford to be honest with one another in this context? While

the girls angrily resist the boys’ chasing, pushing, and kissing, they already measure each other by the female standards of niceness and the male standards of strength and possibility. To be girlish is to be delicate and wimpy; strength is a boyish show of physical prowess and athleticism. But to be too assertive, to be a bossy girl like Meghan, is to be outside the realm of good girl behavior and is cause for concern. Already they know the power of niceness to mask or cover over the strength of their feelings and the complexity of their relationships.

Girls this age see and name the difference between what they feel and think and want and what others say girls ought to be like. In a social world in which they are expected to narrow the range of their feelings and modulate their voices, young girls are amazingly creative in finding ways to get their point across. Sometimes they break out altogether in an attempt to disrupt old categories, as when seven-year-old Mary imagines the gender-bending “zuts” from outer space—“maybe they’ll be people with long hair down to here that are boys and play with Barbies,” she says. More often girls move back and forth between gendered stereotypes and their own realities. At seven and eight, being a girl is about being “pretty” and having long hair, but it’s also about fighting with your friends and refusing to play with people who treat you badly. And for Julie it’s simply about the freedom “to play by myself and stuff.” “It’s good to be free,” she says.

But girls also know there is power available to those who buy into cultural ideals and notions of good girlness and they see that masking what they want and what they know to be true can buy them attention from adults and also friendships with other girls who desire that same feeling of power. While approximating a feminine ideal promises adoration and love, approximating a masculine ideal can buy respect and distance from weak or “wussy” girlness. These are the culturally sanctioned choices and, unlike boys, both are available to girls. But a culture that consistently refracts individual differences through narrow gender stereotypes makes it harder and harder for girls to stay with the reality of their everyday experiences and to stay connected with each other in a way that’s fluid, open, and responsive. It’s very hard to hold onto the other parts of yourself when at seven years old you’re labeled a “delicate” girly girl for liking dresses or for being “calm,” or when you’re considered a tomboy if you’re bold and don’t mind getting your pants dirty.
What accompanies girl things and boy things, as we’ve seen, are a whole set of opposing behaviors and expectations. References to heterosexual romance and prince charming are ubiquitous and connect femininity to passivity or construct girls as potential victims of active male desire or aggression; dominant views of femininity require girls to shut down their anger and to be pleasing and caring toward others. Dominant views of masculinity require them to separate from anything feminine and to criticize things girlish. These voice-overs threaten to contain girls (and boys) and they quite understandably get anxious and suspicious. How will they reconcile such stereotypes with their reality without giving up things that are fundamental and important—the power and certainty that comes with knowing what you want, the capacity to say what you like and don’t like, at times forcefully and with self-righteous anger?

Built into these gender stereotypes is a whole host of dos and don’ts and the resulting frustration and anger girls feel gets taken out on other girls, either the girls they compete with or the girls they’ll have nothing to do with. It’s no surprise that girls fight over who’s nice and who isn’t, who’s loud and who’s calm, who’s too pleasing and who’s too much, who’s thin and who’s fat. They are practicing, trying out idealized femininity and proving to those around them who are invested in this “Reality” that they can match up and are worthy of praise and love. Similarly, when girls like Nancy distance or decontaminate themselves from “the worst part of being a girl,” they are operating out of the same system—just from a different standpoint. Our narrow views of gender limit girls’ imaginations and the possibilities open to them, so that the complex and interesting relational weave of their daily lives becomes channeled into tired, predictable patterns.

Girls who resist or don’t match up run the risk of being cut off from other girls—labeled bad, bossy, or mean. The alternative is to embrace the ideals, at least publicly, and to protect yourself by being the arbiter of good and bad. The best defense is a good offense and girls who know and embrace what it means to be a good girl in school and other public places have the moral high ground. Moreover, they have the power through adult approval to persuade others to this position or to punish those who don’t make the grade. Those with less power or less interest in this performance learn the hard way. Controlled by threats of exclusion or rejection, they learn to read the relational world like naturalists, self-protectively masking their feelings at appropriate moments and
calling the whole nasty unreal thing friendship. Or they learn not to like or respect their gender and see the great benefits of acting tough or picking fights with the “delicate” girly girls.

It doesn’t have to be so. The very fact that young girls can be so direct and open about their thoughts and feelings ensures that there is a lot of public debate about just who does and doesn’t match up and who does and doesn’t care. Girls take themselves very seriously and are quick to point out unfairness to other girls and to adults. This capacity for conflict is something adults should support and encourage. Notions of good and bad, nice and mean are on the table and the debate is on. All the elements for a healthy resistance to the narrow ideals of femininity and to sexism, racism, homophobia, are present and available and ready to be nurtured in girls: self-respect, openness, determination, clarity, honesty, and capacity for anger and critique.

 Needless to say, the voice-overs we’re more likely to offer girls do not provide a good foundation for female friendships. If girls can’t stay with themselves and the reality of their experiences, they can’t stay with other girls. If being a girl means effacing their anger or performing niceness or acting tough to be taken seriously, girls can’t trust other girls to be really present in their relationships—to see what’s going on and to be fair or responsive. When is a girl real and when is she fake? Things are already getting dicey by second grade as girls move back and forth from the real to the ideal. “Mindy has the number one slot,” seven-year-old Gail says about her best friend’s relationship to her, “and KayAnn and May are fighting it out for number two.” If a girl knows that choosing the voice-over of feminine niceness and compliance buys her the number one slot, she also knows that other girls know this. There is, then, a seed of uncertainty, and possibly mistrust, germinating at the heart of girls’ friendships. As we see in the next chapter, this uncertainty can grow and divide girls in more consistent and obvious ways.