



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 17 | Issue 1

Article 16

Jan-2016

Book Review: Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion before the Sixties

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Recommended Citation

Rackley, Lauren (2016). Book Review: Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion before the Sixties. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(1), 213-214.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss1/16>

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***Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion before the Sixties* Amanda H. Littauer. 2015. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 259 pages. Photographs, Appendix, and Index included. \$27.95. Paperback.**

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The common historiography of sexuality characterizes the years following World War II as a time of sexual repression, which fueled in turn the countervailing sexual revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. Recently, scholars have begun to challenge this commonly accepted history and instead argue for the existence of what Amanda Littauer calls a “long sexual revolution.” Littauer’s *Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion before the Sixties* reveals the 1940s and 1950s as periods in which “sexual desire was a driving force” in women’s lives, even though cultural conditions did not permit women to actively “resist conservative sexual morality in organized ways” (2). Littauer’s research demonstrates that these changes were a “distinctive transformation in American sexual culture” rather than an historical aberrance, and she argues that the shifts in sexual culture during the 1940s and 1950s permitted the sexual revolution to occur on a large scale in later decades.

Littauer approaches her research as a historian and utilizes oral histories from archives, governmental studies on sexuality, and written letters to Alfred Kinsey. The primary sources allow Littauer to illustrate how women’s and girls’ reorganization of the collective consciousness of sexuality “catalyzed the explicit sexual revolts of the following generation” (174). Each of the sources utilized in *Bad Girls* reveals a shift in girls’ and women’s ideologies surrounding sexual performances by recounting the girls’ and women’s first hand narrations of their nonnormative sexual encounters with other men and women. These first person narratives conveyed through the oral histories and written letters to Kinsey reveal girls’ and women’s disregard for conventional sexual practices and instead demonstrate how women fought to create new sexual standards, ranging from the normalization of sex outside of marriage to the practice of same sex relationships. By including both girls’ studies and women’s studies, Littauer demonstrates how both groups worked simultaneously to gain sexual agency. However, because of “the material, social, and legal conditions” that defined each group, girls and women altered societal perspectives on sexuality in different ways (12). *Bad Girls* delineates between the sexual agency that girls’ fought for, such as the choice for a girl to sleep with her boyfriend before marriage, and the sexual autonomy that young women fought for, such as normalizing practices within the public sphere.

Littauer divides *Bad Girls* into five chapters, which primarily focus on the 1940s and 1950s. The first two chapters explore the emergence of “victory girls” and “B-girls” that resulted from World War II and the military’s mobilization. These chapters argue that “victory girls” and “B-girls” had greater opportunities for sexual encounters as the military mobilized, and they created tension between commercial and casual sexual interactions. Chapters three, four, and five explore the repercussions of sexuality during World War II by focusing on girls’ and women’s

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response to Alfred Kinsey's female report, the normalization of "going steady," and the emergence of public displays of same sex desire. These chapters argue that the women of the 1950s wanted to know more about their bodies and sexual urges and that these vocalized sexual urges led to the normalization of various sexual practices.

Littauer illustrates how the widespread acknowledgement of women's and girls' sexuality was enabled by the actions of "victory girls" and "B-girls" during and immediately following World War II. These girls created tension between their sexual performances, such as soliciting drinks for money and sleeping with men as a patriotic gesture, and society's expectation of girls' sexual performance. By acting against conservative sexual morality, they forged a "space for single women in the 'consumer republic' of urban nightlife" (79). Because "victory girls" and "B-girls" forged these sexual spaces in the 1940s, average girls and women of the 1950s developed a curiosity of their sexualities, as demonstrated by their letters to Kinsey, and began to question conventional sexual standards. Littauer reveals first-person perspectives of the sexual evolution occurring in the 1950s, and she demonstrates how this "era of contested, contradictory, and rapidly shifting sexual norms" allowed for women's and girls' "redefinition of normality and abnormality" (104). This redefinition led to both new normative practices, such as the acceptance of premarital sex with a "loving partner," and the acknowledgment of contested nonnormative practices, such as women's and girls' queer desire. The final chapters of Littauer's book focus on these newly introduced sexual practices and the various heterosexual and non-heterosexual possibilities for women that continued to evolve in later decades.

Ultimately, Littauer's *Bad Girls* argues for a reconception of the emergence of sexual agency in United States' history. The 1940s and 1950s have been largely ignored in the sexual revolution's narrative, and they have instead been characterized as chaste temporal moments of "conservative sexuality morality" (2). Littauer alters our understanding of the sexual revolution by narrating girls' and women's resistance to sexual confinement and authorities' expectations of female sexuality. New practices, such as oral sex, "going steady," and infiltrating bars and nightlife, expanded women's sexual performances and gave them the agency to choose the way they fulfilled their desires. The new norms of sexual performance introduced by the women of the 1950s included a "relationship-oriented sexual ethics" and "individual sexual autonomy," which offered later women a stable platform to build upon during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s (175). *Bad Girls'* exposure of women's and girls' achievements allow us to restructure our understanding of sexuality's timeline in the United States.

Littauer's research allows us to recognize the rapid shifting that sexual ideologies underwent during the 1940s and 1950s and the progressive actions that women took to gain both sexual agency and sexual autonomy. This book challenges the way we understand perspectives on past and contemporary sexuality and will be of interest to other critical projects, such as feminist and queer movements. Littauer's research creates conversation between identity movements occurring within the last century and allows us to interrogate the role of sexuality within those movements. Ultimately, *Bad Girls* questions the way we have come to understand women's and girls' sexual agency in both the past and contemporary society, and it demonstrates how the "bad girls" of the 1940s and 1950s can serve as a model for contemporary women and girls as we fight for the complete sexual justice that is still absent from society today. Amanda Littauer's *Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion before the Sixties* provides fresh insight into the history of sexuality and greatly contributes to the reconception of a "long sexual revolution."