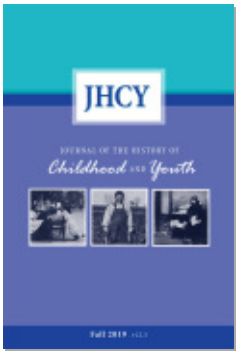
A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools by Rachel Devlin (review)



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girls. This monograph not only makes a much-needed contribution to knowledge of what and how Australian girls read in the twentieth century, but also to the growing body of research on how childhood and feminine ideals circulated internationally through print culture.

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A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools.

By Rachel Devlin.

New York: Basic Books, 2018. xxx + 342 pp. Cloth, $24.99.

A Girl Stands at the Door is a moving study of the activism of girls and young women in American school desegregation. Audiences are familiar with names like Elizabeth Eckford and Ruby Bridges, yet until Rachel Devlin, no one had asked the question: Why were African American girls at the forefront of school desegregation? Devlin's answer adds significantly to the historiography of girlhood while also revising standard narratives about school desegregation and the civil rights movement.

To begin, Devlin focuses on often overlooked women leaders of the 1940s. She follows Lucile Bluford's crusade to attend the University of Missouri, which ended when the university closed its journalism school rather than accept a black graduate student. The indefatigable Bluford was at once a prospective student, reporter for the Kansas City *Call*, fundraiser, and litigant. More successfully, Ada Lois Sipuel applied to and eventually graduated from the University of Oklahoma College of Law. Sipuel's struggle paralleled that of Heman Sweatt, the plaintiff in the 1950 *Sweatt v. Painter* Supreme Court case that banned segregation in graduate education. Devlin documents Thurgood Marshall's reluctance to represent Sipuel, despite her reputation as a "famous, universally acclaimed desegregation crusader" who was by all accounts more willing than Sweatt to fight this battle (35).

Another chapter recounts the story of Esther Brown, a white Jewish activist whose years of organizing black tenant farmers, attending a southern labor college, and working with the Communist Party preceded her effort to desegregate

a rural Kansas township. Her success laid the groundwork for the subsequent Topeka case in *Brown v. Board*. Bluford, Sipuel, and Brown all exhibited unwavering commitment, diplomatic skill, and a willingness to stand up to—and sometimes call out—black male leaders.

Other chapters focus on the girls who pioneered school desegregation. As plaintiffs they outnumbered boys two to one, and they constituted a large majority of primary and secondary school students who first attended previously all-white schools. Devlin explores the experiences of plaintiffs in 1940s lawsuits, students involved in the *Brown* decision, and girls who desegregated 1960s southern schools, often as part of the broader civil rights movement.

In answer to the question "Why girls?" readers might guess that girls were less frequent targets of violence or that whites imagined black boys "mixing" with white girls as the greater threat. Devlin reminds us, however, that black girls and women never benefited from either a presumption of innocence or gendered protection. To the contrary, racist beliefs about black female sexual promiscuity stoked fears of interracial teenage sex and rising rates of "illegitimate" births in integrated schools.

Devlin argues instead that it was girls' training for black womanhood that prepared them to step up as plaintiffs and pupils. Black women's experience as domestic workers and consumers made them practiced in how to "act" with whites. Passing this knowledge on, elders also drilled girls in "proper" comportment, social diplomacy, and verbal dexterity. Well-versed in sexual respectability, black female students used "decorum, poise, and manners as a weapon against white hostility" (xxvii). Decorum did not signify deference, but rather a blend of "sass," strategic dissemblance, steely determination, and verbal parrying. Devlin does not ignore boys but rather shows that they often felt less internal and parental pressure to join desegregation efforts. Both children and adults saw school desegregation as a girls' "call to arms, a mission they felt to be their own" (xv).

If mid-century African Americans understood this, historians have not. *A Girl Stands at the Door* rights the historical record. Devlin also makes other effective historiographical interventions, arguing that recent critiques of *Brown*'s failures effectively erase its radicalism. School desegregation was less a top-down NAACP campaign than a product of grassroots pressure that forced male NAACP leaders to take more aggressive action. And Devlin reminds us that the youth who voluntarily braved daily hostility and violence did not know the outcome. They joined a fight they might not win and endured the wrath of both white segregationists and black community members who perceived "firsts" as rejecting their "own" for the white world.

Finally, Devlin adds to the affective history of both childhood/youth and the black freedom struggle. Rather than romanticizing the heroism of girls and young women, she investigates the price they paid. Female "firsts" withstood constant physical and verbal assaults along with near total isolation from both white and black students. The remarkable political and social acuity embodied in their public personae cost them dearly. It literally sickened some, causing serious health problems. All experienced a "self-alienation" as they painfully learned to live life as a "case" rather than a person (66). Sadly, the self-possession of female interracial pioneers who knew exactly how "to act" brought with it an attending loss of self.

Devlin's keen eye for detail, impressive research, and well-crafted arguments make this an important book. It is also a compelling read. It has much to offer scholars of childhood and youth, of African American and women's history, and of post-1945 America.

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