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Empowering or Responsibilising?

A Critical Content Analysis of Contemporary Biographies about Women

*Abstract: This article contributes to the limited body of work attending to girlhood in children's nonfiction, with specific focus on collective biographies about women published since 2016. In recent years, children's nonfiction books about women have proliferated rapidly in the United Kingdom and beyond. This proliferation has coincided with an intensification of academic and public interest in young people's engagement with feminist ideas, where female empowerment is often marketed as a commodity. The biographies often present narratives of "empowered" women, and the implication of their framing is that readers will consume the texts and be inspired to achieve empowerment as well. Such discourses of empowerment are conducive to neoliberal subjectivities, where the self is regarded as autonomous, self-reliant, and responsible. This article offers a critical content analysis of Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo's *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women* (2016), *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2* (2017), and three of Kate Pankhurst's *Fantastically Great Women* books (2016–2020). My analysis is framed by poststructuralist feminist theories and popular feminism as theorised by Sarah Banet-Weiser. I suggest that, despite the important and admirable intentions underlying their publication, the overarching discourses of girlhood that these texts present are problematic. Specifically, whilst female representation is important, there are undertones that render women and girls individually responsible for themselves, especially for their aspirations and successes. As readers are inspired to take responsibility for their lives, other factors that produce and maintain their unequal status in the first place are eschewed.*

Keywords: nonfiction, popular feminism, neoliberalism, postfeminism, rebel girls, girlhood, Kate Pankhurst, Elena Favilli, Francesca Cavallo

Since 2016, children's nonfiction books about women have proliferated rapidly in the United Kingdom and beyond. If you step into any bookshop, you are likely to find a shelf or an entire section devoted to biographies that present stories of women's achievements throughout history, such as Rachel Ignatofsky's *Women in Science: 50 Fearless Pioneers Who Changed the World* (2016), Vashti Harrison's *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* (2017), and Kate Pankhurst's *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* (2020). In the United Kingdom, Pankhurst's *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (2016) paved the way, selling more than 52,000 copies by the summer of 2017 (Flood). However, it was arguably the publication of Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo's *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women* (2016) that prompted an explosion of children's biographies about women. The book was translated into dozens of languages, including Swedish, and quickly sold more than a million copies worldwide (Laity).

This article seeks to contribute to the limited body of work attending to girlhood in children's nonfiction, with specific focus on collective biographies about women published in the United Kingdom and United States since 2016. Nonfiction texts can be instructional in a way that most fictional texts are not. In these collective biographies about women, readers are instructed to "be inspired" (Pankhurst, *World*).¹ Having undertaken a critical content analysis of five of these texts, I suggest that, despite the positive and admirable intentions underlying their publication, the overarching discourses of girlhood that they present are problematic. Specifically, there are dangerous undertones that responsabilise girls. In a similar vein to Catherine Rottenberg ("The Rise" 433), I use the term "responsibilise" to refer to discourses that render women and girls individually responsible for themselves, especially for their aspirations and successes. In *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, the authors note that it is important for girls to understand the "obstacles that lie in front of them" and to "find a way to overcome them" or, even better, to "remove" them entirely (Favilli and Cavallo, *Good Night* xi-xii). Chronic and deep-rooted structures of discrimination and oppression are framed as scalable or movable objects akin to those one might find and conquer on an assault course. As female readers are inspired to take responsibility for their aspirations and lives, other factors that produce and maintain their unequal status in the first place are eschewed.

I begin by offering a brief history of children's biography, including an overview of the literary, socio-cultural, and political context

from which these recent biographies have emerged. Drawing on Sarah Banet-Weiser's theory of popular feminism and her "market for empowerment" ("Confidence" 188), I position these texts as objects of popular feminism, suggesting that they provide fertile ground for messages of responsabilisation to take hold. In the remainder of the article, I present my analysis of Favilli and Cavallo's *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (2016) and *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2* (2017) as well as three of Pankhurst's *Fantastically Great Women* books: *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (2016), *Fantastically Great Women Who Made History* (2018), and *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* (2020). I conclude with some final thoughts on the troubling implications of their content and framing. Based on the approach outlined by Kathy Short in "Critical Content Analysis as a Research Methodology" (2016), my analysis asks questions such as, according to these narratives, who has power? Who has agency? What assumptions are made? Exploring these questions has led me to focus on specific elements, such as the use of direct address and narrative framing. My analysis is underpinned by popular feminism as theorised by Banet-Weiser and poststructuralist feminist theories, enabling me to examine the texts' linguistic practices and make their constitutive force visible.

A Brief (Her)story of Children's Biography

In their respective studies, Barbara Chatton and Victor Watson claim that biography for children in English began in the 16th century with John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, which was translated into English in 1563. According to Chatton, "these grim stories of the uplifting lives of saints, and their torture and death at the hands of their persecutors, were intended to inspire children to live saintly lives" (84). In the same period, secular role models were provided in Sir Thomas North's 1579 translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (Chatton 84). Gillian Adams, however, claims that biographies for children in Britain existed as early as the medieval period, when students read stories of saints' lives, stories of Alfred the Great, and stories about King Arthur from Geoffrey of Monmouth (235).

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the continued use of biographies to instruct and encourage children to lead "good" lives and to behave in the "right" way. Victorian contributions included Charlotte Yonge's *A Book of Golden Deeds of all Times and all Lands* (1864) and William Canton's *A Child's Book of Saints* (1898) (Watson 82). Mary Pilkington's *Biography for Girls; Or, Moral and Instructive Examples, for*

Young Ladies (1799) is one of the earliest recorded biographies in English, written specifically for girls (Robson 107). Like John Darton's *Famous Girls Who Have Become Illustrious Women: Forming Models for Imitation for the Young Women of England* (1864), it was written "to evoke humility and modesty in their female readers" (Robson 107).

In the 20th century, a number of notable biographies about women were produced, including Laura Richard's writings on Florence Nightingale (1909) and Diane Stanley's biography of Joan of Arc (1998) (Stevenson 163). The year 1934 saw Cornelia Meigs' *Invincible Louisa: The Story of the Author of "Little Women"* (1933) being awarded the Newbery Medal for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children (Watson 82), and Anne Frank's *Het Achterhuis (The Diary of a Young Girl)* was published in 1947, signaling the start of stories about heroic children making their way into print (Chatton 85). Picturebook biographies also became increasingly popular, notable titles about women including Fay Stanley's *The Last Princess: The Story of Princess Ka'iulani of Hawai'i* (1991) and Diane Stanley's *Cleopatra* (1994) (Chatton 85). Interestingly, by Julie Cummins' definition, many of the picturebook biographies Chatton references could be categorised as "storyographies." She describes these as being a "story presentation" rather than a factual recounting of the person's whole life, containing the dramatic tension of a well-constructed plot (Cummins 754). Undoubtedly, collective biographies about women published in the 21st century are indebted to these storyographies and the biographies of women dating back to the 18th century. Like these earlier texts, they are written to encourage readers to act (though not necessarily with humility and modesty!) and, like storyographies, they construct narratives around key events in the individuals' lives.

Authors of these recent biographies tend to cite the inadequate representation of female characters in children's literature as part of, if not their main motivation, for writing children's biographies about women. Academic studies in the Global North have been attending to the under-representation and problematic representation of women and girls in children's literature since the early 1970s, generally agreeing that the representation of gender has been, in some form or another, gravely inadequate. This verdict corroborates what Favilli and Cavallo as well as Pankhurst articulate when looking back on their own experiences of childhood reading. For example, Pankhurst has said:

No matter what my surname I'd want to write and illustrate strong and I hope, dynamic, female characters, because those are the characters I wanted to read about as a child and why on earth should female characters not be all of the above? (Pankhurst, "The Fantastically Great")

The arrival of these types of books has contributed to, and coincided with, what Lisa Edwards among others has termed the "non-fiction renaissance," which began in 2013. In the editorial to an *IBBYLink* newsletter, Ferelith Hordon observes that whilst "children are increasingly using the Internet to chase down facts, authors are once more looking to use informational texts as a way to inspire" (2). The result has been an incredibly diverse and ever-expanding range of exquisitely illustrated and aesthetically beautiful books, intended to both entertain and inform.

Popular Feminism and the "Market for Empowerment"

The proliferation of children's biographies about women cannot be entirely credited to the "non-fiction renaissance." As these biographies began emerging in the late 2010s, we were witnessing the watershed cultural phenomena of the #MeToo movement, Women's Marches, and the implementation of gender pay gap reporting legislation in the United Kingdom. Feminism was becoming "popular." Thus, there is a discernible socio-cultural and political context from which these books have emanated. A 2011 study by Janice McCabe and others concludes that, in children's literature, "change toward gender equality is uneven, nonlinear, and tied to patterns of feminist activism and backlash" (198). Based on their analysis of over 5,000 books published throughout the 20th century, they find that, for example, the 1930s to 1960s reveal the greatest disparity between male and female characters – the precise period following the first-wave women's movement, when feminism was heavily scrutinised (219). Given the socio-cultural and political context, the 2010s arguably provide further evidence for the suggestion that female representation in children's literature tends to be greater during times of feminist activism.

The backdrop and vehicle for these feminist movements and campaigns has largely been the mainstream and commercial media. In *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (2020), Alison Phipps explains that although the #MeToo movement started as a programme of work by Black feminist and civil rights activist

Tarana Burke in 2006, it went viral as a hashtag in 2017 after a tweet by white actor Alyssa Milano (2). *Me, Not You* is an important exposition of how mainstream feminist movements co-opt the work of women of colour, whilst also offering a striking example of how mainstream platforms facilitate and sensationalise expressions of popular feminism. Banet-Weiser argues that it is precisely because forms of feminism have manifested themselves in discourses and practices associated with the mainstream and commercial media that feminism has become increasingly “popular” (*Empowered* 1). She explains that in North America and Europe, expressions of feminism are everywhere – on social media platforms, on t-shirts, in movies – and they are often couched in discourses of empowerment. She terms this “a market for empowerment, where empowerment itself becomes a commodity” (“Confidence” 182). Banet-Weiser argues, for example, that the implied messaging of Always’ #LikeAGirl and CoverGirls’ #GirlsCan advertising campaigns is that “girls and women individually need to lean in, be confident, to stop thinking ‘I can’t’” (*Empowered* 53). It is through “leaning in,” that is, purchasing feminine hygiene products and makeup – for those who have the economic and cultural privilege to access the market – that girls and women can achieve empowerment (47).

Presenting narratives of “empowered” women who have achieved extraordinary things, texts such as Pankhurst’s and Favilli and Cavallo’s are undoubtedly part of this “market for empowerment.” As my analysis reveals, readers are encouraged to consume, be inspired, and achieve empowerment as well. In fact, the texts’ “market for empowerment” extends far beyond the individual texts. At www.rebelgirls.com, fans can subscribe to the “Rebel Podcast” and purchase an array of “rebel essentials,” including tote bags, t-shirts, and greeting cards. Bloomsbury, the publisher of the *Fantastically Great Women* series, similarly offers a range of accompanying merchandise. Furthermore, a musical based on the series is being performed at numerous theatres across the United Kingdom in 2022 (Millward). Clearly, opportunities to achieve empowerment are not limited to the bookshelves, as readers are orientated towards purchasing and consuming additional products promising self-confidence and achievement.

The continuous stream of scholarship exposing women’s and girls’ under-representation and problematic representation in children’s literature, in addition to the visibility of feminist movements in the 2010s, has provided a burning platform from which children’s biographies about women have been able to rise with particular

force and popularity since 2016. Furthermore, the overarching message of responsabilisation has found for itself a perfect vehicle in the form of children's biography, where the notion of inspiring readers to exhibit certain behaviours has been present since its beginnings.

Responsibilisation and Responsibilising Readers

Discourses of empowerment are conducive to neoliberal subjectivities, where the self is regarded as autonomous, self-reliant, and responsible. "Responsibilisation" is a term first developed in the governmentality literature to refer to the process whereby subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the duty of a state agency, or would not have been deemed a responsibility at all (Wakefield and Fleming 276). Most recently, the responsabilisation of women and girls, specifically, has been discussed in the contexts of postfeminist sensibilities, neoliberal feminism, and popular feminism. For example, Rosalind Gill explains that girls and women have long been required to monitor and self-survey in order to perform a successful femininity, but contends that this self-surveillance is intensified in the postfeminist media culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s (155). With reference to popular magazines, Gill states that women are no longer presented as "passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze" (151). Rather, by portraying women as active and desiring subjects, "the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime," and girls and women become "responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects" (151-152).

In 2014, Rottenberg pointed to the emergence of a new type of feminism - neoliberal feminism - where a new variation of self-responsibilisation was starting to manifest. Unlike postfeminist sensibilities where the need for feminism is repudiated, neoliberal feminism avows gender inequality. However, it is the neoliberal feminist subject who is "mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" (Rottenberg, "The Rise" 420). Specifically, Rottenberg describes how neoliberal feminism

helps to maintain a discourse of reproduction and care work while at the same time ensuring that all responsibility for these forms of labour - but not necessarily all of the labour itself - falls squarely on the shoulders of so-called aspirational women. (Banet-Weiser et al. 8)

As such, neoliberal feminism has “helped construct the context for popular feminism to flourish in popular culture and media,” as personal choice and taking individual responsibility are key tenets of neoliberalism (Banet-Weiser et al. 10). The message to self-responsibilise is pervasive across expressions of popular feminism and, as this recent wave of children’s biographies demonstrates, children and young readers are not inoculated against its reach.

Rebel Girls and Fantastically Great Women: Selfless Individuality Under the Guise of Collective Action

Across these texts, the exhortations to self-responsibilise are strikingly directive in tone. In Pankhurst’s *Fantastically Great Women* books, almost all biographies include a series of directional indicators, including arrows, dotted lines, and pointing hands, urging readers to follow or emulate the women’s journeys. In fact, each text includes an opening double-page spread, using arrows to guide readers through an overview of the women featured therein, and an imperative verb in the upper-left corner to signal their expected participation. The last double-page spread of the *Fantastically Great Women* texts showcases the women for a final time, and readers are directly addressed through use of questioning. For example, in *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* readers are asked, “How will you speak up for our planet?”. These questions are repeated in the blurbs, where the “YOU” is capitalised, further emphasising the responsibility of the reader.

As Jennifer Graff and Courtney Shimek explain, direct address “is increasingly common in contemporary nonfiction. Addressing the reader as *you* at the individual and collective level connects readers to abstract and concrete concepts, guides readers’ imaginations, and inspires readers to take action” (226). Imperative verbs are also a key component of the texts’ direct address. Readers of the *Fantastically Great Women* books are told to *be* like the women presented in the texts, to “be brave,” “be curious,” “be kind.” In *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* and *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2*, readers are told to “dream,” “aim,” “fight”; the list goes on. At the back of the books there is also a blank template for readers to write their own story and draw their own portrait. Again, using direct address, readers are encouraged to be involved and take ownership.

The ownership girls are encouraged to take and the responsibility they are encouraged to shoulder are highly prescriptive. To put it rather crudely, to *be* like the women in the texts or, rather, to be like

the women are generally *represented* in the texts, means following your dreams and adopting wholly positive qualities. The women are mostly presented in one-dimensional format – their flaws, imperfections, failings, and defeats are only briefly touched upon if not erased entirely. The title of Pankhurst’s series alone is exemplary of this hyperbolic positivity – these women are not just “great”; they are “fantastically great.” There are some anomalies, such as Christina of Sweden’s biography in *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2*. The authors quote Pope Alexander II, who called Christina “a queen without a realm, a Christian without faith, and a woman without shame,” further appraising that “he was right” (Favilli and Cavallo, *Good Night 2* 42). Behaviour that some might regard as selfish is highlighted. Importantly, this does not invalidate Christina’s achievements, and the biography concludes by acknowledging her work in forming the Academy of Arcadia, an institute for literature and philosophy (42). In Christina of Sweden’s biography and a handful of others, a range of “positive” and “negative” attributes co-exist, though this is not the case for the majority. With reference to recent compendiums of feminist heroines such as Favilli and Cavallo’s books, Anna Leszkiewicz acutely observes “that while men can remain problematic giants of history, women must find relevance by becoming inspirational poster girls.” As I will discuss later, spotlighting women’s positive attributes and concealing behaviour or qualities that might undermine this positivity have worrying implications.

Across the texts, humility, modesty, courage, and determination are all celebrated as positive traits, but the one reinforced with most positive acclaim is that of serving others. Selflessness – defined here as the prioritisation of serving others over one’s own desires and/or ambitions – is afforded high value. Some of the women’s actions, even when driven by personal ambition or interest, are framed in a way that celebrates their service to others. For example, the biography of Mary Kom, a professional boxer from India, opens with a description of her family: they “were very poor and struggled to put food on the table” (Favilli and Cavallo, *Good Night* 128). We read that Kom decided to become a boxer to “help her family live a better life” (128). She became an Olympic champion, “made her village proud, and was able to provide for her family, just like she had dreamed when she was a child” (128). Although we are provided with a quote from Kom, who says, “[w]ithout boxing, I can’t live. I love boxing” (128), her passion is peripheral, whereas examples of her selflessness are repeatedly emphasised. Sophia Loren’s biography similarly highlights her passion, but transposes this passion to function as a

symbol of hope for the nation (Favilli and Cavallo, *Good Night* 2 178). The biography details Loren's life in Italy during the Second World War, her move to Rome to pursue a career in acting, and her subsequent success in Hollywood. We learn that Loren's mother had often dreamt of becoming an actress and, after spending some time with her mother on set, Loren decided she wanted to try to become an actress too. Three short paragraphs later and Loren is elevated as a symbol of hope for the whole of Italy: "Sophia embodied the whole country's determination to bounce back after the long, hard years of war, and to work toward a brighter future" (178). Through the texts' narrative framing, even these women's personal passions are heralded for their service to others.

This selflessness is often framed as an entirely independent enterprise. Though there are exceptions – notably in Pankhurst's *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet*, where nearly a third of the biographies celebrate collective action, for example, the Chipko movement in India – most biographies narrate how the women achieved success singlehandedly. It could be argued that, bound by the conventions of the genre, a focus on individuality is somewhat inevitable. Biography is, after all, a written account of the life of an individual. Further, individual action "is more easily commodified" than collective action (Banet-Weiser, "Confidence" 186). However, there is an eerie silence surrounding the wider, historical context of these women's achievements, which often involved sustained periods of collective effort. For example, in Pankhurst's and Favilli and Cavallo's biographies of Rosa Parks, her individual act of resistance on a bus in Alabama in December 1955 is central, and her collaboration with others is confined to one or two short sentences at the end (Pankhurst, *World*; Favilli and Cavallo, *Good Night* 166–167). It is true that Parks' refusal to give up her seat was a groundbreaking moment in the American Civil Rights Movement, but her engagement with activism extended far beyond this singular event and, for the most part, involved collaboration with others. In her autobiography, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (1992), we learn that, prior to 1st December 1955, Parks had been involved in discussions with Montgomery NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) about boycotting and beginning legal proceedings against the city, and that the Women's Political Council had already brought numerous protests to the Montgomery bus companies (110–111).

Even when collective effort is demonstrated, individual leadership is often the most celebrated feature of the narrative. For example, in the biography of Flora Drummond, the collective effort of the British suffragettes is acknowledged, though Drummond's leader-

ship accomplishments as “The General” are repeatedly emphasised (Pankhurst, *History*). At the centre of the double-page spread is a large illustration of Drummond on horseback, with the words “THIS WAY SISTER SUFFRAGETTES! FOLLOW FLORA!” trailing behind her. Other suffragettes are depicted, but their positioning around the borders of the pages – usually behind Drummond – portrays their role as followers, as opposed to equal contributors to a collective cause. This is lamentable, especially given that “an individualistic approach to feminism elides the fact that most of its successes, from suffrage to civil rights to legalising abortion, are thanks to grassroots collective action” (Leszkiewicz), a critique that certainly bears out across these texts.

Although these texts responsabilise readers to be extraordinarily, individually selfless, this is simultaneously cloaked in calls for collectivity and community. Indeed, *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* is “the outcome of collective and collaborative manufacture: two authors gestated the project, thousands of ‘rebels’ funded it, and sixty female artists were invited to make the illustrations” (García-González 52). The resulting texts are imbued with this sense of grassroots collectivity. In the preface to *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, the authors write: “Now that you’re holding this book, all we can feel is hope and enthusiasm for the world we’re building together” (Favilli and Cavallo, *Good Night* xii). This type of messaging is in keeping with current discourses of empowerment that circulate within popular feminism. As Gill argues, this leap from individual success to vaguely drawn political aspirations for equality is typical of popular feminism (617). Readers are responsabilised to be individually selfless whilst simultaneously asked to contribute to a broader – and distinctively nebulous – collective cause.

Banet-Weiser argues that the “commodification of empowerment through visibility reifies empowerment, justifying it as an end in itself rather than as a starting point for material change and feminist social justice” (“Confidence” 185). In other words, the suggestion that individual readers can become empowered through consumption of these texts and their wider merchandising dilutes the conceivability and capacity for collective transformation. These texts and the “markets for empowerment” surrounding them intimate that individual consumption is “enough,” that one can consume, be inspired, achieve empowerment, and then observe the occurrence of equality. However, the concomitant calls for collective action – where the aims remain unspecified and the strategies, non-existent – highlight a jarring contradiction at the heart of these texts.

Troubling Implications: “Self-fulness” Rather than Selflessness?

Texts that responsabilise girls to follow their dreams and adopt wholly positive qualities – individual selflessness being the most important of all – have troubling implications. Firstly, the notion that women can achieve “extraordinary things simply by following their hearts, talents and dreams” (Pankhurst, *World*) is predicated on the idea that individuals know what their dreams are and that they are lying in wait, ready to be pursued. Presumptions such as this place expectations on young people that are unhelpful and unrealistic. The juxtaposition between “extraordinary” and “simply” is demonstrative of this unrealistic idealism – things which are extraordinary are rarely achieved with or through simplicity.

Secondly, in many of the biographies the centrality of the “simply follow your dreams” narrative eclipses many of the women’s other qualities and skills. For example, in Amelia Earhart’s biography in Pankhurst’s *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* we read: “Amelia showed the world what amazing things a girl with adventure in her heart can achieve.” Undoubtedly, Earhart would have needed a high level of technical skill to fly across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, yet these skills (aside from a brief reference to her quick thinking) are omitted from the narrative. This type of one-dimensional representation impoverishes our understanding of women’s history and offers an unrealistic depiction of achievement.

Thirdly, the notion that anyone can achieve greatness if they follow their hearts, talents, and dreams, no matter how “ordinary” they are, risks ignoring, even fortifying, already-existing inequitable structural conditions. In her analysis of eight sports advice books written by top female athletes, Dawn Heineken writes that “the construction of the liberated girl subject erases the social and structural inequities that continue to constrain the experiences of many girls within the US” (339). The same is true of the texts analysed here. In fact, some of the biographies in these texts disclaim the structural conditions that would have likely helped facilitate some of the women’s extraordinariness. For example, Noor Inayat Khan’s biography in Pankhurst’s *Fantastically Great Women Who Made History* describes how her father descended from Indian royalty, but concludes by stating that Inayat Khan’s hard work “showed that in extreme situations ordinary people are capable of extraordinary things.” There is nothing “ordinary” about being a descendant of Indian royalty, and implying that there is conceals the benefits that come with such privilege. Encouraging young people to be aspirational has value, but acknowledging that structural and systemic inequities can make this challenging is vital.

In her 2019 book, *Selfish Women*, Lisa Downing talks about a different type of individuality, a selfish individuality, which she argues should not be discounted as a means for advancing feminist social justice. Downing writes that when women adopt any discourses of self-interest, self-regard or selfishness, they become illegible. She focuses on women who set themselves apart from narratives of selflessness, such as Margaret Thatcher, a former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom considered abhorrently selfish by many feminists, and provocatively concludes that feminism might do well to examine the strategies and behavioural modes of such women. She coins the term “self-fulness” to describe the co-existence of prioritising the self whilst understanding structural oppression, and the need for “strategic common-cause-making” (Downing 156). This, she argues, would allow women’s self-fulness to be fully realised. Could Downing’s “self-fulness” be a way to bridge the contradiction at the heart of these texts, that is, their call for collectivity and their concomitant representations of individual, selfless action? Indeed, the contradictory message these texts emit certainly highlights the untenability of the simplistic notion that individualism is “bad” and collectivity is “good,” and that we must choose one to move forward. What might these texts look like if, instead of celebrating women’s selflessness, more space were given to women’s unpalatable characteristics whilst simultaneously acknowledging structural and systemic inequities through careful representations of strategic, collective action?

Many of the biographies do detail women’s direct challenges to institutional inequities. However, these are narrated in a way that implies they can be easily overcome or removed entirely, through the actions of extraordinary, selfless women. Whether eschewing the reality that structural inequities can be enabling or constraining, or acknowledging their existence but implying they can be easily circumvented, these texts do not adequately address the complexity of the issues. This is highly ironic given that structural inequities produce and preserve the societal devaluation of women and girls in the first place, hence why we need books that celebrate women’s existence!

Conclusion

By using direct address and framing women’s achievements in a way that highlights and celebrates their service to others, these texts responsabilise girls to not only be individually responsible for themselves, but also to be extraordinarily selfless. This type

of messaging is in keeping with neoliberal individualism, and the limitations of feminist politics within this context are well-documented (see Rottenberg, “The Rise” and “Women”). Surface-level messaging, issues of exclusivity, lack of political agenda, and failure to challenge inequitable systems and structures are recurring points of criticism. For girls specifically, narratives of empowerment that self-responsibilise and fail to provide opportunities for questioning the production and maintenance of inequitable structures that “justify” aspirations for empowerment in the first place, are unsettling to say the least. Yet, female representation is important. The “popularisation” of feminism can spark discussion and action. As such, the existence and visibility of texts such as these are valuable. However, as Banet-Weiser puts it, women and girls inhabit “an identity that is unequal from the ground up” (“Postfeminism” 155). When aiming to inspire, we must be mindful of this. The structural devaluation of women and girls needs to be acknowledged on a much deeper level and with greater nuance. Ultimately, we do young readers a disservice by not always inviting them to grapple with these nuances for themselves.

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Notes

1 The Pankhurst books cited in this article are non-paginated.

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