



Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem, and the Confidence Gap

Peggy Orenstein

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A *NEW YORK TIMES* NOTABLE BOOK OF THE YEAR

The classic account of the hurdles facing adolescent girls in America--now reissued with a new Foreword, to coincide with the award-winning author's new book on women and identity.

Inspired by a study by the American Association of University Women that showed girls' self-esteem plummeting as they reach adolescence, Peggy Orenstein spent months observing, interviewing, and getting to know dozens of girls both inside and outside the classroom at two very different schools in northern California. The result was a groundbreaking book in which she brought the disturbing statistics to life with skill and flair of an experienced journalist.

Orenstein plumbs the minds of both boys and girls who have learned to equate masculinity with opportunity and assertiveness, and femininity with reserve and restraint. She demonstrates the cost of this insidious lesson, by taking us into the lives of real young women who are struggling with eating disorders, sexual harassment, and declining academic achievement, especially in math and science. Peggy Orenstein's **SchoolGirls** is a classic that belongs on the shelf with the work of Carol Gilligan, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, and Mary Pipher. It continues to be read by all who care about how our schools and our society teach girls to shortchange themselves.

Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem, and the Confidence Gap Details

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Author : Peggy Orenstein

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Tia says

This could be a great book but it wasn't. The ideas and information was there, but it felt extremely repetitive and seemed like they were trying to stretch each idea into as long as possible by saying it 5 different ways. The first bit of it was good, but then it became boring. If you want to read this book, all you need to do is read the introduction and you've gotten all the information you need from the book.

Susan says

This is an old book - over 20 years old, in fact. I read it because I had seen so many references to it. Some things have changed tremendously since it was written, but, sadly, much hasn't changed at all. The author spent time in two middle schools - one suburban and middle class and one inner city and mainly minority. The girls in these schools had different outlooks and approaches to life, but both were hamstrung due to being females.

First the positive since the book was written - girls graduation rate has risen and they are now more likely to graduate and go on to college than boys. Professional development for teachers in urban schools has been created and disseminated so that teachers in these sorts of schools are more likely to know how to deal with the problems that go with these schools and their students' back stories than when this book was written.

BUT - Girls STILL face the double standard discussed in this book, girls are still sexually harassed in schools and don't seem to realize it or know what to do about it, boys still have their outbursts and wild behavior excused more than girls. I don't think very many teachers have taken the conscious efforts described in this book to give girls more say. And now with the greater emphasis on seat learning, standardized tests, and other things that make kids stay quiet and in their seats, girls problems have been swept under the rug as, generally, young boys find it harder to fit in this new formal classroom than girls do.

The individual stories of the girls the author spends time with are compelling, and she does a good job of creating a picture of them. I wish she did a better job of tying in their stories with her overall thesis, though. I am amazed and thankful that two schools and parents in those schools allowed the author to observe and interview them to such an extent. This is a scary prospect because you don't really know the person who will be spending so much time in the school, you worry about privacy issues, and it can be intimidating for both teachers and students alike. But without these opportunities, we will never learn how to better serve young people, so I am grateful.

KeTURah says

This book was a real eye-opener for me, but not in the way one might think. The research for the book was done on 11-14 year old girls during the early 90's, the same time that I was in that age in school. I recognized the mostly white suburban school immediately - it had the exact same environment of female oppression that I remember from my school. And now I realize why I had such a tough time in school - I was conditioned to

be unassertive. the saddest thing is that, trapped in a world of double-standards, girls contribute to their own oppression. And they're not getting any help from parents or teachers to break them out of the cycle. i just hope things have changed since i was a teenager.

Marian says

Disturbingly accurate even after 20+ years.

jill says

This book was written in response to a study about self-esteem and girls in school conducted by the American Association of University Women, and I have to admit that throughout most of my reading of it, one of the questions in the back of my mind was "okay, but don't girls generally out perform boys in educational settings?" So it's interesting that one of the feminist blogs I read (because that's the kind of manhating bitch I am) had this posted earlier this week.

Whatever learning differences boys and girls may have, and whatever problems educational settings have in balancing those differences, I do think the issue of self-esteem and confidence is huge in girls' success. This book raised a lot of issues about girls' socialization, and what is acceptable feminine behavior vs. acceptable male behavior, that are really interesting, both in general and, of course, narcissistically. I know I was one of those perfectionist girls in middle school. I could so easily have been one of the white, middle class girls she interviewed. I never had eating disorders or wanted to cut myself, but I cried in class a couple times because I wasn't doing well enough, and I didn't want to contribute, even though I knew I was the smart kid.

One of the things measured in the original study was what kind of traits adolescents listed as the thing they liked most about themselves; boys overwhelmingly listed skills or personality traits, girls listed physical attributes. I would have listed my intelligence in middle school, I'm sure. I have always identified as smart, not pretty. But it's not like I've overcome the need to be pretty; I just kind of wrote it off. I chose smart, I wasn't pretty -- the end. And, although I do think I'm attractive today, I have problems with people being attracted to me, in a way I don't have problems with people thinking I'm intelligent or funny.

And even traits I like about myself are cast into doubt from a feminist perspective in this book. I don't want to be louder or less diplomatic, but how much of that is the "nice girl" socialization? And, if I accept that it is a result of that socialization, at least to some extent, am I obligated to try and change it?

Questions, questions, questions.

Stacy says

Not much has changed in the 20+ years that Orenstein has written this book. Many of the things the young girls in this book experience are things that I experienced as a young girl. It was an important read for me both as a woman and an educator. Orenstein also takes into consideration how race and class factor into these girls' sexuality and self-confidence.

Jenni Buchanan says

A shocking look at girls in 6th-8th grades, how they are treated differently than boys by their teachers, and the invisible gender bias through which they are viewed by their peers, their educators, their parents, and eventually even themselves. This book should be required reading for anyone who plans to work with kids in any way. It opened my eyes to the "hidden curriculum" we teach our kids and how desperately it needs to change. This was published in 1994, and it's all too clear the straight line we can draw between the kids and gender preconceptions in this book, and the circus that is the 2016 presidential race with our first female candidate. Sadly, not nearly enough has changed in the school system in the decades since. This book is still all too relevant.

Jeannette says

I read this book for a class in college and dang, it makes me want to home school my kids if I ever had any. It just talks about all the issues and peer pressure that is out there.

Amanda says

Every time I read a book like this, I walk away thinking how terrifying it is to be a girl in these circumstances and wonder how I missed most of this doubt and self-harm behavior when I was this age. This book underscores a number of common themes about girls in schools, the stereotypes of docile and compliant behavior and the secondary status girls have in school. But I find myself a bit skeptical as the book cannot show all perspectives, only those that reinforce the author's thesis so it ends up being skewed. I would have liked to see what happened to the girls profiled in the book and it left the experience a bit unfinished.

Carolyn says

I LOVED this book. It does a beautiful job of exploring the social and academic struggles of young women across racial, ethnic and class lines and is so readable. Orenstein is a journalist and that carries through in her story telling-- non-fiction with the allure of a plot and characters. The book also does a nice job of explaining young women's roles in their own lives without making them victims or vixens (or beating up too much on boys). Much of what she writes is not earth shattering for people who have read a lot of feminist works, but the WAY she explains it is fresh, authentic and accessible. If you like Naomi Wolf, you'll love this- it takes those theories and shows them operating in the lives of real women.

Elizabeth says

Fascinating book. A bit uncomfortable to read at the beginning, as it makes you reflect on your own high school experience, but the book delved into many areas about how women are influenced in school that I not thought of. In the last chapter she presented an educational environment that was focused on a wider world view in terms of gender. I would have liked to have read more about solutions to the issues she uncovers, but

still an excellent read.

Joe says

In *Schoolgirls*, Peggy Orenstein explores self-esteem in young women; in particular, she focuses on how self-esteem relates to education: how low self-esteem can cause women to hold themselves back, and how the school environment can hurt self-esteem in many women.

The book takes a look at one school that is relatively well-off, and another that does not have many resources. Orenstein discusses a number of issues in the contexts of the different situations; it's not an exhaustive study, but it's not really meant to be.

Overall, the book does a good job of talking about many facets of the problem, while not getting too unfocused; humanizing the problem by looking at real students without simply ending up with a long series of anecdotes; and talking about solutions that are working, while avoiding preachiness.

Stephanie says

Reading this book just a few months after reading Orenstein's *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* has given me a lot to think about as I continue to raise two daughters. I can't say Orenstein's findings (or the research studies she references to flesh out her anecdotal observances) are encouraging. In *Schoolgirls*, I was most struck by the chapter in which a teacher taught a class that emphasized women's roles in history to the degree that men's roles are normally emphasized, and about the ways people reacted when she inverted the standard procedures. I have Rachel Simmons' *Odd Girl Out* sitting on my nightstand, but I think I need a break from reading about the bleak futures of our nation's daughters.

Christy says

Important for educators and other human beings who know that all the gender equity issues for girls growing up and in school weren't "solved" or had gone away before we started crying "what about the boys?" and putting out books and requisite slew of school workshops on how our culture messes them up, too. (It is true that gender equity experts forgot there were two genders - at least, we'd say now? - for too long...)

Sarah says

Every parent, teacher, man, and woman needs to read this book. I can honestly say it has changed me. This is not a problem that went away when women entered the work force or were given the right to vote. Inequalities happen in subtle ways everyday, everywhere. Reading this book made me so much more aware of them and pushed me to change the way I teach and think.

Valerie says

This book is a great resource for parents.

Julie says

You need to read this book.

If you're interested in education, you should read this book.

If you're interested in gender roles, women studies, class issues, you really need to read this book.

It's basically an ethnography of two middle schools, one in a poor area and one in a ritzy area. We follow a handful of students at each school and get glimpses into their home and school lives. There are nuanced reactions and interactions with the adults around them that are really telling about expectations of girls in general and these girls in particular.

I read it in high school sometime and was happy that it was assigned in my college Women Studies intro class, because it was a bit of a life-changer for me. I haven't read it in over ten years and have forgotten most of the details now, but still remember the power of these stories.

You need to read this book!

Vince says

I gave this book four stars because it does exactly what its description says it does: describe the hardships that girls in their adolescence face.

And now for the \$1,000,000 question:

Where is the equivalent book (call it "Schoolboys") that describes the hurdles that adolescent boys face???

People, especially feminists, like to assume that all is hunky dory with boys and that we don't need to help them (even the media likes to assume this -- just ask Time magazine). I don't think this is the case, because if it were, then we wouldn't see a few teenage boys walking into schools with ammunition and opening fire. It is evident that our public schools (I don't know about private schools, parochial ones, etc.) are failing to meet the needs of boys, in part (in my opinion) because it isn't politically correct to do so.

An anecdote comes to mind. While I was student teaching, my cooperating teacher was teaching a lesson on ratios of boys to girls in the class (this was a ninth grade class). She asked the class how many girls there were and recorded the number on the chalkboard. Then she asked the class how many boys there were, and then said, "way too many."

Is it any wonder, then, why we see boys dropping out of school way more often than girls do (even though the total number of male dropouts have decreased over the years -- I'll give you that -- but that still doesn't take away from the problem), attending college less, doing much worse in reading (even though they do

slightly better than girls in math and science, but that too doesn't take away from the problem), and making the honor roll less often than the girls? Despite this, we not only see books like these, but also, programs like the ones on WeTV that highlight the hurdles of adolescent girls -- think of the programs as the video equivalent of Peggy Orenstein's book.

In sum, what I'm getting at is that even though this book does do girls a favor by highlighting the challenges that they face, it is high time that we do likewise for the boys. For as long as politics and the media ignore the suffering of a segment of the youth population for the sake of "leveling the playing field," instead of seeing **EVERYONE** as a victim, our society will remain a precarious place.

Jennifer says

As an educator, mother, or future mother, OR someone that works with young girls, this book is a must read. I cried through most of the book remembering the hardships of adolescence: popularity, boys, harassment, being female. This book is an interesting microscope into a few girls lives. I was so moved by this book, I emailed the author inquiring about the girls in the story, and what became of them. This was her reply:

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you so much for your note. It makes my day to hear from readers.

You know, the journalist-subject relationship is a peculiar one. It's very intense when it's going on, but it doesn't usually translate to a longer term relationship, largely because I say so little. I'm like a cipher, because I don't want my subjects to know too much about me--it might color how they relate to me. It's a bit like being a shrink. So I don't tend to stay in touch with my subjects much. I've kept in touch with Becca over the years. She's doing okay. Just broke up with a boyfriend, is a personal trainer, lives in Northern California, not quite sure what she wants to do next. I know that Evie and Lindsay went to junior college, but don't know what they did after that (maybe transferred to 4-year universities). Another girl--oh, gosh, I'm forgetting what I named her in the book, but she's in the first chapter saying "eww" about spiders--got married shortly out of high school and has 3 kids, is a stay-at-home mom for the moment. Another girl with a lesser role in the book graduated UC Davis and works at a Fortune 500 company now. She was into Goth for awhile and then Gaelic.

The girls from Audobon all went to different high schools and their lives are so chaotic that they don't tend to keep the same phone numbers or addresses for very long. I tried to keep track of Marta, but she just disappeared. Maybe her family was here illegally, I don't know. But when they disconnected their phone, I went to their apartment and they were gone and of course no one would tell me where (even if they knew). I know Dashelle graduated high school, but lost her after that. Once I turned on the TV news and there was April as big as life--there had been a race riot at her high school and, of course, she was the one the TV newscasters were interviewing. That made me laugh. She was in 11th grade then, so that was the last I heard. And I know nothing about LaRhonda. I wish I could tell you more. What I can tell you is that there are girls like them in every middle school and every high school in urban America and they need someone who will see them, really SEE them. It's a very hard job, teaching in schools like Audobon. There are a lot of kids who slip through cracks.

Thanks again for writing. You might be interested in my other two books. I'm especially fond of my most recent one, a memoir called "Waiting for Daisy." Might not be a natural subject for you, but I hope you'll take a look anyway.

Best wishes and good luck with all you do.

--Peggy

Lynley says

When I went into teaching my first job was in a girls only high school. It was thought of single sex education in general that girls' schools are best for girls but boys tend to suffer a bit with an overly masculine culture at boys' schools.

There are also problems with girls only education of course. Namely, some of them get a big shock when exposed to the wider co-ed world.

Strangely, many parents who send their girls to single sex schools do so because they don't want their daughters 'distracted by boys', which seems to me a coded concern for parents who are actually policing their daughters' sexual desire. If they had read this book they would know there are other very good reasons for single sex education that have nothing to do with the girls themselves but with the problems in our sexist culture.

I don't know why we don't see more co-ed schools which separate boys and girls for maths, science and English. That would be the ideal situation for my own daughter.

It would have been interesting to compare these co-ed girls to equivalent SES girls at girls only schools and even more interesting to track where they all go from there. Because I'd really like to know if girls only education is the answer, or if it only delays the inevitable.
