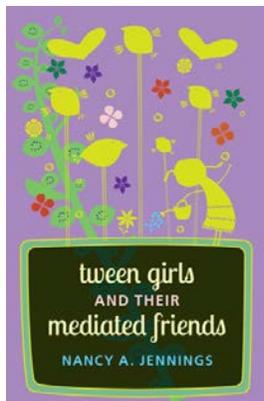


Professional Book Review

Jennings, N. (2014). *Tween Girls and Their Mediated Friends*. New York, NY: Peter Lang. 122pp., ISBN 978-1-4331-2188-3. \$35.43.

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Parasocial relationships are defined as the interrelationships and interactions between a media viewer and a media figure (Herbert & Wohl, 1956). Research done by Theran, Newberg and Gleason (2010) indicates that parasocial relationships are a normal part of adolescent development. There is little research, however, that focuses on how these relationships influence and are influenced by girls' views of friendship. The book *Tween Girls and Their Mediated Friends* by Nancy Jennings (2014) is a significant contribution to this field of study. Dr. Jennings is an associate professor and director of the Children's Education and Entertainment Research Lab at the University of Cincinnati.

Jennings provides a foundation for the text in Chapter 1, describing the history of preschool and children's programming and the changes seen in recent years, further explaining how this has impacted programming designed to appeal to tweens, ages 9-14. Citing the Children's Television Act (1990) and the FCC "3-hour" ruling (1996) as catalysts for the rapidly evolving landscape of children's programming, Jennings asserts that this current generation is composed of media savvy children who have never known a "non-digital" world. No longer seen as passive viewers, preschoolers and tweens are now viewed as media consumers who are able to influence family economics.

The main purpose of this book is to contribute to an understanding of how this group of tweens has been impacted by the parasocial relationships they have developed with media figures they designate as "friends." Jennings' text is based on the results of a multi-method study of six 11-year-old girls who grew up with strong female characters in leading roles in the programming they watched currently and those they had viewed as preschoolers. In question are the ways in which parasocial relationships resemble real-world relationships, particularly in understanding the concept of friendship and its related characteristics.

Chapter 2 provides the reader with background information on the television shows/books that include the characters the girls chose as their mediated friends. Each of the girls in the study selected female characters with strong personalities who also exhibited the characteristics of caring and being helpful. Those chosen were Teddy Duncan from the Disney sitcom *Good Luck Charlie*, Cleo from Australia's Network Ten and Germany's ZDF stations' *H20*:

Just Add Water, Carly from Nickelodeon's *iCarly*, Tori from Nickelodeon's *Victorious*, and finally the character Hermione from the *Harry Potter* book series.

The author used Vandergrift's (1996) Model of Female Voices in Youth Literature to analyze the narratives of each of the characters and Gilligan's *Listening Guide* (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003) to analyze the interviews she conducted with each of the girls. Within the context of the narratives of the characters several themes emerged:

- Sense of Community/Connection: "Community, respect and interdependency can be seen in the interactions between the female characters identified in each narrative and other characters in the narratives" (p. 32).
- Self-Determination and Agency: Each of the identified characters exhibited a degree of self-determination that reflected their achievements. Jennings notes that both Cleo (*H2O: Just Add Water*), Tori (*Victorious*) and Hermione (*Harry Potter* series) are slow to develop their feelings of competency and autonomy. However, each of the characters becomes strong early in their seasons/books.
- Self-Expression: The girls surveyed all identified characters that are excellent at expressing themselves; they make their voices heard. Jennings asserts the critical nature of this theme saying, "it is important to recognize that self-expression in its many forms gives power to these female characters" (p. 39).

The girls' responses to the survey are the primary focus of Chapter 3. Using Vandergrift's model as the organizer, Jennings shares how each of the girls in the study connects her character to the themes. Their descriptions show that each of them has developed parasocial relationships with their identified characters: "The girls either used specific words such as helpful and caring to describe the characters or the girls indicated that the character would be a good friend" (p. 45). They exhibit their identification or shared voice with the characters by using "we" to describe the similarities they see between themselves and their mediated friend.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the characters each of the girls in the study identified with as preschoolers. While interesting, this proved to be the weakest section of the book. All of the study participants identified Dora from *Dora, the Explorer* or Diego from *Go, Diego, Go!* (Nickelodeon) as those they remember interacting with when they were younger. Rather than sampling preschool girls, the author chose to interview the same set of girls (all currently tweens) and apply the same analysis (Vandergrift's model) to the characters they identified. Using memory rather than current experience, each of the girls in the study expressed a connection with the characters because they were friendly, helpful and caring. However, they were quick to distance themselves from the characters: "They all voice that they have outgrown Dora and Diego" (p. 88).

The text also suffers from repetitious ideas. For example, on page 45 the author states, "The girls used specific words such as helpful and caring to

describe the characters....” Later, on page 100 the author states, “Through the voice of the girls, we learn that caring for others, helping others, and wanting to learn are far more important to friendship formation than looks.” This idea is repeated again on page 101: “They also value people who share their interests, who are kind to others, who support each other, who defend one another, and who want to help each other grow and prosper.”

While the book has flaws, the major premise is solid. Tween girls develop parasocial relationships with television personalities and book characters that they would consider being friends with if that character were real. They are able to find similarities between themselves and that character and are able to identify the characteristics that make that character a potential “good friend.” Because we are schooling a generation of “digital natives,” research such as this is important to our understanding of the ways these students connect themselves to the mediated world.

References

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