Introduction: Vicarious Living through Hybrid Literature

At the beginning of the twentieth century, an innovation in literature for children was the introduction of book series aimed specifically at juvenile readers. Tomes heavily laced with moral lessons gave way to mass-produced and cheaply priced stories of adventure, fun, and friendship, first for boys, and, soon after, for girls (Romalov 87–97). Because publishers wanted sales, they strove to supply books that appealed to the interests of children. Books for boys that were “exciting and entertaining with juvenile heroes and juvenile villains, a great deal of action, some of which was plausible and some not, no sex, a minimum of dialogue and philosophy” were, although deplored by teachers and librarians, “bought by the millions” (Dizer 75). The Stratemeyer Syndicate dominated the production and marketing of book series specifically for children. By making books cheaper and thus more accessible to young buyers, Stratemeyer bypassed teachers and parents.

Nancy Romalov describes the production of series books for girls as an “hybridization” process, whereby “the form and content of the girls’ books imitated the boys’ books, and the result was an hybrid literature in which girls vicariously could live the adventures of young heroines as ‘new women’ in a new century” (89). Peter Stoneley notes that the pairing of girls’ series with boys’ series enabled females to visualize a more adventurous life, but notes that “the apparent physical freedom is often conditioned by an intense and almost inescapable ideological control. There are attitudes and protocols to which the girls must conform at all times and in all places” (94).

Publishers soon realized that they were caught in a difficult situation when it came to series books featuring sport and adventures that were aimed at a young female audience. Athletics, for example, requires displays of physical skill, determination, daring, risk, and independent behaviour, all traits
regarded as masculine at the time (Hall 64). Conventional opinions about women at the turn of the twentieth century were guided by deeply rooted cultural assumptions that female passivity and subordination should serve primarily as support for the public activity of males. There was very little public support for female sport competition, and few athlete role models for young women to emulate. For example, a few American women “entered women’s tennis, golf and archery exhibitions in the 1900 and 1904 [Olympic] games, but their participation was not encouraged or well publicized” (Cahn 45). When Canadian and American women did begin to compete in a more organized fashion in the Olympic Games, their activities were severely restricted to sports, such as swimming or figure skating, that highlighted female health and beauty (Cahn 45; Hall 68).

Nevertheless, a variety of cultural changes contributed to greater female interest and participation in sport and recreational games. As more women began to attend secondary and post-secondary institutions, schools provided more opportunities for women to participate in organized team sport. An influx of European immigrants accustomed to more varied and extensive sport participation for males and females and increased economic pressures resulting in more women in the workforce led to increased demands for recreational facilities and activities for workers (Hall 27–37; Hill 6–7; Cahn 44).

The Girls of Central High book series for girls provided significant support for the athletic endeavours of young women at a time when a great deal of controversy enveloped women’s participation in competitive sporting activities. A girls’ book series featuring physically skilled, athletic, and yet feminine young women found ready acceptance in the imaginations of the girls for whom these books were published. As Nancy Romalov observes, “hybridization was bound to result in some degree of confusion, tension and contradiction” (89), and many potential book buyers—teachers, librarians, and parents—disapproved of books encouraging female children to emulate masculine behaviours (Ross 202–04). Notwithstanding the reservations of parents and librarians, book series for girls proved to be wildly popular from their inception. Stoneley notes that “between 1900 and 1910, forty-six new series for girls were begun; between 1910 and 1920, there were ninety-four new series for girls” (92).

The Girls of Central High

The purpose of this article is to investigate how unconventional images of gender in a girls’ book series, The Girls of Central High, published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate at the turn of the twentieth century, worked to influence and regulate the actions and attitudes of juvenile female readers with regard to participation in competitive, vigorous sporting...
activities. The portrayals of two fictional personalities, Clara (universally referred to as “Bobby”) Hargrew, a hoyden, and Prettyman Sweet, a dude, will be examined.

The Girls of Central High extended to only seven books, a relatively short series when compared with later productions of twenty or more. It has been out of print for almost one hundred years, and is now sought after only by collectors. It is difficult to assess the impact that these few books may have had on the actual thoughts and actions of young readers of a century ago (Romalov 87–90). It should be noted, however, that neither the age, nor the relative obscurity, nor even the contested literary value of these books should devalue the significant contribution The Girls of Central High has made to the genre of juvenile literature. This series contributed some of the first books directed specifically to girls that featured females purposefully choosing to participate in competitive team sport. In the pre-World-War-I era, when women were just beginning to explore the possibilities for movement afforded by less restrictive female attire (such as the Bloomer) and to enjoy a slightly more positive public attitude toward vigorous female physical activities such as lawn tennis and “basket-ball” (Hall 1–3; Hill 3), The Girls of Central High provided a safe, private forum for young girls to examine the tensions emerging from female demands for increased physical autonomy. Even in the present day, school, community, and amateur and professional sport organizations for females struggle for facilities, support, recognition, and credibility. In this particular series, contentious intersections of sport and gender from one hundred years ago resonate to the present time and serve to illuminate how patriarchal forces manipulate the same variables of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, and power over and over in their effort to retain cultural control.

Furthermore, this series, one of the first to explore the topic of female physicality, provided a foundation upon which other book series for girls were able to model their skilled and active heroines. The purposeful actions and sporting activities of The Girls of Central High led the way in providing vital information and encouragement for young women to participate in sporting activities. Their actions echo down through time and throughout the rollicking adventures of later girls’ series such as The Outdoor Girls (Hope), Ruth Fielding (Emerson), Grace Harlow (Flower), and, of course, Nancy Drew (Keene). The influence of The Girls of Central High can be traced all the way to modern book series for girls, and publications featuring Zan Hagen (Knudsen), The Broadway Ballplayers (Holohan), Soccer Stars (Costello), and The Screech Owls (MacGregor) have provided reading pleasure to many, even as they continue to provide encouragement for girls and young women to explore unconventional sporting possibilities.
Many series adventures took place at school. A clear illustration of the “hybrid” nature of girls’ book series is provided by the customary inclusion, in school-based series fiction, of some form of athletic competition between rival class teams or schools. Entire boys’ series were developed around the varsity exploits of the hero, and the pervasive impact that these experiences have on his life (see, for example, the Fred Fenton series by Allen Chapman). Although almost all girls’ school series devoted some attention to competitive sport, games and athletics were generally downplayed as nothing more than a useful vehicle for dramatizing a problem in relationships between rival girls or demonstrating the heroine’s virtues (such as refusing to cheat) and/or her extensive and superior range of capabilities (see, for example, the Marjorie Dean High School series by Pauline Lester). In this way, publishers provided young female readers with the vicarious action they demanded, without appearing to insist that they “give up the advantages of dependence and security that accompany more domestic narratives” (Romalov 89). That is, token displays of moderate athletic participation in games, monitored by watchful teachers and woven through with school regulations, enabled publishers and authors to portray for young female readers traditional competitive sporting activities in environments that were designed to reify commonly held cultural assumptions about appropriate gendered behaviour. There are, however, significant differences to be found in The Girls of Central High series.

Although the author of this book series is depicted as Gertrude W. Morrison, it is generally thought that this name is a pseudonym for W. Bert Foster, a prolific writer with the Stratemeyer Syndicate (Leithead 11; White). It is difficult, at a point nearly one hundred years after publication, to determine the significance of a male author writing...
about girls’ sporting experiences. Both female and male authors included descriptions of girls’ sporting experiences in their series books, with varying levels of technical accuracy about the games that they described.

The features marking The Girls of Central High as different from other book series for girls are the breadth of activities in which the girls participate, the extent to which they train and compete, and, most importantly, the overt awareness of the cultural and social controversies assailing young females who desire to participate in competitive team sport and the provision of responses designed to quell fears and assuage concerns about the feminine appropriateness of the games in which the young women play. Instead of a single chapter devoted to “the big game,” five of the seven books in this series develop the narrative around a specific sport or physical activity such as basketball, rowing, or track and field. In the first book, the girls are engaged in organizing a competitive sports league between high schools. In another, the girls camp on an island for their summer holiday (with a chaperone; the boys who associate with the group set up their own camp on the adjoining mainland). The relationships of the characters in the stories, and the personalities of the characters themselves, are viewed through the lenses of practice and of participation in the specific sport that is featured in a given story. Thus, one book focuses on how relationships among the girls are affected by attitudes to competition as they practice and play basketball against other high-school teams. Another examines training limitations for girls in track and field. The game rules, training regimes, and clothing worn for games and practices described in these books are accurate (Hill 1–15; Bingham 7–20) and (to my mind) evocative of the era. Descriptions of the girls’ practices and game play are accompanied by comments from various authoritative figures (their female coach and PE teacher, the doctor, an unsympathetic female teacher, the male principal, parents) on the pros and cons of vigorous competitive sporting activity for females. This dialogue is a remarkably authentic mirror of the academic discussion being carried out at the time (Hall 27–33; Hill 6) and, when compared to other girls’ book series of the era, such as Marjorie Dean, considerably broader in scope and more detailed in terms of the issues surrounding female sport participation. The series provides an intriguing window for today’s readers into the athletic experiences open to girls almost a century ago, and into the cultural attitudes and opinions that served to both challenge and encourage female participation in sport. Furthermore, the unusual topic of competitive sport for girls provides multiple opportunities for the author to develop characters rarely encountered in juvenile literature.

Diane Reay has observed that “There is a co-dependence between femininities and masculinities which means that neither can be fully understood...
in isolation from the other” (118). The Girls of Central High series provides a unique opportunity to investigate, in their most early stages, crucial intersections of gender and institutionalized schooling as they impact on participation in competitive sporting activities by young females. A way in which these intersections may be explored is through a detailed examination of two characters in the series whose lives are affected by sport in very different ways. Although, in many aspects, this book series served to reproduce and reinforce for young readers conventional attitudes and beliefs about how femininity and masculinity should be performed (as did practically every other juvenile book series), The Girls of Central High also succeeded in reassuring young women that the desire to participate in vigorous competitive team sport was reasonable, feminine, and beneficial for other aspects of their lives.

Furthermore, the stories provided boys and girls who responded in unconventional ways to traditional hegemonic masculinity, particularly if they were females aspiring to increase their athletic participation or males who wished to opt out of athletic experiences altogether, with the knowledge that they were not necessarily alone in their aspirations or interests. My understanding of “traditional hegemonic masculinity” is based on Helen Harper’s interpretation of John Stephens’s and R. W. Connell’s observations that hegemonic masculinity “is best understood as any privileged form of masculinity that supports patriarchy” and that “guarantees . . . the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (qtd. in Harper 528n2).

The formula followed for this Stratemeyer book series is similar to that of other book series for girls and boys produced at this time. That is, it generally follows the narrative plot development whereby an initiating event is affected by a crisis that is finally and happily resolved. For example, the opportunity to play or participate in a new or different sport or activity is introduced early in the story. Before the event or activity can occur, it is thwarted by mysterious occurrences (for example, someone starts a fire in the new gym), by unsympathetic teachers, or by scheming peers. Resolution is achieved through the quick thinking and clever problem-solving of one or more members of the group. In this series, two characters, one girl and one boy, become the standards upon which the author contrasts the normalcy of the other young people in the story. Often, this is accomplished through the use of humour—one is a joker, the other is joked about.

**Bobby Hargrew—“Just as much fun as any boy”**

The Girls of Central High series features physically active females striving to improve their athletic abilities; conventional cultural beliefs concerning femininity and masculinity are explored and
challenged within and through the medium of sport. As the various characters are developed for the stories, issues concerning early-twentieth-century female participation in sport—such as the nature and extent of participation in competitive physical activities, personal desires to play and to win, and relationships with peers and adults as they are affected by sport—are all topics for examination and discussion.

There is a tradition of “boyish” female characters in juvenile literature that extends at least as far back as Jo in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. Jo makes it clear that she envies the freedom with which men move in the world, particularly when she compares that life to her own, restricted by a limited income and confined by notions of gentility. Jo may have been the forerunner of a popular female character appearing in many book series for girls—that of the mischievous (but loveable), rowdy or reckless scamp. In this sport series for girls, the character of Clara “Bobby” Hargrew and her relationships with others in her community—her teachers, parent, teammates, and friends. Bobby resists attempts by others to regulate her behaviour, activities, and appearance as she strives to find a balance between public demands for propriety and her private desires for physical action and excitement.

Bobby is acknowledged by all to be a “flyaway,” a “harum scarum.” She does not like formality and, while she recognizes and acknowledges that there are different behavioural expectations for females and males, she actively resists those set for girls. In a conversation with her friend Laura, Bobby complains, “We’re all getting so dreadfully lady-like and grown up. I hate to grow up. If I’ve got to be all stiff and starched all the time, I’d rather be a boy” (Morrison, *Rivals* 6).

Bobby’s resistance to the limitations of acceptable femininity is established through her habitual unruliness in school (joking, speaking out, arguing with the teacher), and, as an additional and unusual aspect of series fiction for girls, through her athletic interests. This conversation between Laura and Bobby sets the scene:

“Old ‘Gee Gee’ is opposed to it [interschool competitive sport].”

“How do you know Miss Carrington doesn’t like the idea?” asked Laura, quickly.

“She told us if we did not stand well in deportment, as well as in our studies, we could not belong to the new association . . .”

“Well, why should we? We’ve got to play the game, Bobby.” [. . .]

“Can’t all be ‘Miss Prims’ like you, Laura.” (Morrison, *Rivals* 6)
While Bobby is doubtful that changing her rebellious nature will guarantee her a place on the team, she is enthusiastic about the formation of a competitive league just for girls: “I hope we get a girls’ athletic association formed, too. The boys won’t let us play with them if we want to, and I’d like to learn how to play some game beside Puss in the Corner and Drop the Handkerchief” (Morrison, Rivals 6). The consequence of Bobby’s “unladylike” behaviour in class is to be barred for a certain time from playing on teams after school. In a strange twist, boyish behaviour results in expulsion from team participation—in these stories, sport is clearly regarded as a girlish pleasure that can be denied as a form of punishment.

Young readers are sometimes left to try and make sense of the complex and conflicting conceptions of gender that are an integral aspect of this book series. All of the girl athletes of Central High are perpetually engaged in complex negotiations to produce an acceptable form of “sporting femininity,” and Bobby’s character propels her into the limelight as these negotiations periodically arise in the stories. The following passage illustrates both the contradictory and “hybrid” nature of adventure fiction for girls and the conflicts associated with aggressive physicality for female characters in these stories. Bobby happens to witness a kidnapping in progress. A man snatches a young girl, and, carrying her, runs away. Bobby seizes the moment and “screamed, dropped her books, and went at the fellow as though she were playing football. She ‘tackled low,’ seizing with both arms about the knees, and Jim Varey, screeching and threatening, fell forward on the sward” (Morrison, Track and Field 174).

After this extraordinary athletic feat, carried out against a villainous adult male by a young woman wearing an ankle-length dress (this was 1914), the story continues with no further mention of Bobby’s
intervention. There are neither congratulations for her heroic tackle, nor condemnations for her “unladylike” behaviour. The silence following Bobby’s action leaves young readers in a void: is Bobby’s heroic tackle an acceptable physical action, or not? Should they emulate this aggressive physicality, or avoid it? What are the limits of acceptable physical activity for young women? Could one adequately portray the elements of conventional femininity while also working hard to develop the skills normally associated with hegemonic masculinity? Bobby herself is upset that her deed is unacknowledged, and it is not until the next day that the kidnap victim comes to Bobby “and thanked her warmly” (178).

Bobby’s “harum scarum” nature is explained in terms of family circumstances. There are other younger girls, but no boys, in her family, and no mother to influence her behaviour. Her father, “Having no son, . . . made her his companion as though she were a boy” (Morrison, Rivals 5). Bobby’s close ties with her father and her plans for the future are revealed when the possibility emerges that her father might re-marry:

For Bobby loved her father very dearly and for years had been his confidante. It had long been agreed between them that she was going to be his partner in the grocery business, just as though she had been born a boy. And as soon as the little girls were big enough they were to go away to boarding school, Mrs. Ballister [housekeeper] should be relieved of the responsibility of the house, and Bobby was going to be the real mistress of the Hargrew home. (Morrison, Track and Field 74)

If the message that athletic girls should not plan for marriage is not clear enough in this passage, a succeeding observation that “Bobby and Mr. Hargrew had been such close friends and comrades that the girl was jealous of such a possibility as anybody coming into her father’s life who could take her place to any degree” (75) should make explicit for any young reader the future in store for girls who have not learned “the femininity game,” and who are unruly, athletic, and boyish. These messages are particularly powerful when they are combined with specific implications about the effects that “excessive” participation in competitive sport may have on the relationships that active girls could expect. Marriage is unlikely. The best a young woman may hope for is to stay home to care for one or two aging parents, and, if they are lucky, eventually to run the business. Sexual energy is redirected to the care and management of others.

Unlike some of the other girls in the group, Bobby does not have a boyfriend, and, while she notices and comments on the relationships of others, she does not seem to be interested in a beau for herself. Although sexuality is never directly addressed in these series books, subtle messages assuming heteronormative
attitudes and interests are regularly delivered to young readers. There is no alternative to heterosexuality other than to be, as Bobby’s future indicates, sexless. The hoydens depicted in vintage juvenile fiction may provide a safety valve for sexualities that cannot be acknowledged, but that are difficult to repress.

Today, a young female who is boisterous, impudent, and who values her activity over her appearance may be labelled a tomboy, particularly if her “behaviour, pastimes, and style of dress are considered those of a young boy” (“Tomboy”). Barbara Creed extends the description of “tomboy” into the realm of sexuality by claiming that, “The central image used to control representations of the potentially lesbian body—to draw back the female body from entering the dark realm of lesbian desire—is that of the tomboy” (88). While it may seem reasonable and logical to telescope a century of cultural change into a single view and conflate the tomboy of today with the hoyden of one hundred years ago, these literary characters cannot be read in the same light. As M. Ann Hall notes in her history of women’s sport in Canada, The Girl and the Game, “Any discussion about the sexuality of female athletes [in the early decades of the twentieth century] presumed heterosexuality. No one suggested that masculine athleticism in women was indicative of homosexual love. . . . The criticism of ‘mannish women athletes’ was not that they might be lesbians, but that they might be men” (92). Bobby Hargrew is described affectionately by her father as being “just as much fun as any boy” (Morrison, Rivals 2), and by Laura’s brother as “no namby-pamby, Miss Sissy kind of a girl…” (Morrison, Track and Field 164); but she does not dress or act the same as the boys with whom she is friendly. Bobby challenges the limits of acceptable femininity with her impulsive actions, her jokes, and her athletic capabilities, both on and
off the playing field, but she is not a mannish young woman.

Bobby represents a new point on the femininity continuum along which young female readers might attempt to place themselves and their own growing awareness of what it meant to be a sporting female at the turn of the twentieth century in North America. But the accompanying message is clear: to be a pioneer comes at a cost. Bobby is considered, even by her affectionate friends, to be immature, impulsive, and irresponsible. Her teachers deplore her happy-go-lucky attitude in their classes and, in their attempts to punish and control her unladylike behaviour, exploit her love of sports by restricting her opportunities to play. Even the narrator of these stories holds out little hope for a “normal” female future for Bobby. The patriarchal forces of traditional hegemonic masculinity work to regulate female athletic participation in these stories by celebrating Bobby’s abilities on the one hand and rolling over her accomplishments like a steamroller on the other. Young readers are left to decide for themselves if the joy of vigorous physicality is worth the risks they may face in their personal lives if they persist.

**Constructions of Femininity and Masculinity through Sport**

Although this fiction series features a group of very physically active girls, males play an integral part in the stories. In vintage book series, females are constantly reminded that active lives are only accomplished with the help of males, while boys are reminded that masculinity is defined by independence and self-sufficiency. Unlike series books for boys, in which it is possible that no females appear for an entire book (Singleton, “Camps” 53), the young women in this series (as in many other book series for girls) are expected to develop their identities as athletes, scholars, daughters, friends, and girlfriends through their associations with males. Conventional femininity and masculinity are reproduced and reinforced for young readers in the interactions that occur between the girls and boys, and the roles that each gender assumes.

In a series for girls that is focused on an unconventional topic such as female participation in competitive sport, it is noteworthy that males provide a great deal of the justification for girls’ sport in the stories. While this may indicate to the young female reader an unequivocal masculine acceptance and enthusiasm for girls’ participation in sport, a more discriminating reader may be struck by the note of “permission” apparent in many of the comments. That is, the casual remarks of various males clearly indicate that the nature and extent of the sport participation actually undertaken by these young girls is regulated by masculine tolerance and good will. For example, the team medical advisor and father of one of the aspiring
female athletes enthuses, “I don’t care how much of a bookworm a girl is, if she swings a pair of two and a half pound Indian clubs, she’ll come out all right!” (Morrison, Rivals 75).

In reply to an inquiry from his wife, “Do you approve of all of this disturbance about girls’ athletics, James?” the father of the main character, Laura Belding, observes, “It’s for after-hours. It won’t interfere with their school work. It can’t, in fact, . . . for only those pupils who stand well in both their studies and in deportment can take part” (Morrison, Rivals 41). No one asks Laura’s mother what she thinks about her daughter’s participation in sporting activities. While athletic young female readers in 1914 may have considered these statements to be supportive, it is not a difficult step to wonder what would have happened to the series if the Doctor or the father had protested to other powerful males in the community (the principal, the male philanthropist providing the facilities, or other fathers) about the planned athletic participation of their daughters. Males in these stories effectively control the sporting experiences of females by publicly condoning the limitations set to regulate the extent of the participation allowed the girls. In so doing, they provide a powerful confirmation of the strength of Connell’s definition that hegemonic masculinity, through the incorporation and subsequent control of activities that may appear to be resistant to patriarchy, succeeds in maintaining the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. When Bobby wins the quarter mile, the doctor is immediately called to examine her:

“There’s nothing the matter with that little girl,” said the doctor, confidently. “Only, these sudden strains are not valuable. Yes, once, by the way, is all right. As long as one does not go beyond that reserve strength that your instructor harps upon,” and he laughed. (Morrison, Track and Field 96)

Bobby’s health and well-being after participating in strenuous physical activity must be confirmed (and the activity condoned) by a male authority, and, although he is jocose about her fitness, he cannot resist a dig at the qualifications or concern evidenced by Bobby’s female coach. It is evident that the notion of “natural” female physical limitations was supported and encouraged (in life, as in fiction) by female instructors anxious to maintain their fledgling programs within the patriarchal culture permeating secondary education.

In most series books for girls, contrasts between masculine and feminine behaviour are effective in establishing and reinforcing cultural ideals of femininity and masculinity. David Whitson observes that “Body sense is crucial to the development of male identity . . . to learn to be a male is to learn to project a physical presence that speaks of latent power. . . . sport is empowering for many young males precisely
because it teaches us how to achieve power through practiced combinations of force and skill” (23). If Whitson is correct, a clear contrast between masculine and feminine practices is more difficult to achieve in a series focused on the athletic exploits of females. As Whitson argues,

in contending that our sense of who we are is firmly rooted in our experiences of embodiment, it is integral to the reproduction of gender relations that boys are encouraged to experience their bodies, and therefore themselves, in forceful, space-occupying, even dominating ways. It may be suggested that masculinizing and feminizing practices associated with the body are at the heart of the social construction of masculinity and femininity and that this is precisely why sport matters in the total structure of gender relations. (23–24)

While it is evident that males are determined to incorporate and thus regulate the nature and extent of the play that is undertaken, inescapable tensions arise whenever female physicality and expertise become too pronounced.

In her text *Masculinities without Men?*, Jean Bobby Noble observes that “Recent scholarship in the field of gender studies exposes the technologies that construct gender as an unchanging biological essence with self-evident links to physicality, identity and authority” (x). One of the significant places where gender is constructed using those three building blocks is in vintage series fiction for boys and girls about sport and characters participating in sporting activities. Feminizing and masculinizing practices associated with the physically active body in these stories are perpetually justified and supported by authoritative adults who extol the benefits of competitive sport for boys and well-supervised, moderate exercise for girls: “As boys are made more manly by physical exercise and sports, so girls can be made more womanly by them. A healthy girlhood is the finest preparation obtainable for the higher duties of life” (Morrison, *Rivals* 75).

Pretty Sweet Is Just That

Another way in which tensions generated by the unconventional practices of sporting females are dissipated is through a male character who contrasts with the athletic girls of Central High and who serves to both normalize their femininity and legitimate the physical activities in which they participate. Prettyman Sweet does not fit conventional expectations of masculinity. His appearance, abilities, and actions are constantly displayed in contrast not only to the more typical boys in the series, but also as a means of alleviating some of the potentially worrisome actions of the athletically inclined young women featured in
these books. Even his name separates him from the other boys, who bear conventionally masculine names such as Chet, Lance, Billy, Red, or Otto. He is often referred to as Pretty or Purt.

Prettyman is described in these books as a “dude,” a “dandy,” or an “exquisite.” In the first decades of the twentieth century, a dude was a male fastidiously concerned with clothes and appearance. (Think, for example, of the Duke in the film Moulin Rouge). While a dude associated with Edwardian times may not be a particularly uncommon phenomenon, a dude appearing between the pages of juvenile series fiction certainly is. Why would such an unusual character appear in a girls’ book series featuring athletic females?

Edwardian dudes were usually considered to be the fashion elite, and Purt’s character certainly fills the “fashionista” role in these stories. His clothing and appearance are sources of constant amazement and amusement for the other boys and girls in the stories, and there are many descriptions throughout the books of the outfits in which Prettyman appears. Here is the first introduction of Prettyman: “In the twilight they saw a rather tall boy, dressed in the height of fashion, with brightly polished shoes and an enormously high collar, coming down Whiffle Street” (Morrison, Rivals 64–65). In a later book, Prettyman’s apparel is described with evident enjoyment by the author:

Prettyman Sweet wore a white flannel coat and trousers, with a very fine line of blue running through the goods lengthwise. He wore a canvas hat and canvas shoes, cut low to show open-work crimson silk socks—oh! they were dreams of the hosier’s art! He wore a flowing crimson tie, too, and around his waist, instead of an ordinary belt, he wore a new-fangled, knitted, crimson sash-belt, the like of which none of the boys of Central High had ever beheld.
Before. (Morrison, Lake Luna 69)

At other times, Prettyman appears in a Canadian skating suit, with a fur-edged velvet cap “that it really took courage to wear” (Morrison, Stage 75), and he goes camping in an outfit reminiscent of Robin Hood, a Lincoln green suit and a Lincoln green hat with a feather stuck into one side. It is noteworthy that Prettyman is the only character whose clothing and appearance are described in such detail. The only other young people whose clothes receive a fraction of this attention are identical twins, Dora and Dorothy, whose apparel is occasionally described as a means of emphasizing the difficulty others have telling them apart.

Pretty is further distanced from his peers by his speech. He speaks with an affected drawl that reads somewhere between a lisp and a speech impediment: “You cawn’t fool me, deah boy!” (Morrison, Camp 179); “You never can get even with her, doncher know,” drawled Purt, shaking his head. ‘Weally, I’d much like to try it; but I don’t know what to do’” (Morrison, Track and Field 121).

Like Bobby, Purt lives with a single parent. Pretty is described by the narrator as the only son of a rich widow. She is helpless and prone to hysteria; he is spoiled and accustomed to getting his own way. In the way that Bobby is missing the benefits of a woman’s touch in her life, it is suggested that Prettyman is missing the masculine influence of a father: “The boy’s father had long since died. Purt had been indulged by his mother to a ridiculous degree, and as a usual thing Purt’s conversation and his activities were ridiculed by his schoolmates” (Morrison, Red Cross 150–51).

Prettyman has many more material possessions than most of the other young people in the stories, and he uses his money to attract and keep a following of younger, more impressionable students. To some extent, his strong sense of entitlement shields him from the teasing carried on by the other boys and girls. He often responds seriously to jokes and comments about his appearance or mannerisms, only increasing the amusement of his peers. For example, when Bobby fastens a thread from Pretty’s beautiful new red sash to the wheel of the car in which they are riding, and it begins to unravel rapidly without his knowledge, the following conversation takes place:

“What do you suppose is the matter with all these people?” demanded the unconscious Purt. “I never did see the like. Weally! It is too widiculous!”

“That’s what it is!” laughed Bobby.

“Why!” exclaimed Purt, “they weally seem to see something about us to laugh at! What can it be?”

“Must be you, Purt,” said one of the boys.

“Widiculous! There is nothing about me to laugh at, dear boy.”
“Huh!” grunted his schoolmate. “You’re one big laugh all the time, Pretty, only you don’t know it!” (Morrison, Lake Luna 72–73).

With his extensive wardrobe, his expensive possessions (including a car and a motor boat), and his ready cash, Prettyman embodies the envied “leisure class” often included as an integral aspect of juvenile book series (Stoneley). But Stoneley’s notion of the “enormous hunger for wealth” routinely expressed in these stories is turned on its head in The Girls of Central High. Prettyman may be rich, but he is regarded here as the outsider, the interloper. Regardless of his self-centred personality, wealth, and naïveté about most things typically male—sport, camping, fighting, and so on—the group always includes him and allows him to come along with them.

Purt’s speech, dress, and mannerisms represent many stereotypical characteristics that readers today would associate with a gay lifestyle, but Purt’s sexuality is portrayed in the only way possible in this juvenile book series: he is unquestionably heterosexual. Unlike Bobby, who does not have a beau at any time during the series, Purt has a girlfriend, Lily.

Similarly, the conservative nature of children’s literature prevented any description or discussion of gender that was not unequivocally tied to biological constructions of masculinity or femininity. That is, as Bobby Noble observes, “Conservative ideas about gender dictate that people with male bodies naturally possess both a man’s identity and a man’s right to wield power” (x). Thus, a label such as effeminate cannot be, and is not, attached to Pretty. While his identity is regarded as unarguably male, and his sexuality as heterosexual, his appearance and mannerisms effectively neutralize any masculine power that he may have possessed.

**Pretty Significant**

At the intersections of sport and gender, Prettyman serves a number of purposes. He is hopelessly awkward when confronted with anything demanding physical skill, so it is difficult to understand why Prettyman persists in sporting activities at all. For example, the very first mention of Pretty in this series is to comment on his inept performance on the baseball diamond. He is distinguished from other, much more physically competent boys by Billy’s observation that “Purt Sweet pretty near broke up the ball team this season because he couldn’t play” (Morrison, Rivals 16). Pretty begs to go camping with the other boys, and finds that “[h]aving fun in camp was the hardest work [he] had ever done” because “[i]he boys had made him do his share of camp work. Chopping wood had made his palms blister, sparks had snapped out of the fires he had made and burned holes in his clothes, and hot fat snapping from the skillet had left red marks on his hands and face” (Morrison, Camp 123). Pretty’s
inadequacy is constantly contrasted with vignettes of physical skill displayed by one or another of the boys or, often, by the girls. Michael Kimmel notes,

At the turn of the century, _manhood_ was replaced gradually by the term _masculinity_, which referred to a set of behavioural traits and attitudes that were contrasted now with a new opposite, _femininity_. Masculinity was something that had to be constantly demonstrated, the attainment of which was forever in question—lest the man be undone by a perception of being too feminine. (119–20)

That notions of masculinity are constantly being negotiated is evident in the frequent comparison of the greater sporting experience and competence of the boys with both the girls’ novice status as competitive athletes and Prettyman’s complete incompetence when it comes to athletics of any kind. While the moral parameters of the juvenile series book would not allow Prettyman’s character to be described as “feminine,” his lack of traditional masculine attributes confirms the masculinity of the other boys and the femininity of the female athletes in the stories.

Prettyman’s character also provides a contrast of a different kind. With his concern for sartorial perfection, his affected style of speech, his lack of physical skill, and his self-centred focus on his own well-being, although he is often included on outings, he is never accepted. As one of the girls mutters when her friend Lily begins dating Purt, “goodness only knows what she sees in that freak to want to walk with him” (Morrison, _Basketball_ 26). The other young people’s reaction to Pretty’s character hammers home to young readers of both sexes the dangers of stepping too far outside of conventional constructions of gender.

Purt’s persona as an overblown dude confirms the desirability of the physical activity in which the girls engage by demonstrating to young readers the extent to which one may appear unattractive when physical skill is lacking. Noble refers to Gail Bederman when she comments that “the ideological process of gender works through a complex political technology made up of institutions, ideas, and daily practices, which, when combined, produce a set of truths about who an individual is or can be based upon his or her body” (x). Pretty’s interactions with his male and female peers, and the stories that they tell about him, provide a picture of masculine inadequacy. When contrasted with the confident and competent actions of the other boys and the female athletes, Pretty’s “exquisite” character confirms the “normalcy” of their gender performances even in the face of vigorous female physicality.

**Conclusion: Hegemonic Masculinity and the Regulation of Gender through Sport in 1914**

Publishers pushed the boundaries of acceptably adventurous female behaviour to make sales while
treading a tightrope strung between parental disapproval and juvenile enjoyment. Vintage book series about adventurous, physically active girls go out of their way to highlight the feminine virtues of their heroines while challenging the conventionally gendered conceptions of female (or occasionally male) behaviour of the era (Singleton, “Grace” 115–18). Furthermore, the ways in which girl and boy characters interact in these series provided a range of possibilities for juvenile readers to explore. While not all possibilities were necessarily liberating or empowering for either sex, the power of The Girls of Central High book series, in which girls experiment with responsibility and relationships in the forum of competitive sport, and boys can be dudes and care about their wardrobes, was that it presented to children alternatives to the limited and limiting conventional expectations of the time.

Perry Nodelman is not referring to vintage juvenile series literature when he states, “What we call ‘normal’ is usually the imposition of culturally constructed and therefore politically motivated ideals that serve to repress individual differences by identifying the supposed ideal as the norm” (2), but his comment accurately describes one of the primary characteristics of these publications. Early twentieth-century juvenile series literature was not in the business of challenging the status quo by intention, but hybrid literature that paired girls’ series with boys’ series created unavoidable tensions between the cultural ideals of femininity and masculinity. Exciting portrayals of strong, adventurous, courageous, and skilled female characters challenged ideological notions of traditional femininity and raised questions about what could be considered “normal” gendered behaviour. Furthermore, in a series about skilled, athletic, and competitive young women, the introduction of a male figure who is none of those things resulted in an
overt challenge to the prevailing version of hegemonic masculinity of the era. Although at times a symbol of resistance to conventional thought about gender, it is made clear that Bobby’s physicality, as much as her joking, places her at risk for an unfulfilled adulthood. Prettyman’s presence overwhelmingly broadcasts a warning to both boys and girls that unconventional behaviour, whether in appearance, personality, or actions, may be allowed by exceptionally forgiving friends, but will never truly be accepted by any “normal” boy or girl.

The character of Prettyman Sweet occupies a location on the masculinity continuum unique to vintage juvenile series fiction and unfamiliar to many young readers today. Unlike Bobby, whose physical skills are accepted with respect, and whose active, mischievous nature is greeted with affection and laughter by her peers, Prettyman’s lack of physical skill, affected mannerisms, and extraordinary apparel cause him to be treated as a perpetual outsider by the other young teens in the stories. Whereas Bobby confirms for young female readers that it is possible to be both feminine and athletic (even though there may be social repercussions), Prettyman represents the consequences of challenges to traditional hegemonic masculinity. Whereas the other boys in the series tolerate and support the actions of Bobby and the other girls because they are secure in the knowledge that, as young males, they possess greater strength and expertise, they are definitely not prepared to wholeheartedly accept Prettyman’s brand of unskilled and disempowered masculinity. While it is possible to be both feminine and physically skilled, it is clearly not possible to be both masculine and physically incompetent. Males who cannot or will not embody the physicality necessary to ensure the continuation of masculine dominance are treated with contempt and ridicule.

Although The Girls of Central High, like most other early book series for girls, did not prove to have the staying power of Nancy Drew, the unique and engaging figures of Bobby Hargrew, hoyden, and Prettyman Sweet, dude, as well as the exciting sporting experiences detailed in the stories, will ensure the worth of the cultural contribution of these stories for many generations to come.

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Works Cited


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