Jackson, Stevi. "Ignorance is Bliss when you're Just Seventeen (1996)." *The Trouble & Strife Reader*. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 223–231. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-028>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:56 UTC.

Copyright © Deborah Cameron, Joan Scanlon and the contributors 2010. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

28. Ignorance is Bliss when you're Just Seventeen

Stevi Jackson (1996)

On 6 February 1996 a bill was introduced into the House of Commons to print minimum age recommendations on the covers of teenage girls' magazines, a move which followed publicly aired concern about their sexually explicit content. A week earlier, BBC2 screened a documentary about five year old beauty queens in the Southern USA.

The media were suddenly full of discussion about children and sexuality, or more specifically about girls and sexuality. As usual, public debate missed what feminists might see as the main issues, the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality and the construction of female sexuality in terms of objectification and pleasing men. Instead the focus was on the threat posed to childhood.

On the morning of February 6, Radio 4's regular phone-in focused on sex in teenage magazines, framed by the question 'whatever happened to childhood innocence?' 'Innocence' appears to be taken for granted as a defining feature of childhood, so that anything which threatens it is seen as a danger to childhood itself. Hence a recurrent theme in media discussions of both young women's magazines and child beauty queens was the idea of lost or stolen childhood. It is not just asexual innocence which is seen as threatened, but the supposed golden age of freedom from the pressures of adult life. Yet sexuality is nonetheless thought of as central to this age of innocence — as something such young children should know nothing about.

Where have we heard all this before? One arena where the concept of innocence has been deployed in the media is in coverage of child sexual abuse. Jenny Kitzinger argues that feminists should be critical of the way this concept is used to evoke public revulsion against sexual abuse. She points out that 'innocence' itself is eroticised as a sexual commodity and that the ideal of innocence is used to stigmatise the sexually knowing child, to make her a potentially legitimate victim. Moreover, in the name of protecting 'innocence', adults deprive children of access to sexual information which might help them avoid sexual abuse and exploitation.

In all this discussion of children and sex, it is rarely made explicit that gender is an issue: yet in both the case of the beauty pageants and the magazines the children

who are the objects of concern are *girls*. This makes a difference, since discourses on both childhood and sexuality which underpin these discussions are profoundly gendered. This neglect of gender has meant that the emphasis is on what is deemed extraordinary, the challenge to idealised models of childhood, rather than on what is depressingly and predictably ordinary — the cultural construction of sexualised femininity.

Like most women I know who watched the BBC documentary on child beauty queens, I was both fascinated and appalled. Part of what appalled me was what was being done to these children. The issue for me, though, was not that the discipline and sexualisation enforced on them was robbing of them of their childhoods — rather it seemed an extreme manifestation of the ways in which children in general and girls in particular are treated. Children are defined as dependants subject to parental authority and, within limits, parents have the power to rear them as they choose. Childhood is also remarkable for the degree of control exercised over the body by others. Children's appearance, deportment, posture and movement are regulated; they are touched, kissed and fussed over and more likely to be subject to physical punishment than any other category of person. This control of the body is more rigorously imposed on little girls, one facet of the intersection of gender with the more general powerlessness of children. The five year old beauty queens are young enough and small enough to be physically coerced. They are inexperienced enough not to know that any other mode of life is possible. Like all children, they are constrained to live their lives according to their parents' choices — they are forced to go along with what parents think best for them, whatever it is.

A degree of 'femininity' is being imposed on these children which might well seem excessive even by non-feminist standards. They are being taught very deliberately, rigorously and systematically that the only thing about them of value is their prettiness and their ability to carry off a carefully managed performance of stereotypical femininity. This merges with the reduction of children to objects owned by their parents. With little girls this has often lead to them being treated as dolls to be dressed up and displayed. One doting mother said of her daughter that, when dressed up and made up in her stage costume, she 'looks just like Barbie'.

The sexualisation of childhood is not new. Little girls have long been taught to cultivate prettiness and coquettishness, to get what they want by sexualising themselves. Beauty pageants can be seen as just a logical extension of this. For generations little girls have aspired to be 'May queens' or local carnival queens. The beauty contest is just a more commercialised and professionalised version. Even this is not a recent invention: beautiful baby contests are something I remember from my

childhood. I also recall that Pears soap sponsored a 'Miss Pears' competition, the winner of which then featured in advertisements. Judith Ennew suggests that such representations have distinct parallels with pornography. One example is a painting by Munier called 'Playmates', used by Pears Soap advertisements in 1903 (pre-dating Miss Pears) which features a scantily clad child in a distinctly sexual pose. She also places the famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe with her skirts blowing up around her next to a Oxo advertisement featuring a similar depiction of a small girl, suggesting that both represent the same fantasy (see pp 132-3). 'Sexuality' is further indicated by gestures, movements, a particular turn of the head, a knowing look or wink — all of which the competitors in the beauty pageants were being explicitly taught.

Being encouraged to sexualise themselves as objects without understanding the implications is a dangerous game for girls. Paradoxically the same parents who encourage their daughters to behave like this would, I'm sure, think it terrible for them to know about the realities of sex. It is this anxiety which underlies recent concern about teenage magazines. On the one hand these publications encourage aspects of femininity which are socially approved — interest in fashion, make-up and being attractive — while in another they appear to pose the threat of a more knowing and active female sexuality. It is the issue of sexual knowledge and how much of it should be available to young women which is the central issue at stake in the attempt to regulate teenage girls' reading.

Sex and the teenage girl

The Periodical (Protection of Children) Bill is a private member's bill introduced under the ten minute rule and, as such, is unlikely to become law. Even if there were a law requiring the printing of minimum reading ages on the covers of magazines, I cannot see this stopping young women from wanting to read them. The most popular magazine among boys aged 11-14 — *Viz* — does carry on its cover the message 'not for sale to children', but over a quarter of boys in this age group read it. I find this far more worrying than the magazines girls are reading, but boys' reading habits have not come under public scrutiny — a point I will return to later.

We might want to consider why a magazine called *Just Seventeen* is the most popular purchase among 11 to 14 year olds in the first place, or why *19* is read by girls in their mid-teens. Part of the appeal of these magazines is that they speak to those who are still classed as children, still lacking the rights of adulthood but who aspire to the maturity and status that young womanhood seems to offer them. More sensible commentators have pointed out that teenage interest in sexuality is nothing new. I entered my teens in the early 1960s when teenage magazines had lots of

romance and no explicit sexual content. In the stories a kiss was the culmination of every romantic encounter. I and my peers were desperate to know more but starved of likely sources. At the age of 11 or 12 we were reduced to reading out 'the dirty bits' from James Bond novels (it was that bad!). I recall great excitement when someone got hold of a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. At fourteen, continuing this communal reading practice, three friends and I were nearly expelled from school having been caught with *The Perfumed Garden*.

At least the magazines girls are reading today circulate in a public domain, where their content can be discussed and perhaps challenged, rather than furtively exchanged and whispered over in classrooms and playgrounds. Moreover, we cannot assume a direct link between the magazine's representations of sexuality and young women's sexual activities. The tendency to treat women as 'cultural dupes' brainwashed by whatever they are reading or seeing on television has been much criticised by feminist cultural theorists. Teenage girls are being depicted as cultural dupes by those seeking to restrict their access to magazines. The assumption is that, as children, they are peculiarly vulnerable to brainwashing, they do not know their own minds and therefore they are in danger of being corrupted. We need to credit young women with some ability to think for themselves.

On the other hand, the new emphasis on women and girls as active readers can go too far in denying that particular texts have any effectivity at all. What young people read about sexuality will not *make* them act in particular ways, but it is likely to inform the meanings they construct around their own sexuality. This is not grounds for barring them from reading about sex, but is grounds for being concerned about what sort of sex they are reading about.

The debate around the bill is framed in terms of whether access to explicit sexual information is a good or a bad thing — rarely is the quality of information discussed, other than in moral terms, and what counts as 'sex' is almost never questioned. The increased sexualisation of the magazines' content is seen in isolation, rather than as an aspect of the increased sexualisation of femininity in general. Changes in teenage girls' magazines parallel those in adult women's magazines and, in many respects, the boundaries between the two are blurring. There is now far more explicit sexual content in women's magazines in general and far less desexualised romance. Heterosexual love is itself becoming more sexualised, a trend discernible in Western culture as a whole since the early 20th century and visible in girls' magazines since the 1950s.

One feminist interpretation of this trend is that it is indicative of the increased eroticisation of women's subordination. Other feminists take a more optimistic view.

Angela McRobbie, for example, sees signs of progress in the newer magazines, a postmodern celebration of plurality. She argues that they represent a potential for less uniform, monolithic modes of femininity, for a more knowing and assertive female sexuality, for the exploration of alternatives to heterosexuality. In some ways the new magazines are an advance on earlier ones, but in many other ways I find it difficult to share McRobbie's optimism.

While writing this article I bought a selection of magazines over a period of about three weeks and asked friends and colleagues with teenage daughters what they read. The most popular ones are either music focused — although their real interest seems to be male stars as objects of female lust — or the fashion and relationships variety. It is the latter which have the most explicitly sexual content and it is these I have looked at most closely.

The magazines have certainly changed from those around in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the earlier magazines did include fashion, beauty tips, pin-ups, features on relationships and so on, their stock-in-trade was the comic strip romance. This has disappeared and the magazines now look much more like adult women's magazines of the *Cosmopolitan* variety. Even magazines for pre-teens now have a more grown-up look and share some content with teenage magazines. *Bunty*, for example, which I remember as being a comic book featuring stories about boarding schools, gymkhanas and ballet classes now has a more adult look. It still has some of the old favourites, but these sit alongside articles with lead-ins like: 'Which holiday hunk is the one for you?'

Once past this stage, the next step up is to magazines like *Just Seventeen*, the most popular of this genre among 11-14 year olds — read by 52% of them. There's also the fortnightly *Mizz* and somewhat glossier monthlies such as *Sugar* and *Bliss* (the latter carrying the message 'a girl's gotta have it' under the title). The monthlies may be intended for slightly older girls, but I know of twelve year olds who read them regularly. All, in any case, are aimed at girls still at school.

The barkers on the front of these magazines give an indication of what the fuss is about: 'Sex: should you tell mum or keep schtum'; 'I slept around, but I'm still a virgin'; 'Make him want you bad'; 'He slept with me for a bet'; 'Does sex change your life?'; 'I got pregnant on purpose'; 'Dribble over the sexiest footballer alive' and so on. There are also more serious sexual themes: 'Shock report: why 12 year olds are turning to prostitution'; 'Could I have AIDS: one girl's scary story'.

The sexual message is more explicit still in the magazines for older teenagers such as *19* and *More!*, the latter being (in)famous for its regular 'position of the fortnight' (with line drawings, full instructions and a 1 to 5 difficulty rating). *More!* is the most

adult of these magazines in other senses, in that it addresses its readers as young women with jobs living independently of their parents. The biggest clue to its target audience is that it is alone among these magazines in assuming that the objects of its readers' lust are men rather than boys. It is a tackier, more downmarket version of *Cosmopolitan*, with cheaper clothes in its fashion features and more of a tabloid journalism style. According to Angela McRobbie its 415,000 readers are aged on average between 15 and 17.

Once past the lurid headlines, the contents of these magazines are mixed and often contradictory. Problem page reassurance that all bodies are normal is contradicted by injunctions to improve, disguise or conceal bodily imperfections. Advice on saying no to sex and not rushing into it sits side by side with articles and quizzes which give the impression that the only important thing in life is to attract, keep and please your man. An article in *Bliss* about the joys of being without a boyfriend, which looks at first sight like a positive move, lists among the 'good things about being single' such items as being free to do what you want, to spend time with your mates, but also 'you can eye up any guy you want without feeling guilty'.

It is true that the tone of all this talk of boys, sex and looking good is, as Angela McRobbie says, often ironic and self mocking. Boys are not treated with any great reverence and often they are the butt of jokes. I'm not sure, however, how far this undermines the fairly conventional range of femininities represented in these magazines. Certainly the way readers are addressed implies a more knowing and active sexuality: girls are no longer expected to passively wait until Mr Right makes a move, they are expected to make it happen. Equality seems to be understood within the discourse of these magazines as behaving like men: girls can look at male bodies just as men have traditionally looked at female bodies. At the same time there is an acknowledgement of persistent difference as in '11 things you should NEVER say to boys' (*Sugar*); 'Dazed and confused: just 17 girly things lads will never understand' (*Just Seventeen*).

Moreover, the old idea that girls' sexuality is being attractive and alluring has by no means vanished. The boundaries of what is acceptable in this respect have shifted and behaviour once thought of as that of a 'slag' or 'tart' is now playfully endorsed. Here is the response to those who score highly on a sexiness quiz in *Mizz*:

Grrrrr! You little tiger! You have the secret of sex appeal all right, right down to wearing slinky black numbers to take the dog for a walk, and flirting with your Headmaster to get out of detention. Stop that wiggle when you walk — you'll do yourself an injury!

Yet alongside this are more serious articles about both sexuality and other aspects of life. The same issue of *Mizz* carries articles on teenage prostitution and on a girl coping with her mother's death. The more considered discussions of sexuality in both articles and problem pages are often constructive and informative. The readers of these magazines certainly know far more about coercive sex, sexual exploitation, rape and incest than previous generations and are better informed about avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Girls also know more about their own bodies and how to derive pleasure from them. This is all to the good. So too, in my view, is the demystification of romantic notions that good sex is something which magically happens once you fall in love. However, this has its downside, in that the idea that sex has to be 'worked at' produces its own anxieties and is itself a form of social regulation.

Magazines read by younger teenagers cannot be accused of promoting early sexual experimentation. Generally the message is not to rush into early sex and to resist being pressured into it either by friends or boyfriends. Some carry regular explicit warnings on their problem pages on the illegality of under age sex: 'Be sure, be safe and remember sex under 16 is illegal' (*Just Seventeen*); 'It's cool to wait, sex under 16 is illegal' (*Bliss*). Some of the advice on sex is helpful and positive, the sorts of things young heterosexual women need to know but may not find out from other sources. Sex, however, is still defined in terms of the penetrative norm — 'having sex' means heterosexual coition — even though there are items on problem pages and elsewhere explaining clitoral orgasms and masturbation.

The magazines are relentlessly heterosexual. This is one of the points on which my reading of these magazines differs markedly from Angela McRobbie's. I did not find evidence of 'gay and lesbian sexualities [being] frequently invoked' or any great sign of a postmodern plurality of sexualities. While there is undoubtedly greater openness about lesbian and gay sexualities, in the magazines I read these issues remain marginalised. I only found four explicit discussions — all, significantly, on problem pages. The line taken is, on the whole, a liberal one which seeks to present a fairly positive view but without challenging the normality of heterosexuality.

The problem pages reveal that some boys, at least, read girls' magazines — assuming, that is, that the letters are genuine. It is now common for magazines to have 'agony uncles' as well as 'agony aunts', both to advise on boys' problems and to offer a male point of view on girls' dilemmas. Given that these magazines assume a community of young, heterosexual and primarily female readers and that they focus on heterosexual relationships, one obvious question is: what are the boys these girls relate to reading?

In all the public discussion of girls' magazines, there has been a silence around what boys are reading. In part this reflects the lack of magazines aimed at a young male market. Since there are still only a few adult 'men's magazines', aside from pornographic ones, it is not surprising that no-one has yet launched a publication aimed at teenage boys — particularly since boys seem to read less than girls. *Viz*, the most popular magazine among young teenage boys, is intended for adult men of a puerile disposition. Its appeal may be that it is a fairly easy progression from *The Beano* (which remains among the top five magazines for boys in the early teens). The other 'top five' publications for this age-group are *The Sun* and two computer game magazines. It would seem that if boys of this age are engaging with issues of sex and relationships at all, it is at the level of page 3 and 'the fat slags' — hardly promising for young heterosexual women in search of either true love or sensational sex. Most research on young people's access to sexual information suggests that pornography is boys' main source of 'knowledge' on sex.

In the early 1970s, while I was researching teenage girls' ideas about sexuality, I worked in a psychiatric unit for teenage boys aged 11-15. The boys all read pornography and the walls of the unit were covered in photographs of naked women — those with fully exposed genitals were strongly favoured. Some of the staff objected, but the psychiatrist in charge saw the consumption of pornography as a sign of 'healthy development' in the boys and a legitimate part of the therapeutic environment. Meanwhile the youth club in which I was conducting my research, which claimed to have liberal attitudes to sex, threw me out because I mentioned orgasms to the girls and let on that it was possible for girls to masturbate. While health and youth workers might no longer endorse such gross double standards, I suspect they have by no means vanished and that interest in pornography is still regarded as part of a normal 'healthy' development for boys, that it is not seen as a problem that this is their main means of learning about sex. Finally, I suspect that these double standards are what underpin the concern about explicit sex in teenage magazines.

Whatever reservations I have about the magazines girls are reading, however much I might object to their relentless endorsement of compulsory heterosexuality, I can't help feeling that girls are better served by these magazines than by those available in the past. The girls I was talking to in the early 1970s all read *Jackie*, thought of sex in terms of 'love' and were woefully ignorant about their own bodies, although many were sexually active. Readers of *Bliss*, *Mizz*, *Sugar* and the like are far better informed about safer sex and their own bodies and are constantly exhorted to assert their own sexual wants and needs — including saying no to sexual practices they don't want.

This knowledge does not, of course, translate easily into more egalitarian sexual relationships. All the evidence we have suggests that whatever girls may know in theory, in practice the power dynamics of heterosexual relationships still work against them. However, ignorance would only make girls more vulnerable. One of the problems girls have in negotiating sex with boys is finding a language in which to discuss sexuality and assert their own sexual desires. At least these magazines begin to provide them with such a language, speak to them in terms which make sense in terms of their everyday experience. The problem is not that girls are exposed to too much sex, or too explicit sex, but the limited, male oriented ways in which sexuality is discussed.

References

- Ennew, Judith (1986), *The Sexual Exploitation of Children*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Kitzinger, Jenny (1988) 'Defending innocence: ideologies of childhood', *Feminist Review* 28.
- McRobbie, Angela (1996) 'More! New sexualities in girls' and womens' magazines', in James Curran et al. (eds.), *Cultural Studies and Communications*. London: Arnold.