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Preface

This book celebrates two aspects of girls' lives that they try hard to keep secret: sex and aggression. After years of studying girls' reactions to victimization and women's memories of both sexual victimization and sexual play at Harvard, Children's, and Massachusetts General hospitals in Boston, Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, and now Saint Michael's College in Vermont, I've learned that girls and women have amazing strengths and clever, if hidden, ways of acknowledging feelings of sexual agency as well as anger and aggression. Although I have learned to welcome these forces in the lives of girls, I haven't always felt this way. I initially came to this work with a guilty conscience.

When I was a child I had played sexual games with other girls and was deeply concerned for many years after about what I had done. I had even had sexual feelings during these games. For many years I believed I had seduced another girl into playing with me, although years later I found out that she didn't see it that way at all. The games I played were delightful games of heterosexual romance where a handsome young "man" would seduce or trap a young "woman" into sharing his bed and rubbing up against him. But I felt so terribly guilty for years about these games that I sought out therapists and social workers in high school to tell me if there was something wrong with me.

By the time I began working on this book, however, I had sufficiently dealt with those issues in my life, through coursework as I trained to become a psychologist, through therapy in my twenties and thirties, and through my

work as a feminist, a professor, a therapist, and a researcher of sexual abuse and victimization. In my earlier books, *The Trouble with Blame* and *New Versions of Victims*, I easily disclosed that I had been molested at the age of six by a neighborhood adolescent boy, and although it was a scary and confusing experience at the time, I emerged relatively unscathed and consider myself lucky compared to the many victims of sexual abuse who experienced so much more—penetration, threats, bribes, assaults to their very being. What I think is so interesting and also sets the stage for this research about girls and women that I have done is that an experience of sexual pleasure (the games I played) was so much more life-defining, threatening to my ego, shameful, and disruptive than that experience of abuse.

Another defining experience was my work with Carol Gilligan, who taught me how to listen and direct my attention to the words of the girls and women I interviewed. But the body of work that arose after her original brave book, *In a Different Voice*, pushed me in a different direction. In the 1980s I wanted so much to join the crowd of believers in women's caring natures and their deep strivings for connection, but I felt that I didn't belong. As a woman who experienced anger, wishes for vengeance, who could be sexual, mean, bad, and as a woman who grew up in a lower class family where some forms of aggression were valued, I felt at odds with the glowing image of girls and women that became a popularized version of the ethic of care. And as Carol's original and political message became reduced in the public arena to the simple thought that women are both caring and more caring than men, I felt uncomfortable with the model of girlhood that seemed to be emerging. Redefining my sexual urges and needs for vengeance as deep-seated strivings for connectedness did not ring true to my own experiences. They had a life separate from my wishes to be known and loved and even to be "good."

That is why I think I have a new perspective to offer readers on the development of girls and women, a perspective that gives girls' sexuality and aggression their due and doesn't subsume it under a blanket of caring nor as a defense against oppression. This is a perspective that returns us to a more complicated version of girls, that understands sexual and aggressive feelings as "normal." Hopefully, it's a perspective that will help girls to integrate these acts into their definitions of who they are and how girls are "supposed" to be.

For those readers who might want to know a little about the research I did, I interviewed women from over twenty-five states, using family trips and trips to conferences in other states as opportunities to find women and

girls to interview. Friends and family helped me to find parents who would allow me to interview their daughters. A student with connections to an elementary school in New York City introduced me to low-income Puerto Rican women so that I could explore a group of women rarely tapped by researchers for a focus on healthy development. A friend who consulted with an after-school program situated in a housing project helped me to bring into my sample low-income African-American girls and women as well as low-income white girls so that I might write a book that reached out beyond middle-class white readers alone.

Concerned that African-American women and girls might not open up to me, I trained Bev Colston, a middle-class Black woman with Caribbean roots, to do some of these interviews. Her warmth, intelligence, and love of the topic produced some of the best interviews. Also, an older doctoral student in Oregon, Laura Orgel, who had great energy for the topic, interviewed some West Coast women for me. Students at Saint Michael's College did some initial interviewing as we developed the interview questions. I am the interviewer for the rest, the majority of the interviews, that follow.

Listening to these women and girls was an incredibly powerful experience. They were from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, from different parts of the country, different socioeconomic classes. I worried about how much truth they were sharing and the limits to that sharing; about whether I influenced or led women down paths they may not have followed on their own; and whether I might have made them too vulnerable or accidentally shut them up. I had concerns about how other psychologists would see this kind of work, data which would always remain incomplete; that is, we would never know the whole "truth." And I had feelings myself when memories came back that I needed to confront.

Of the 122 women and girls interviewed, 29 are African American, 21 Latina (primarily Puerto Rican-American), and 3 Asian American. Of the 122, about 30 are children or teens. I reached them all through word of mouth and through friends who had friends in churches, schools, colleges, and housing projects. In the stories that follow I may have changed around characteristics or descriptions of individuals to preserve their anonymity, but not their words, which ring clear and true.

Perhaps the reader will want to know whether I believe I got at "the truth." My answer is that I got at some truths, and not the whole story. Many women and girls are not ready to tell the whole story.

Still, I don't believe people made up stories to impress me. Perhaps

there were untruths that aren't lies—stories that became distorted over time. These stories arise in a culture and context that cannot be ignored. For example, how many times did women erroneously remember someone else initiating a game of sexual play instead of herself because our culture has taught her that good girls do not “ask for” that sort of thing. I suspect that when involving desire or the initiation of sexual games, the stories may have emerged distorted.

And sexual feelings. This is another area where the full story may be hidden. For some interviews it was difficult to even ask the question, “Do you think you had sexual feelings while playing the game?” If a woman answered yes, it was almost always tentative. If I felt bold enough to ask, “Did you experience orgasms?” and if the woman replied that she did, she would almost always ask whether I thought this was “normal.”

Shame is a funny emotion, making people want to hide their faces, their selves, and their stories. It also makes people want to confess in order to find some relief. I tried to bring out the shameful as well as the delightful. I welcomed the hearty, joyful stories of childhood power, sexuality, and aggression, and tried to make room for the scarier, more tentative childhood feelings. My hope was to begin a dialogue about such taboo topics.

I hope these stories will change the way people talk about girls and raise their daughters. Truths or partial truths, I think these stories can offer that.

The book is divided into two parts: The first focuses on sex (the sexual play and games in childhood) and the second focuses on aggression (power, anger, and aggression, to be exact). Feelings of guilt and shame are woven throughout the stories presented in both halves of this book, yet so are feelings of delight and wonder. Interspersed between chapters the reader will note sections or minichapters I label “Zeroing In On. . .” These are reflections or summaries of research or background information on smaller topics that are aimed at preparing the reader for stories to come.

Through the stories and reflections I hope to offer a more complex understanding of female development than is currently offered to parents by psychologists, one that allows for a wide range of human desires, emotions, and actions. While common notions of “girlness” influence girls in ways that protect and oppress them, making them feel shame and guilt for their ungirlish acts, the girls in the stories to come challenge these notions. With honor and integrity, many find a way to stay “good” while incorporating their secret urges for sexuality, power, and aggression.

Introduction: Good Girls versus Real Girls

As Sarah, naked and vulnerable, struggles to free herself from the imaginary bonds that tie her hands to the bed frame, Lisa bends down over Sarah's naked body and slowly but gently places a kiss on the top of her bare vagina. Because they hear footsteps in the hall, this electrifying act signals the end of the game, and both girls, seven years old, hasten to get their clothes back on before Lisa's mother knocks on the closed and locked door of her bedroom. They are now satisfied and silly but still hopeful that tomorrow or the next day they will find another time to reenact this powerful game as well as switch roles. Next time Sarah will be the man, Lisa the woman.

Lisa is a Jewish white girl and Sarah is a Christian Japanese American. Both do well in school, are their teachers' pets, and they are best friends. It is 1962, long before children were likely to be exposed to semipornographic magazines, TV shows, movies, or videos, and long before these children could read well enough to learn about the erotic traditions of romance novels. Yet at some time during their imaginative play, a game developed, secret and even unspoken between these two, that reproduced one of the most sexually thrilling scenes of female imagination for the time—to be captured, stripped, and then, not degraded or humiliated, but adored.

This is not an unusual story of two oversexed seven-year-olds who found each other, but a story more common than not in the secret lives of girls. Like Sarah and Lisa, there are other girls who play these games and

games like them with other girls as well as with boys. There is Chrissie, who loved to kiss the boys on the playground when she caught them. Abbie played mermaids and rubbed her naked top against her friend's as part of the game. So many other girls play "I'll show you mine if you show me yours," usually with boys. Some enjoy getting together with friends to play "naked Barbies."

There are also typical stories of girls whose secrets are about pleasurable aggression. Leah, for example, got a "kick" out of kicking the boys in the crotch and running away as they doubled over in pain. Chanelle beat up a girl in her school who had nice clothes, and enjoyed it.

The following pages hold many stories from girls and women I interviewed about the sexual play and games of their childhood as well as the moments of aggression and sometimes evil they committed. These interviews about the secrets they've kept have shown me a few things about what goes on behind closed doors, and what sorts of behaviors have been hidden by women and girls to preserve their outer image of goodness. Two themes stand out: sex and aggression. Girls hide their sexual acts and feelings as well as their aggressive impulses because girls are not supposed to have these. But sexual feelings and aggressive impulses are a part of human nature. They can be about power as well as self-discovery. Their narratives show that

- many girls play sexually, not just out of curiosity. Many have sexual feelings and pursue these feelings. They teach themselves and their friends (boys and girls) about their perceptions of adult sexuality. Even at early ages, they incorporate into their sexual styles images of what they think adult female sexuality is really about.
- many girls do aggressive things to other people, and not always to retaliate or out of frustration or because they were losing a connection to someone. Some enjoy their aggression, and especially if they have grown up in poverty or in dangerous neighborhoods, they wear their aggression as a badge of honor. Middle-class girls live with life-long secrets of what they see as inexplicable outbursts or furtive evil done to another, badness they have never been able to explain to themselves.
- many girls crave power and seek it in their relationships with others, not only to connect, but because power over another is sometimes pleasurable.

There are an amazingly wide variety of sexual and aggressive behaviors in childhood, but most girls and women see the incidents from their own lives as outside the range of "normal."

I interviewed girls ages six to eighteen and women from eighteen to seventy. They came from over twenty-five different states, a variety of up-bringsings, poor, low income, working class, middle class, and wealthy. Some grew up on farms, some in housing projects, some in high-rises, and some in suburban houses. And what I found traveling around the country is that many girls and women have secrets, secrets of sexual play and games, and secrets of aggressive acts that surprised and sometimes scared them. It's not my intention to shock the reader with raw sex and pure aggression in the lives of girls; instead, after reading story after story and learning about the meaning of sex and aggression in girls' lives, I hope that for some this behavior will look a little more "normal" than it did at first glance.

"Normal" is something that we as a culture construct. In America today, we can look at a girl's sexual talk and games and call her prematurely slutty or, using a more clinical word, oversexualized. We can look at her plans to play sexually with another girl, the sexual feelings she has with another girl, and we might call her a lesbian. Or, we might simply say "this is what children do," "they have bodies, they have sexual feelings; the exploration and expression of both are *normal*" no matter whom they are with.

Some people would say that we shouldn't even use the word "normal" and they might be right. It's hurt too many people and gives special power to the word "abnormal." But the one question that girls and women asked me over and over when I was interviewing them was "Am I normal?" Usually what I told them was that I had heard many stories like theirs already, and that answer seemed to satisfy. What they really wanted to know was: Am I different? Should I be ashamed? And more often than not, Should I continue to be ashamed? Rather than encouraging the self-condemnation, secrecy, and shaming of these girls, I wanted them to see that what they did was more or less typical of girls growing up, that sex and aggression are a part of human experience, and even sometimes sources of pleasure. To see sex and aggression as part of life and even a source of pleasure doesn't mean we ought to abandon all efforts to treat these as moral acts, but that we base our moral judgments on issues of harm and caring, justice and individual rights, rather than on conventions of purity and outdated stereotypes of women and girls.

After sitting with and listening to over 120 women and girls across the

country I know a little bit about what goes on in the privacy of children's bedrooms and backyard playhouses. And after reading this book, so will many others. In knowing this, maybe we all will look at girls a little differently, and maybe we will reframe our own pasts, reclaiming some lost parts of ourselves that were discovered in the basements and closets of girlhood, in the spots where teachers and parents weren't looking.

Good Girls and Guilt

This book tries to undo the image of the good girl that I think has been unnecessarily harmful to girls as they grow up. And this book tries to take a second look at all this moral language, such as "good" and "bad," when it gets applied to sex or aggression. The word "good," when used to describe girls, has little to do with real morality and lots to do with social norms. I think of social norms as rules about what's "proper" or acceptable, rather than rules about what's morally right. These rules rein in women and girls and restrict their development in important ways.

While the exaggerated guilt and shame that little girls carry around with them for their secret acts of sexual pleasure or aggression is a burden, it is the hemming in of girls through the rules of "niceness" that hurts girls most and causes the guilt and shame. The girls whose stories are told are all too aware that they act in ways not befitting a girl or young woman, and as acting like a girl gets merged in their minds with being good, they grow up with a nagging guilt that they are never good enough, nice enough.

How could so much be going on behind the scenes while still so many girls and women continue to think they have done something perverted, abnormal, or horribly cruel? There is some greater social force teaching girls and women how to interpret their acts and impulses. On the one hand society suggests these impulses to them, for where else but from our culture (parents, movies, peers, advertisements, and more) do ideas about sex and aggression come from? And then, on the other hand, societal norms aimed at girls make them feel bad about it, bad and immoral. This is a real shame. It's a shame that women and girls have to learn about themselves and their potential for both sexuality and aggression in a secret and shame-evoking manner. I want this book to free up women and girls to acknowledge all aspects of being human and to take off the shimmering costume of a femininity that equals goodness.

But the point of this book is *not* to find yet another area in which girls

are victims of the culture. (In some cases it certainly is true, yet women, who were once girls themselves, are key shapers of girl culture.) The larger purpose is to expose all of these acts that are going on in secrecy so that girls and women can feel less guilty about their sexual desires as well as their aggressive impulses, can learn to accept these as part of themselves and still love and honor themselves for them. It is so that the goodness of women and girls can be defined in terms of a more universal morality, grounded in justice and caring, instead of in terms of their ability to sit still in a classroom or restrain themselves from the human desires for revenge or sexual pleasure.

You might think that feminism has done a lot already to change this popular image of the good girl. But, in some ways, it's probably helped it along a little bit. What popular feminism has taught us about girls over the past twenty years (after the sixties, that is, when anger and rebellion were celebrated) is that girls are more caring and more vulnerable, more likely to be victimized by the culture and more likely to nurture, more likely to suppress their anger so that they don't hurt others and more likely to try to please. While there also has been a tradition rewarding girls' spunkiness and resistance to images of purity, psychologists have for the most part told parents that these qualities in girls of caring and sensitivity are to be admired.

But they are also qualities that confirm a stereotype that works against girls feeling powerful. Readers have come to know the rebellious lost teens of *Reviving Ophelia* as really and truly empathic, caring girls who have lost their grounding connections with adults. Mary Pipher, who wrote *Reviving Ophelia*, is so like the good nurturant mother who has come to pluck out the treasured adolescent soul, preserve it, and cherish its goodness for all time. Many will also remember the voices of caring, nurturing women who were ignored by male psychologists who valued independence and rational decision-making. Women psychologists gave these women's voices a hearing. But are these pure and caring voices so different from the good girl of yesterday? Whether or not these voices box girls in or recognize a reality of girls' development, psychologists continue to re-create them on the covers of best-selling psychology books to the exclusion of other parts of girls and girls' development. The point is, we all would so much rather look like the lovely lost souls found by Mary Pipher than the bad girls we suspect we really are.

Not so long ago, girls and women were viewed as evil temptresses, seductive witches, and manipulative matriarchs, but even when these images flourished, there was always the opposite image of the pure and good

girl, as in a fairy tale, set beside them for comparison. It's time to take a look at the fantasies that we all keep repressing—those fantasies of women as insatiable, angry witches and bitches, oversexed, with monstrous appetites, women who actually want power over another person, who want to dominate, and women who find pleasure in sexual feelings and aggression against another. And when we allow them into our lives, they may not feel so exaggeratedly wrong.

Creating an "Other"

Little girls' attempts at being active, angry, and sexual are pushed away by the culture and by themselves. They hide these from us or we don't see them for what they are. And when they are aggressive or sexual, they "other" the experience—someone else made them do it or they see it as something outside of themselves, a strange and weird occurrence. In fact, in these pages you will hear the words "weird," "strange," and "not me" used over and over to describe these experiences.

Another way of "othering" the experience is to project it onto women and girls who really are considered others in our culture, for example, African-American and Puerto Rican girls. Because when we conjure up the image of the good girl who "minds" her parents, does well in school, and doesn't dirty herself, we do not usually picture her Black or Latina. It's easier for society to see aggression and sexuality in, as well as project them onto, these girls. It fits the stereotypes and allows white girls to feel superior in comparison. While it is difficult for African-American and Latina girls to project an image of the "good girl," given the culture's unwillingness to see them that way, there still is a lot at stake for these girls if they embrace sexuality or aggression.

In this book I include stories from Puerto Rican and African-American women as girls growing up in a culture in which they are othered. The scope of the study did not allow me to collect enough stories to explore other groups who are treated as others, such as other Latina groups, Native Americans, or Asian Americans. Even as I tried to integrate the Puerto Rican and African-American girls' and women's experience into these chapters I was acutely aware of the intersection of class, race, and ethnicity and how these complexities are difficult to do justice to within one short book. On the other hand, I also was aware of how at times I may be treating "whiteness" as some monolithic term

without reference to the variations in class, ethnicity, and experience within this group.

Yet while the realities of many white girls' lives do not conform to the stereotype of the white middle-class girl, as the realities of the lives of African-American or Puerto Rican girls do not conform to the culture's stereotypes of them, there is still an image of a girl, a good girl, that is internalized for all girls. This stereotypical ideal may indeed loom larger in the lives of white girls than in those girls whose lives become other to the stereotype. Girls growing up in situations that make such a stereotype seem less attainable will in some way be freed from the stereotype, but they will be hurt in other ways. This othering brings about harmful counterimages of sexual and aggressive girls that they accept or resist to their detriment.

The general kind of othering (the other girl started it) that is so much a part of how middle-class girls explain sexuality and aggression is done out of guilt and shame. But in the following pages we will take apart this guilt. Some of it is appropriate, and we would wish that all people might feel the sense of guilt and remorse that many girls feel when they've hurt another by acting out aggressively. Even so, because these acts are forbidden, they carry with them an unrealistic burden of guilt for girls. And they try to hide the fact that these are human impulses we all share—the taste for revenge, the sexual urges of the body, the desire to dominate another.

Girl Power

Finally, someone reading this book is bound to ask, What about "girl power"? Aren't girls today more powerful than ever thanks to those early feminists who fought for the empowerment of women and girls? Don't girls today have better self-esteem? Can't they do everything boys do? In sports, for example? And even sexually, aren't they worlds apart from the white-gloved Mommy's helper of the fifties? Many have commented on how high school girls today seem unashamedly raunchy in their discussions of sex and bodies.

Teenage girls today engage in sex earlier and speak more freely about their sexual exploits. These acts frequently do not derive from a love of their bodies or an urge to express and understand themselves sexually, but from a desire to garner male attention and define themselves as desirable, even if "wild," in the eyes of boys. They don't divorce themselves from the image of the "good girl" but evaluate their behavior against the backdrop

of this image, which makes them feel somewhat ashamed. If recent reports on teen sexuality are accurate, sexually active teens frequently regret their early sex, wishing they could do their teen years over again. The raucous, in-your-face teen sexuality of today is not a sexuality that leaves them feeling powerful.

But what about “girl power,” the media slogan that focuses on the pre-teen as well as the teen? Even the new movement about girl power plays into this image of goodness and sets up unrealistic images. For white middle-class girls, the image of “supergirl” is evoked by shouts of “Girls rule!” This is the girl who can achieve well in school and pursue a career when she grows up. Girls knew, even before these slogans appeared, that they did better than boys in school and were well loved by teachers for their achievements. But Valerie Walkerdine, a British sociologist and feminist, points out that the image of the supergirl that “Girls rule” and “girl power” suggest sets up an opposing image of the girl of color or from a low-income family who is the other and not given the opportunities to achieve superwoman status. And it ignores the privilege that helps only *certain* girls become supergirls and makes them suffer when they come close to achieving this status, working as hard as they do for some perfection or recognition that is often unattainable.

Girls love these slogans, though: Girls rule! Girl power! And why? Because so many girls seem to love power and love to win. And girls have been deprived of that exuberance for a long time. Boys in our culture have greater freedom to engage in transgressive activities and call them their own. They are free to explore, rage, experiment—free to be ravenous, sexual, and outrageous. Their secrets are of a different kind and deserve their own treatment elsewhere.

When boys act “bad,” a different kind of distancing from their acts occurs, perpetuated by the boys themselves, their parents, educators, and the media. Rather than othering (projecting their badness onto others), boys are *excused* quite publicly for the sexual and aggressive acts they commit. Unless the boys take guns to their high schools or rape another student, adults in the United States will tend to see their aggressive or sexual acts as typical, and in some cases, biological—a part of who they “really” are. When we hear of a sexual game or an aggressive act of a boy we say that *all* boys are like this; we say “boys will be boys.”

Who Are the “Real Girls”?

It would be tempting to tell you that the stories ahead show what “*real girls*” do, just as William Pollack asserts about “real boys” in his book of the same name. Any such truism would mislead just as much as the prevailing stereotypes of girl and boy behavior do. Biological urges get shaped by the social expectations of specific cultures and specific times. The “sexual girl” is no more real than the pure and innocent girl, for both potentials are in us and our children. Still, recognizing the potential for sexuality and aggression in our girls affords them a little more privilege in this world, helps them to lead more fulfilling lives in our current culture, protects them from self-destructive acts, and encourages them to be “good” in truly moral (seeking peace, justice, and care) rather than in merely conventional ways.

If parents want their daughters to be full and moral people, aware of all aspects of their humanity, good and bad, they need to accept certain impulses in girls that up until now they may not have wanted to see. Girls, like boys, are deeply sexual, deeply aggressive creatures. And these impulses exist alongside their sweetness, competence, and ability to love and care for others. Real girls are morally complex, interesting, and interested creatures, and while the culture may do its best to simplify and codify their “girlness,” box them in so to speak, they do their best to resist, rebel, redefine, and explore this girlness through the secret games they play and the secrets they keep.