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REVIEWS & PRESS

Johanna Drucker & Susan Bee. *A Girl's Life*. Granary Books, 2002.



Frontlist Books. Review of *A Girl's Life*.

A graphic melodrama of romance, crime, and passion, *A Girl's Life* addresses adolescent angst in all of its fashionably gory details. The snares and pitfalls of contemporary life, which all girls must struggle to survive, are here revealed through darkly comic and fiendishly noir prose, accompanied by lurid collages and unusual typography.

What is a girl's life today? As a society we still prize the innocence and sweetness of girlhood and adolescence while also celebrating the seeming knowingness and budding sexuality of the Olson twins and Brittany Spears. These contrasting expectations are set against each other in Drucker and Bee's ingenious, fanciful, and dark narrative of two teens, Becki and Dawn. *A Girl's Life* follows Becki ("Bared belly and electrical excitement./ Celebrity crimes and fashion lurked in her daily dreams") as her aspirations for celebrity take a decidedly dark turn. Meanwhile, her more chaste best friend, Dawn, worries about looming dangers and tries to save her. In *A Girl's Life*, an artists' book/ poem, Drucker and Bee mix bright bouncy colors and adventurous typography with images of girls from the pages of the old Dick and Jane books and photos of the acne-free, fun-loving, and stylish teens who grace magazines like *Seventeen* and *YM*. Images also come from the covers of pulp novels and reflect the distinct noir sensibility in the text: "Ivan's voice came at her through the lime-green plastic receiver. He was a low-life creep with a touch of evil... Becki had been bit bad by the Ivan bug." The text weaves in elements of teenspeak ("Becki, her best friend for life, was in mega trouble") that play off the poetic melodrama of the story. Drucker and Bee's bewitching work is not only wonderful to look at but its dark take on a "a girl's life" is also a touching and incisive exploration of teenage life in a society of consumerism and spectacle.

Rosmarie Waldrop writes, "What happens when two brilliant avant-garde artists collaborate? A wild carnival of collage, color, design and lines like 'Decorum had its way with her.' Or: 'Her outfit ached against her thigh.' Any sentimental image of a girl's life we might have is overexposed, self-titillated, and deconstructed. It's dazzling. It's funny. It's a riot.' "

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Tysh, Chris. "Review of *A Girl's Life*." *Metrotimes*, (May 15, 2002).

You could either sit there biting your nails to the quick, counting the days till the fat envelope comes in—or else take meds at appointed intervals and let the puzzle of your life fall where it may. Or if you're running late and trip over the porthole, you might cancel all thoughts of pushing "their" buttons. So long, lucky puppy! But in the end, when the close-up frames the bundle in your arms, you just smile like you landed a "Z" on a triple-score word. *A Girl's Life*—magic writing pad full of dynamite, creeps, girls with raspberry lips, "expired expectations" and "deer caught in the headlines"—has you jumping for joy.

This is the book you not only want to have written, you actually dreamed it and here it comes in its all-powerful drollery, complete with beepers and rabbit holes, scrumptious color and crazy lines. Johanna Drucker and Susan Bee have invented a visually saturated text that is absolutely irresistible, both in concept and presentation. It will dazzle and delight readers of all ages, forever consigning sentimental versions of girlie stuff to the doghouse. These girls rock!

Imagine two very avant artists playing dollhouse with the charged codes of adolescence. The result, neither autobiography nor romance, resembles a "Real World" scrapbook—I'll write the words, you do the graphics—put through the wringer of a pomo imagination, running ecstatic between "the sweet material of girls' dreams" and the lemon-squeeze fun puckering a language savvy with wit and irony.

"Becki offered Ivan a guy-tested phrase."

It's as if the teen world we know from popular culture was at once reflected on (each page bursting with gender cliché, from the blonde bombshell of King Kong to the little bridesmaid) and taken apart, one clever sentence at a time. We get the raw and the cooked, the house and the kit to dismantle it, and nary a word a 15-year-old wouldn't know.

What runs through like a sequined border is the authors' refusal to prefer one psych wardrobe to another. In this dress-up anti-genre, collage replaces identity, which careens over crime or glam as so many outfits in a day's work. The dazzling design underscores artifice and pastiche, which are requisite accessories to the angst of growing female under global skies.

"A car screeched onto the pavement. No men stepped out."

Instead, the text simulates synchrony where Becki and Dawn, friends for life, "twist the rope of affection" and roll their eyes across the screen of their ever-changing melodrama.

"Lived between paradise and compromise, a girl's life is never performed completely unawares."

It's precisely the erotic self-consciousness of performing identity which charges this little adolescent primer with such a killer humor, where shooting a furious glance or a lethal blow are both apprehended as gender scripts and narrative sentences for which we need a suitable typeface, maybe something green and glossy. *A Girl's Life* is a riot of intelligence and girl power whose authors, both celebrated book artists, have scored a perfect 10 with this designer's little heaven. Like all impulse items, it should be stacked by hundreds near the register. A must-have!

Robins, Corinne. "Review of *A Girl's Life*." *Rain Taxi* 36.

In *A Girl's Life*, artist Susan Bee and writer Johanna Drucker deconstruct popular teen romance with a tongue-in-the-ear, mud-in-your-eye look at the dream antics of pre-pubescent Becki and Dawn, "Becki's best friend for life." On the book's acid-green cover the two be-lipsticked nymphets rear up out of painted brush strokes, and off they go through pages which treat lush love, femme prose, and a too-knowing innocence.

The book is also a showcase for Drucker's awesome verbal-visual skills and Bee's gloriously witty painted photocollages. The questions of what is a book and what is a text, as well as the pitfalls of narrative, are send-ups for the reader, carried out in half a dozen different colors and typefaces—the work of Drucker, a writer, art historian, and book artist whose works include *The Alphabetic Labyrinth*, *The Century Of Artists' Books*, and *Figuring The Word*. Drucker's prose pillories the roller-coaster extremes of adolescent anguish. The language of melodrama dances around the page, changing color and catching us up short; the text refuses to stay still, and demands we turn pages around to read up, down, and across.

Bee is a painter/ book artist whose earlier artists' books, *Little Orphan Anagram*, *Tailspin*, and *Bed Hangings*, featured heroines in high-necked dresses, figures of innocence in a world of violence, desire, and sex. In *A Girl's Life*, nudity is also absent—too threatening in the teenage world, where manners, clothes, and words are everything. Bee makes merry with the page's white space in a unique fashion, using snapshots, news photos, and images from picture books, then painting and photocopying flowers and snakes branching out from unlikely green stems, while in the foreground Becki wrestles "with blueberry glitter polish on her nails." Nail polish is no small matter where a girl's motto is being glam forever! Meanwhile, the printed word remains omnipresent along with the artist's brush stroke as *A Girl's Life* joyously plays with retouched (tarted up) photographs collaged into the painted field of its pages.

Artist's books are the achievement of word plus picture, a realization of the old Surrealist dream of collaboration among artists and writers. Such books "investigating verbal/ visual relations" have been a specialty of Granary Books since the early '80s. But *A Girl's Life* goes beyond its "artists books/ poetry" category, and with its sleight-of-sight humor is likely to become an object of universal delight.