Meet Ivy and Bean, Queerly the Anti-American Girls

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In a review for last summer’s big-budget movie Kit Kittredge: An American Girl, Entertainment Weekly critic Lisa Schwarzbaum stops to note that the film is “based on stories invented to sell one of the plastic lasses in a very popular line of dolls . . . So, yes, this movie is a slick marketing offshoot of an expensive toy. Ewww” (55). Since their inception in the late 1980s, the “ewww” factor that surrounds the pricey, popular, and absurdly successful line of American Girl products, the books in particular, has been explored by any number of critics. Daniel Hade, for instance, critiques the “historical errors, misrepresentations, and overgeneralizations” of the American Girl books (163). Elizabeth Kowalski-Wallace is likewise concerned with the American Girl version of history, in particular how “historical specificity is somewhat mitigated by the design of the series” (154) and how the “American Girls dolls offer a version of history in which the past is different but also exactly the same . . . collapsing the story of developing female subjectivity into predictable and ‘normal’ patterns” (156).

For most critics the American Girl books represent a troubling socializing force in one form or another. Jan Susina argues that “the difference between Barbie and the American Girls Collection in terms of marketing and socializing girls to the world of consumerism is not great” (135). He contends “a girl playing with Barbies may be socializing herself for the world of Cosmopolitan, while the girl playing with Felicity or Samantha could be preparing herself for the world of Martha Stewart Living” (134). Sherri Inness similarly argues that “Even these dolls, which appear much more desirable to many parents than a Barbie, are operating to enforce gender-specific behaviors” (169). Stephanie Foote asserts “[T]here is a glad-hearted pluralism at the heart of the American Girls line of dolls. Still, it is hard to suppress the dark-hearted reading that the dolls and their histories are designed not to make dolls more like real girls but rather to turn real girls into American Girl dolls” (521). And it is in the readers,

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real girls, that American Girl claims investment. According to the American Girl company Web site, “Gentle life lessons throughout the stories remind girls of such lasting values as the importance of family and friends, compassion, responsibility, and forgiveness. Full of wisdom and encouragement, the stories show girls how to meet their own challenges with strength and courage” (“Our Company” para. 2). In no uncertain terms, the American Girl books are developed in order to teach real girls life lessons that, by nature of the need to instruct, it is assumed the readers do not already know but need to. In the object-obsessed world of American Girl, it stands to reason that readers are positioned as objects of the lessons, that, as scholars have rightly noted, are normalizing lessons about what it means to be a “good girl.”

Existing almost counter to the normalizing world of American Girl is the Ivy and Bean series written by Annie Barrows and illustrated by Sophie Blackall. The Ivy and Bean series, on the surface at least, is similar to the American Girl books: both are a series of short chapter books about precocious young girls and their friends, often depicted in moments of play, and both are marketed to a young female readership (though the American Girl series is designed for grades 3–5 as opposed to Ivy and Bean’s grades 1–4). The purpose of the Ivy and Bean series, the ideologies that underpin the construction of the characters of Ivy and Bean, and even how the series refuses a didactic approach, however, make Barrows’s series fundamentally different from and much more transgressive than the American Girl series. Of particular difference are the ways in which Barrows’s series consistently avoids chastising or correcting the girls at their center, steering clear of moralizing or offering normalizing discourses about girlhood.

The Ivy and Bean series is set in the present day and is about seven-year-old neighbors, Ivy and Bean, who become friends after Ivy and her mother move in across the street from Bean and her family. At first neither Ivy nor Bean is interested in the other, despite (or because of) the fact that each mother is telling her daughter to go play with the “nice” girl across the street. But the two become entwined in a daring escape from Bean’s older sister, Nancy, and quickly grow to like each other. As the series continues (they are currently up to book 5), Ivy and Bean continue to thwart Nancy, exorcise a bathroom ghost at school, attempt to break a world record, discover dinosaur bones in Bean’s backyard, create a volcano in a neighbor’s front yard, and get trapped in Bean’s attic, to name but a few of the duo’s adventures.

While the two get into their fair share of trouble, where the American Girl series endeavors to teach appropriate behaviors, rewarding the interpellation of its characters, the Ivy and Bean series avoids doing the same. The American Girl character that subverts, even in the smallest ways, the normalizing discourse of “good girl”—where “good girl” typically means such qualities as obedient, patient, and restrained—is promptly brought back into the bounds of “normal” by story’s end. The American Girl book Meet Felicity (1774), for instance, is set during the years leading up to America’s independence from England. The
book, naturally, ascribes the broad quality of independence to Felicity; her stays, for example, always feel too tight (Tripp, *Meet Felicity* 11–12), her gowns and petticoats bothersome (14), and she longs to wear the breeches of a boy in order to escape the ladylike steps her skirts require (15). Her independent spirit is even mirrored in the horse she nurtures throughout the book, as she repeatedly explains: “Her name is Penny, because she’s the color of a penny and because she’s so independent” (28; emphasis in the original). As the book progresses, however, it becomes increasingly clear that both Felicity and Penny need to be “tamed.” Although early on “Felicity hated the idea of sitting straight and still, stitching tiny stitches, when all the while she was stiff with boredom” (5), by the end of the novel she learns the most important lesson of all as it is presented in the book: the importance of patience, a virtue that decidedly tempers her independent ways. Felicity masters patience in order to tame Penny, which conversely allows Penny to be free. Thus, the book strikes a careful balance at the end: Felicity has returned to Ben the breeches she borrowed in order to work with Penny, but she has also “nicely” mended them (62), excelling at the sewing skill that she has previously eschewed as being too boring. Felicity’s pluck is seemingly lauded early on, especially as it relates to the larger American experience at the heart of the story, but it is chastised, restrained, and contextualized within a larger lesson. The unfortunate byproduct of this formula is a series of books that become contradictory, with authors attributing seemingly positive qualities to the young female character when the whole point of the book is to show that these qualities need to be corrected.

In contrast the Ivy and Bean books never culminate in the “gentle life lessons” found in the American Girl series. In fact, much of what Barrows does in the series transgresses the very story structures typical to the genre. Although they might begin in a similar manner to American Girl books, and even evoke some of the same tendencies described above, it quickly becomes clear that Barrow’s books do so only to parody that structure and subvert common expectations by story’s end. In the opening scene of the most recent Ivy and Bean book, *Ivy and Bean: Bound to Be Bad*, for example, Bean is shown misbehaving at the breakfast table, rudely licking the last bits of syrup off of her plate. When told to stop, Bean returns, “I can’t! . . . The force is too strong!” (Barrows, *Bound* 7). After calling her father “dude” and refusing to do the dishes, her father declares, “‘Think about whether you’re making a good choice or a bad choice, Bean.’ I guess I’ll go do the dishes,” she replies (9). Not only is there no didacticism from this point in story—Bean neither reflects back on this “bad” behavior, nor is she depicted as learning any particular lesson from her chastisement—unlike Felicity, one could argue that Bean even goes from bad to worse through the course of the novel. By story’s end we find Bean, having just escaped being tied to a tree, in the middle of a mud fight, spraying her friends with a hose. While both *Meet Felicity* and *Ivy and Bean: Bound to Be Bad* begin with the girls encountering adult forces who announce the behavior they are supposed to follow—behavior sanctioned by both the family and society—in Felicity’s
case this scene is used to solicit sympathy from the reader and simultaneously
depict her as pseudo-rebellious, even though over the course of the rest of
the book she will slowly accept society's expectations for her. In Bean's case,
however, this scene simply presents the context for the societal norms that she
never fully accepts by the end of the book. Throughout the series, if Ivy or Bean
is chastised it is for specific, local reasons; never is their nature in question, nor
is the purpose of the series to instill generic “good girl” qualities—like Felicity’s
patience and restraint—in its readers.

In fact, there seems to exist no “natural” barometer for “good” or “bad”
in Barrows’s series, as both seem to be able to be performed at will without a
question of appropriateness. Nor is the reader positioned in such a way that
we expect or find comfort in Ivy or Bean’s punishment. Instead of fearing
threats to their presumed innocence, as one might in the American Girl se-
ries, the reader fears threats to Ivy and Bean’s freedom. In many ways, the Ivy
and Bean series inhabits a somewhat queer space; in no way does it present
a normalizing discourse, much like the Pippi Longstocking books (if Pippi’s
story were couched in realism and Pippi herself could actually exist). As Karen
Coats points out in Looking Glasses and Neverlands, “Cast in Lacanian terms,
Pippi’s subjective position is the position of the not-all, which she, unlike the
Woman qua symptom of man, actively inhabits. It is, ultimately, a position of
queerness, and one of joy” (113). In other words, Pippi’s is a subjectivity that
cannot exist and does not occupy a place in the Symbolic order; she is neither
male nor not male and actively inhabits a queer position. As such, Pippi’s
location is not limited by the Symbolic. In certain ways, Pippi’s queer joy is
reproduced in Barrows’s new series.

Much like my interest in the Pippi books, my deepest pleasure in the Ivy and
Bean series is with Barrows’s refusal to construct Ivy and Bean as incomplete
or wrongheaded or entities who are merely queered by innocence—that is,
“the seemingly normative child—or the child who, on its path to normativity,
seems safe to us and whom we, consequently, seek to safeguard at all cost . . . the
child made strange (though appealing) to us by its all-important ‘innocence’”
(Stockton 296). American Girl characters, on the other hand, are best defined
by their lack and their need to change, to willingly submit to authority, and to
temper that which also makes them interesting. Moreover, the American Girl
series invites readers to see the change the American Girl is asked to undergo
as being completely right and natural and as the girls’ only logical choice.
“Courageous” Addy, a slave on a North Carolina plantation, for example, is
chastised for being too emotional. When her brother is beaten for trying to
escape, Addy cannot keep from crying out in anguish, and she becomes angry
with those around her whose blank faces show no emotion. Addy cries, “Y’all
don’t care about Sam at all! Y’all not even crying” (Porter 5). Readers will most
likely feel Addy’s frustration at the adults’ seeming lack of emotion. Later, when
Addy’s father is on the ground in chains in preparation for transport to another
plantation, Addy runs to him, crying, and is whipped by the overseer; with this
scene readers will also begin to comprehend the gravity of the situation and how Addy’s emotions are actually dangerous and wrong.

The urgent need for Addy to be more in control becomes obvious, lest she be physically beaten or killed. Later in the story, once she and her mother have escaped, Addy practices the lessons her parents have worked to teach her when she comes face to face with Confederate soldiers. Fortunately for Addy, they mistake her for their water boy, but still she must remain calm so as not to be found out. Because of her newly learned emotional control, Addy is able to safely find her way back to her mother, who praises her: “You did it, girl. You kept your feelings inside this time” (Porter 53). It is a terribly unfortunate lesson that Addy must learn, but under these circumstances, clearly she must. How it translates to the American Girl readership is slightly awkward. Is the book saying that we must be bravely silent when we face our oppressors? Something is lost in the translation. Kowalski-Wallace argues that “The attempt at normalizing is the least successful in the case of Addy” (156). Nonetheless, the problem is not that Addy learned a lesson that helped save her life; nor is this lesson, under these circumstances, a bad lesson to learn. The problem is that Addy’s response to a situation early on, a response that most readers would likely find quite reasonable, is so clearly wrong. It becomes clear that Addy may be courageous, but she needs to be a specific kind of courageous, one that does not come naturally to her but can be taught by adults. Addy’s context makes her initial wrong-headedness as well as her new behaviors the most natural and most obvious choice she has, thus erasing any frustration a reader might have at her early appreciation for Addy’s actions.

Molly’s story, set in 1944, works in similar, though less mortally relevant, ways. “Lively and patriotic” Molly must learn to channel her liveliness into something acceptable, like patriotism, in order to be redeemed. In the beginning of the story, Molly knows two things to be true: she hates turnips, and she is mad at her brother for destroying her Halloween costume and collected treats. The reader is also invited to feel as Molly does: the mashed turnips are described as “old, cold, moldy brains” (Tripp, Meet Molly 11), and Molly and her friends are shocked that Ricky’s actions were so “terrible, mean” (35). However, Molly, like Addy, is shown to be clearly wrong to feel that way. Molly is reminded that not eating homegrown vegetables, just like showering her brother’s love interest with his underclothes in revenge, are wasteful, childish, and unpatriotic acts. Of course, with a father serving as an Army doctor overseas, how could anyone argue with this logic, even if at first readers might relate to Molly’s opinions? Both Molly and Addy’s stories are resolved when they willingly acknowledge how wrong they are and how easy it is to be right, especially with regard to what it means to be a “good girl.”

The American Girls series endeavors to replicate “normal” and “good” girlhood, calling out to girl readers to identify with these conceptions and to accept this identity as it is imposed by the Other. The Ivy and Bean series offers a much different worldview. Without a tone so awkward and contrived
as to reinforce the norm in their seeming refusal of it, the Ivy and Bean series
does not position the reader this way and instead revels in its freedom outside
of the Symbolic order—in other words, the freedoms of queerness. Ivy and
Bean’s transgression of typical expectations of gender, relationships to power,
and even of early readers themselves are instead presented in playful, unaf-
fected terms. Even in the first book in the series, the abundance of somewhat
carnivalesque imagery helps to highlight this series as one that will push at
the boundaries of typical fiction for young readers, girls specifically, with its
attention to that which “should” go undiscussed. For example, in order to cast
a dancing spell on Bean’s older sister, Nancy, Ivy and Bean must sneak from
Ivy’s into Bean’s yard. Fortunately, as we discover earlier on in the book, Bean
loves to sneak (Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 55) and knows how to get into her own
backyard by crossing through the other backyards on Pancake Court, the
cul-de-sac on which the two girls live. Most importantly, Bean knows where
to be careful, such as in the “really gross dog poopy yard” (72): “Bean and Ivy
walked on their tiptoes, but still Ivy stepped in some [poop]. Fester, the dog
whose poop it was, came out to sniff them. He was a nice dog, and he seemed
sorry that his yard was so disgusting” (76). In these ways the books playfully
evoke imagery never seen in the American Girls series—Felicity certainly never
has problems dodging Penny’s excrement. American Girl as a whole is preoc-
cupied with avoiding messes, but in Ivy and Bean’s world messes cannot be
avoided. Ivy and Bean’s sneaking through backyards exposes them to the more
unsavory elements beneath the surface of their otherwise innocuous suburban
neighborhood. A clever two-page illustration in the middle of the book shows
a range of perfectly ordered identical houses with seemingly tidy pie-shaped
backyards along with a diagram of Ivy and Bean’s route. The illustrations
highlight the blandness in these similar yards in order to bring attention to
the sheer amount of poop in Fester’s yard, highlighted with wavy stink lines
(Fester seems like a perfectly appropriate name in this case). In fact, most of the
illustrations throughout the series are purposefully unattractive in some way
or another. One of the prominent illustrations shows Nancy’s horrified face
being covered with worms, while another shows Ivy with an unsettling scowl
directed at her sister in the mirror. These illustrations are often humorous or
seemingly poorly drawn and are nowhere near as ornate as the ones featured
in the American Girls books; even the Addy books’ illustrations are beautifully
rendered, even if the subject matter is not.
Perhaps more importantly, whatever mischief the girls get into, it is never
chastised by the books; rather, it becomes the subject of the books’ humor. The
girls’ experience in Mrs. Trantz’s yard is especially telling of the series as a whole.
“Everything in Mrs. Trantz’s yard was perfectly neat. Her tulips were lined up
in rows. Her apple tree was tied so that its branches grew flat. Her birdbath
had no birds in it” (Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 77). When Mrs. Trantz catches the
two in her yard, she reprimands Bean first, who she believes should know that
children are not allowed in her garden, having been caught back there before,
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and then Ivy, who Mrs. Trantz hopes will “teach her friend Bernice that . . .
because Bernice does not seem to be able to remember it by herself” (78–79).
Despite Bean’s claim that an emergency has propelled them to break the rules,
Mrs. Trantz still threatens to call Bean’s mother, until Ivy invents the emergency
that allows them a free pass out of Mrs. Trantz yard: “I’m going to throw up,” she
announces (80). Ivy burps and gags, which makes Mrs. Trantz jump back and
command, “Go! Go home! Run!” (80). Barely holding back laughter, the two
safely reach their destination. Not only is the gross use of the body somewhat
surprising, the scene also reminds readers that order (like that of Mrs. Trantz’s
yard) and authority (Mrs. Trantz’s strict rules and consequences) will not be
cherished here; instead, Ivy and Bean will (metaphorically, at least) “throw up”
on order and strict authority, more bodily but still in the Pippi tradition. If
Mrs. Trantz thinks that Bernice (a.k.a. Bean) is going to learn a lesson or follow
a rule simply because an adult has told her to, or that she is going to inhabit
“Be[r]nice,” Mrs. Trantz—and the reader—is sorely mistaken.

Bakhtin writes that the carnival featured “a boundless world of humorous
forms and manifestations opposed [to] the official and serious tone of medi-
evial ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (4). Carnivalesque imagery tends to be
distinguished by an emphasis on the body and bodily functions, on things that
are gross, disgusting, forbidden, secretive, and taboo and that stand in opposi-
tion to the finished, the refined, the official, and the serious. The Ivy and Bean
books feature exactly the sort of mocking laughter typical of the carnivalesque
imagery. It is important to note, however, that the series is not thoroughly
carnivalesque in the full sense of Bakhtin’s meaning. Bakhtin writes of the
degradation nature of the carnival that “To degrade is to bury, to sow and to kill
simultaneously, in order to bring forth something new and better. Degradation
builds a bodily grave for a new birth: it has not only a destructive, negative
aspect, but also a regenerating one” (21). In other words, Bakhtin suggests that
carnivalesque imagery in its truest sense is not simply about calling attention to
gross things or making light of authority but truly upsetting power dynamics,
or, as Joseph T. Thomas Jr. puts it, “Carnival allows the playful reimagining of
the world, the reversal and dismantling of hierarchies” (50). Still, where the
carnivalesque rejects rigid identification or normativity, so does Ivy and Bean’s
queer sensibility.

Further, the gross sensibility of the Ivy and Bean series, which sits in such
stark contrast to the American Girls books, is much more than these girls simply
being mischievous brats who won’t obey the adults around them; that would
in fact be an oversimplification of these books. The Ivy and Bean books have
a far more complex depiction of a transgressive girlhood than this. A good
analogy remains with Pippi Longstocking. As Coats suggests, “It is not that
Pippi threatens from the margins to subvert paternal authority, to overturn
the structure and assert an anarchic subjectivity. Nor does she view her status
as girl as limiting” (Coats 115). To be sure, Ivy and Bean’s threat to do “gross
child things” on Mrs. Trantz’s very “adult” yard does not change Mrs. Trantz’s

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position that no children are allowed in her garden, though it does engender the girls’ own agency—to get away and complete their plan. Instead, their behaviors do more to poke holes in dominant ideology than it does to overturn power hierarchies, and it ties those behaviors to how the book defines their girlhood. It becomes clear that “gross child things” are not outside of Ivy and Bean’s repertoire just because they are girls. In many ways, Bean is constructed as rather unfeminized (though she does have a nurturing side, taking care of the little kids who hurt themselves: “When they fell down and got blood all over their knees, Bean would take them home to get Band-Aids” [Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 25]). Instead, Bean is constructed (and illustrated) in rather androgynous terms; she is never shown wearing a skirt, and her short black hair, which “only came to her chin because it got tangled if it got any longer” (8), is sensibly pinned out of her face. Like Pippi, Bean’s queerness “positions her outside of a binary that would disempower her” (Coats 114), and her failure to sustain a particular social performance creates a more fluid identity (Butler 180).

This is explored in a number of ways throughout the series. From the first book in the series, we come to know Bean as a person who isn’t specifically identified; Bean plays with everyone, “Big kids, little kids, all the kids in the neighborhood played with Bean” (Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 25). Her identity is fluid enough to work within a number of groupings. Later, in the opening scene of book 3, *Ivy and Bean Break the Fossil Record*, during a classroom session of Drop Everything and Read, Bean is bored by the book about cats that she had picked out from the library and cannot concentrate on reading. First she tries reading her book upside down, but finds even that approach “Cool. Well, sort of cool. No. Boring” (Barrows, *Break* 7). Albeit brief (and ultimately not gratifying) it is no surprise that Bean is willing to rethink her approach, even if it means (in this case literally) turning on its head the order of things. Then we learn that “Bean liked cats, but reading about them was driving her crazy. All the cats looked the same except the sphinx cat, who didn’t have any fur. He looked half way between a dog and a rat. Bean liked him the best” (7). Bean prefers the queer space of the animal that appears to be neither cat nor dog nor rat instead of the fixed and expected image of a cat that merely looks like a cat. Bean’s character is in constant renegotiation and revels in that; from her initial impressions of Ivy (that she is boring [Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 8], to what world record she will try to break (including an attempt to break a world record for washing dishes, but ultimately breaking dishes, inhabiting a feminized space but not very well), to signing with spit instead of blood in their “oath of liquids” (Barrows, *Ghost* 22), Bean often makes the least “natural” decision, and it is rarely if ever a fixed decision. Bean’s ideas are perpetually in renegotiation.

Ivy also revels in this flexibility. For example, Ivy’s bedroom is divided into zones that she constantly repurposes; the lines themselves are chalk that can be erased and redrawn (Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 62). In book 2, *Ivy and Bean and the Ghost That Had to Go*, when an exorcism potion calls for ingredients she does
not have (or know what they are, such as “ponie” [80]), it becomes clear that Ivy is willing to substitute. According to Ivy, “the problem with making potions with her magic book was that she never had exactly the right ingredients,” but she did have nutmeg, seeds, dead bugs, and baking soda, which she repurposes for that which she lacks (80). To be sure, despite Ivy’s more traditionally feminine style, her identity is as fluid as Bean’s—except with “long, curly red hair pushed back with a sparkly headband . . . [and] a dress everyday” (8–9). But Ivy is a bricoleur and a witch in knee socks and Mary Janes. Throughout the series, Ivy (like Bean) utilizes “typical” icons of little girlness but subverts expectations by repurposing them. In book 1, for example, Bean is intrigued by the number of dolls in Ivy’s room; there are plastic dolls, dolls with fancy costumes that looked like they belonged behind glass, wooden dolls, mushy baby dolls, a rock dressed in doll clothes, and a Barbie doll, too (57, 60). But the dolls are not played with in an expected manner; instead, they are placed in a circle around the mummified Barbie. Ivy tells Bean, “I am going to build a pyramid to bury her in. As soon as I figure out how” (60). Similarly, Ivy has a play kitchen in one of the sections of her room that she has decided to turn into a “science lab for making potions” (62).

Also interesting is the girls’ use of makeup. Ivy shares with Bean that she wants to be a witch, and Bean wants to help her look the part. The two draw silver stars and gold moons all over Ivy’s black robe (Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 65) and create an elaborate wand out of a stick, pipe cleaners, stickers, streamers, and glitter (63). When they turn their attention to Ivy’s face, the two decide to make her extremely pale with black around her eyes and “a couple of red blobs on my cheeks, for blood” (67). After wrapping a black scarf around her head that “looked almost like long black hair” (67), the images of Ivy are scary and ghoulish, not at all the pretty, rosy-cheeked girl from the cover of the book. Different even from Bean’s androgyny, which Judith Halberstam, for one, argues has become a status that is somewhat commonplace for middle-class girls to inhabit—assuming they stop short of or grow out of overtly male identification (196)—Ivy’s identification to witch is wonderfully queer (especially because she does not have a broom; she does have a wand, though it did not work when Ivy first tries it on Bean [Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 48] and is still drippy and rather impotent in Bean’s pocket when the two work to cast the dancing spell on Nancy). Being a witch is one of the first things that constructs Ivy as an atypical literary girl: Bean realizes about Ivy, “But you’re not nice at all. You’re a witch!” (49). As a witch, Ivy is decidedly Other, neither “normal” boy nor girl. As Antonella Corsani notes in “Beyond the Myth of Woman: The Becoming-Transfeminist of (Post-) Marxism,”

Witches were women without husbands who refused marriage, figures of a sexuality that resisted normalization, a sexuality that did not find its goal in procreation, but in a non-productive, deviant sexuality. Witches were also figures of homosexuality, of nomadic sexuality. As Michela Zucca has noted, they also represented “the cardinal element of continuity, the charismatic leaders and
spokespeople of a society and culture that were essentially anti-productive, in the capitalist sense of the term” (292). (123)

As witch, Ivy transgresses “girl” differently even than Bean, further demonstrating that their status as “girl” is not restrictive nor offered as normative.

Even Ivy and Bean’s friend and classmate Zuzu, the most markedly feminized in the series so far, is also enviably skilled and somewhat tough, too. Although Zuzu is scared of the bathroom ghost in the second book in the series, perpetually wears pink clothing (a pink shirt and pink pants [Barrows, Break 24], a ruffled pink shirt [Barrows, Ghost 9], a pink bow [17], and later pink butterfly hairclips [98]), and is likened to a doll with elastic in her legs (10), Zuzu is also the best cartwheeler and backbender in the gymnastic club and can do seven round-offs in a row when “nobody else could do even one” (9). In the third book in the series, when Zuzu attempts to break the world record of one hundred and eleven cartwheels, she runs out of room after her thirty-second cartwheel and crashes into the fence.

“...It looked like she had pepper under her skin” (Barrows, Break 76). Although she has failed to break the world record for most cartwheels in a row, she has “set the record for Emerson school for sure” (75), and her actions are met with approval by her peers. Rather than create Zuzu as “pathologically bound by [her] femininity to weakness and passivity” (Halberstam 197), Barrows explores femaleness as an unfixed, nonspecific, and dynamic identity. Individual females might meet limits and restrictions, but it is not just because they are girls. Besides, Zuzu's characterization seems to embody a distinctly camp aesthetic, markedly attenuated and strongly exaggerated (Sontag 277). Because Barrows does not mentions anyone else’s clothing repeatedly or specifically, Zuzu’s pink ruffles and bows draw attention to their own performance.

Nor are traditional adult authority figures a hindrance for Ivy and Bean. As skilled sneaks, Ivy and Bean are able to move without detection (or escape capture creatively). In book 4, Ivy and Bean Take Care of the Babysitter, Bean sneaks Ivy into her house while Nancy is babysitting even though Ivy is allowed to come in; it is more gratifying to escape the all-knowing gaze of authority, to refuse permission—an interesting distinction to make against the American Girl series. Where an American Girl must sneak—Felicity to tame her horse, for example—Ivy and Bean do not have to sneak but prefer to and do not lament their choice to do so. Further, Barrows’s adults are not configured to be all seeing, all knowing, or with a punitive gaze as they are in the American Girl books. To date, Ivy and Bean’s sneaking has gone unpunished.

Like Pippi, both Ivy and Bean know how to “construct [themselves] in the economy of present performatives” (Coats 115), knowingly transgressing rules that are meant for them. Both girls know the language of authority and can predict the response of authority to certain actions. At one point early in the first book, Bean laments:
Mom hated it when she did more than one bad thing at a time. Bean counted: taking money, lying about her ankle, leaving the yard without asking, and wiggling her behind at Nancy. Four things. Five if you counted pretending to be a ghost. Bean was going to be in big trouble. How big? No dessert, for sure. No videos for a week, maybe. But it could be even worse. Her mom might send her to her room for the rest of the day. Bean hated that. (Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 33–34)

Nonetheless, Bean thinks that “If her mom couldn’t find her, she couldn’t send her to her room. If she stayed out until dark, her parents would stop being mad and start being worried. Her mom might say, ‘Oh, my poor little baby!’ Then they’d be so happy to see her when she came limping home that they probably wouldn’t punish her at all” (35). Ivy, too, predicts the response of authority to her actions but does them anyway: “I will get in trouble—really huge trouble—if I do what I want to do. What I plan to do . . . Spells. Magic. Potions . . . I’m going to be a witch” (43). But as a child-centered book, where power is ultimately in the hands of the child characters—even if the child characters must wrestle power away from more traditional locations—the adults (and other authority figures, such as Nancy as the babysitter in book 4) in this series aren’t set up as infallible or all knowing. In fact, a particular trope of the series is to have Ivy and Bean confront authority with authority’s own words, asking the authority figures to see themselves anew. In book 1, for example, Bean’s mother begins to worry about Ivy and Bean’s plans to make potions in Ivy’s lab the next day. When she begins to set down parameters for their potion making, Bean responds, incredulous, “Weren’t you the one who was always telling me to play with her? Wasn’t this all your idea in the first place?” (112), pointing to the frequent arbitrariness of adult authority.

Just like Pippi challenges the Socratic method in the classroom, for example, in book 2, *Ivy and Bean and the Ghost That Had to Go*, Bean challenges her teacher’s authority; she does so without malice and not in order to subvert it but to point to its own conundrums. When Bean is reprimanded for talking in class, she claims that she is only trying to help her classmate who does not understand regrouping and is about to add when he is supposed to subtract. Bean is told by her teacher, “Bean is only responsible for Bean” (Barrows, *Ghost* 30). Bean finds the reprimand hard to take, however, because Ms. Aruba-Tate had also coached the class that they were like a family, “And families [are] responsible for each other” (30). When Bean points this out to her teacher, “Ms. Aruba-Tate opened her mouth and then closed it again” (30). In the same book, Ivy and Bean’s teacher must step in when Ivy’s story about a ghost in the girls’ bathroom has kids of all grades too scared to use the facilities. The patient and well-meaning Ms. Aruba-Tate asks Ivy if she was the originator of the silly story, to which Ivy replies, “No . . . It’s not a silly story. The bathroom is haunted” (58). Taking a different approach, Ms. Aruba-Tate tells the class a story about yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater, though Bean, for one, has no idea what the story has to do with a haunted bathroom (60). Ivy understands that Ms. Aruba-Tate is disappointed in her, and she is uncomfortable being in
trouble. Nevertheless, Ivy believes in the ghost and refuses to let the threat of further punishment stop her from trying to solve the problem. Ivy and Bean concoct a potion, slightly modified from a spell (found in Ivy’s book of spells) designed to keep evil spirits away from one’s house. That Ivy and Bean are flexible with their spell and its ingredients seems decidedly queer as well, as both girls are willing to move fluidly in and out of the exact and the adapted with equal conviction to their cause. In the end, Ivy and Bean create a bright blue liquid (“Food coloring didn’t change the magic of a potion. It just made it look better” [91]) that they smear around the perimeter of the bathroom. After reciting a chant and flushing an offering of a half-dollar coin, a butterfly hairclip, and a fossil down the toilet (“How else are we going to get them underground?” [112]), the vindictive fifth grade teacher Mrs. Noble (another nod to that which is not sacred here) threatens Ivy and Bean with a visit to the principal. But when the toilet begins to overflow, flooding the bathroom, their now unprovable shenanigans are forgotten.

Ivy and Bean’s relationship to authority is not the typical power relationship found in tales such as those in the American Girl series. In the Ivy and Bean series there are punishments for the crimes; however, just as often the crime goes undiscovered or the punishment is disregarded. Neither Ivy nor Bean are reprimanded for digging a mud pit full of worms in Bean’s backyard in book 1, for example, nor is there any specific outcome for Bean spearheading a volcano sacrifice in a neighbor’s dirt pile, creating a muddy mess in their front yard in book 4. Also in book 4, while Ivy and Bean get stuck in Bean’s attic and make a mess of the house, they are able to bribe Nancy into not only cleaning up the mess but covering up their escapades with their parents as well. When Bean throws worms at Nancy in book 1, which results in Nancy falling in a pit of mud, Bean has videos taken away from her for a week. But Ivy notes, “But your mom had this little, teeny smile on her face when she pulled Nancy out of the pit” (Barrows, Ivy and Bean 106), thereby undermining the intention behind the punishment.

The queerness of the series is likewise reflected in the many occasions where the text playfully defies expectations of “girl books” and of early readers. In no way is Barrows invested in reproducing any sort of normalizing discourses about morality or girlhood; her characters revel in their queer construction. Instead, Barrows seems to love and respect Ivy and Bean in a way that the American Girl book authors/company do not. Unlike the American Girl series, which encourages reader identification and the expectation of a “natural” course of action, Barrows’s series practices the opposite, such as in the repurposing of typical little girl iconography like makeup and pretend kitchens, or in the moments where the plot itself moves in unexpected directions. In a particularly humorous scene in book 1, Bean has pretended to run away from home but returns to cast a spell on her sister. As she arrives back at her house, Bean sees through the kitchen window that Nancy is crying and imagines that Nancy is crying for her, taking responsibility for Bean’s need to run away in the first place.
Bean feels a lump in her throat and remembers all the nice things Nancy has done for her, such as letting her snuggle in her bed after she had a bad dream and letting Bean play with her glass animals. We expect a touching scene where Bean suddenly realizes that her family misses her, but instead Bean quickly discovers that Nancy isn’t crying about her at all. In fact, Nancy isn’t concerned with Bean’s disappearance in the least and is crying because her mother won’t let her get her ears pierced until she is twelve (Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 92). It is a funny turn of events that highlights Bean’s reasons for running away in the first place. Unlike American Girl Molly, whose brother admits in his apology to her after a fight, “I guess it’s better to be on your side than to be your enemy” (Tripp, *Meet Molly* 51), the sentimental sibling reconciliation isn’t reproduced here. Nancy remains the enemy and has been so throughout the series so far. Other moments seem to emphasize how rarely Ivy and Bean play in typical girl fashion. At the end of book 4, for instance, the sanctity of the playhouse is threatened when Bean tells Ivy that her dad has a leaf blower, and Ivy says, “Oh boy . . . we can blow your playhouse over” (Barrows, *Take Care* 122), a great correlative for how little the girls subscribe to typical expectations. To be sure, the cover art of the Ivy and Bean series is deceptive—it appears to be buying into a stereotype, with its pastel colors and clean, cute, smiling little girls on the cover. But the expectations of the stereotype are not reproduced in this series, nor are these girls who come around to adhering to authority, bury the hatchet with bullying older siblings, or value the typical locations and ways of play. Instead, Ivy and Bean are more sophisticated than their covers suggest and are unpredictable at best.

None of this is to say that Ivy and Bean are mean-spirited in their transgressions. In an early scene in book 1, for instance, Ivy admits that she can’t do a spell because she doesn’t have a dead frog, but she thinks killing a frog would be mean. Instead, Ivy makes a puddle in her backyard and tells Bean, “I’m hoping a frog will come here and die” (Barrows, *Ivy and Bean* 45). If anything their mischief is actually far different than someone like American Girl Samantha Parkington (1904) who notices a piece of jelly biscuit that she dropped on the floor the day before and decides that instead of cleaning it up herself or telling Jessie—the seamstress who also cleans up after Samantha—she will leave the sticky pastry on the floor to collect ants. Says Samantha, “It would be fun to see how many [ants] would come” (Adler 6). Later, Jessie must take care of the hundreds and hundreds of ants that have accumulated in the sewing room (20). Sure, Samantha gives Nellie, the poor girl who works for Samantha’s neighbor, a doll and reading lessons, and she worries about Nellie’s family’s lack of food and coal, which is kind of her. But her kindnesses are undermined by her brattiness, which comes across as more mean-spirited than playful. Furthermore, as Daniel Hade points out, throughout the Samantha series, “Though we have been told that Nellie is Samantha’s friend, Nellie . . . merits neither a Christmas present from Samantha nor an invitation to Samantha’s [birthday] party” (159). At best, Samantha is an odd role model, and it is therefore misleading to think
of Ivy and Bean as a “horrible” counterpart to the American Girls seeming “wholesomeness.” In many ways Ivy and Bean are actually more well-meaning, interesting, and dynamic than the ostensibly plucky girls the American Girls series has to offer.

For these reasons and more, it is easy to critique the “ewww” in the American Girl series; its earnest but uneven dedication to teaching America’s girls holds it up as suspect. It would also be easy to pick, rather arbitrarily, a book or series that doesn’t do what the American Girls books are most criticized for. But the Ivy and Bean series is not a random selection of contrast. Instead, the Ivy and Bean series provides a decided antithesis to the goals and ideologies, especially regarding gender, to the American Girl series. Where the American Girl series invites identification—even if only by superficial similarities—in order to educate young girls, Barrows eschews didacticism and refuses to cast Ivy and Bean as role models; their performances are by no means as stable or as fixed as is required of role model status. While the Ivy and Bean and the American Girl series can be said, perhaps, to both be working toward an updated representation of girlhood, it is in Barrows’s series that traditional value systems are troubled to the degree that these contemporary representations are more than just shallow updates—and unlike Pippi Longstocking, Ivy and Bean could actually exist. Perhaps it is with these funny little chapter books—this already queer subgenre of the early reader—where true change is going to happen. Perhaps it is from the margins that Barrows has the freedom to poke holes in dominant ideology, to challenge normalizing representations of girlhood without mere wholesale hierarchical inversions, reliance on the fantastic, or objectifying the girl.

Works Cited


