



Backfisch – An Adolescent Girl in German and American Literature of the 19th Century¹

Pfeiffer, J. (2021). *Transforming girls: The work of nineteenth-century adolescence*. University Press of Mississippi.

Abstract:

The review article addresses the monograph *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* by Julie Pfeiffer (2021), in which she juxtaposes American 19th-century girls' novels and German *Backfischromane*. The article reviews individual chapters of the book, in which Pfeiffer incorporates key perspectives on the differences and similarities between eight novels. According to the author of the article, the monograph makes an important contribution to the state of research on this literary genre.

Key words:

adolescence, American literature, Backfisch, genre studies, German literature, girlhood, girls' novel

Backfisch – powieść dla dziewcząt w niemieckiej i amerykańskiej literaturze XIX wieku

Abstrakt:

Artykuł recenzyjny dotyczy monografii *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* [Transformacje powieści dla dziewcząt. Dzieło dziewięć-

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nastowiecznej adolescencji] autorstwa Julie Pfeiffer (2021), w której autorka zestawia amerykańskie XIX-wieczne powieści dla dziewcząt i niemieckie *Backfischromane*. W artykule dokonano przeglądu poszczególnych rozdziałów książki, w których Pfeiffer uwzględnia kluczowe perspektywy dotyczące różnic i podobieństw między ośmioma powieściami. Zdaniem autorki artykułu, monografia stanowi ważny wkład w stan badań nad tym gatunkiem literackim.

Słowa kluczowe:

adolescencja, literatura amerykańska, *Backfisch*, genologia, literatura niemiecka, dziewczęństwo, powieść dla dziewcząt

The girls' novel is a recognised and widely discussed genre in many European countries. In Poland, the genre has been studied by academics since the 1950s (Kuliczowska, 1959), and the same has happened, for instance, in Sweden (Söderberg, Österlund, & Formark, 2013) or Germany (Ehenpreis, 2004). In American literature, however, a certain genre confusion exists: researchers tend to refer to children's literature or young adult fiction, alternatively juvenile literature, women's novels, and sometimes even orphan girls' novels, but often without distinguishing the girls' novel as such. An exception in this field is an article by Dawn Sardella-Ayres and Ashley N. Reese (2020), who derive the American and Canadian girls' novel from the Bildungsroman, as well as attempt to provide definitions of it, referring to a text by Kimberley Reynolds (2011). This, in turn, might be seen as oversimplification against a European background – why link the genre to the Bildungsroman and not derive it from the romances of François Fénelon, Jean-François Marmontel, and Samuel Richardson (Kruszewska-Kudelska, 1972)?

Julie Pfeiffer, though, is not engaged in a study of the genre in terms of its origins. Her 2021 book *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* is an intriguing contribution both in the category of comparative literary studies and literature history. The author's choice of research subject is significant – *Backfischromane* and girls' novels are an important part of literary history that is often neglected. What Pfeiffer accomplishes in her examination of eight novels is particularly important. She brings a completely fresh perspective to the understanding of adolescence and girlhood in the 19th century and overturns previous literary interpretations. It should be emphasised that Pfeiffer's work is essentially groundbreaking – no one has yet made a comparison between English- and German-language girls' novels on this scale.

Pfeiffer (2021) defines the girls' novel genre as follows: "The girls' book is a subcategory of children's literature, typically defined as books written with

girls as an intended audience (as opposed to a more general category of books read by girls)” (p. 5). On one hand, these novels reinforce gender norms and promote patriarchal values as necessary for female happiness. On the other hand, they offer an escape into fictional worlds focused on adolescent girls, portraying this time in their lives as a chance for personal growth and self-investment. The declared and achieved goal of the book is “to illuminate the genre of Backfisch literature by examining German and American texts comparatively to foster an understanding of nineteenth-century literature for and about girls well beyond the borders of either national literature” (p. 17).

The book is divided into an “Introduction,” five chapters, and a “Conclusion.” In her study, Pfeiffer (2021) analyses four German-language novels: *Backfischen’s Leiden und Freuden. Eine Erzählung für junge Mädchen* [Backfischen’s Sufferings and Joys: A Story for Young Girls] by Clementine Helm (1863), *Das Heideprinzeßchen* [The Moorland Princess] by Eugenie Marlitt (1872), *Der Trotzkopf: Eine Pensionsgeschichte für Junge Mädchen* [The Troublemaker: A Boarding School Story for Young Girls] by Emmy von Rhoden (1885), *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri (1881), and four English-language novels: *The Flower of the Family: A Book for Girls* by Elizabeth Prentiss (1853), *Faith Gartney’s Girlhood* by A. D. T. Whitney (1863), *An Old-Fashion Girl* by Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) and *What Katy Did: A Story* by Susan Coolidge (1872). All of these novels have been translated from their original language into English or German within just a few years of their first publication. As a consequence, we can thus speak of a cross-cultural dialogue on young girls’ adolescence, a lively reception of the genre, and even a specific trend for this type of novel.

The author references to three subtypes of girls’ novels specified in American literature, noting that the *Backfischroman* could certainly be listed as a fourth subtype. These would have been bestselling novels at the time focused on the adolescent heroine, not on growing up as a process (that would appear later, foreshadowed in German-language literature by Spyri’s *Heidi*). Although the flow and mutual literary fascination between the United States and Germany was intense, and the aforementioned novels were quickly translated into both languages, *Backfischromane* were forgotten in the US after World War I – even though they were bestsellers in the 19th century.

Chapter One, “Defining the Backfisch,” focuses on characterising and showing the historical conditions of a particular type of German novel for girls – the aforementioned *Backfischroman*, which has no direct equivalent in English-language literature. Backfisch is a German term that literally means ‘young fish’ and is used, often in a colloquial and affectionate manner, to describe teenage girls in German-speaking countries. The term became popular

in the 19th century as a way to describe the target audience for the novels that were focused on the experiences and emotions of young girls as they navigated their adolescent years. Backfisch is a symbol of transition, which is also brilliantly depicted in the illustration on the book's cover (figure 1). It is worth mentioning at this point that Pfeiffer's book is not only clear and well-structured in terms of content and language, but also in terms of editorial quality.

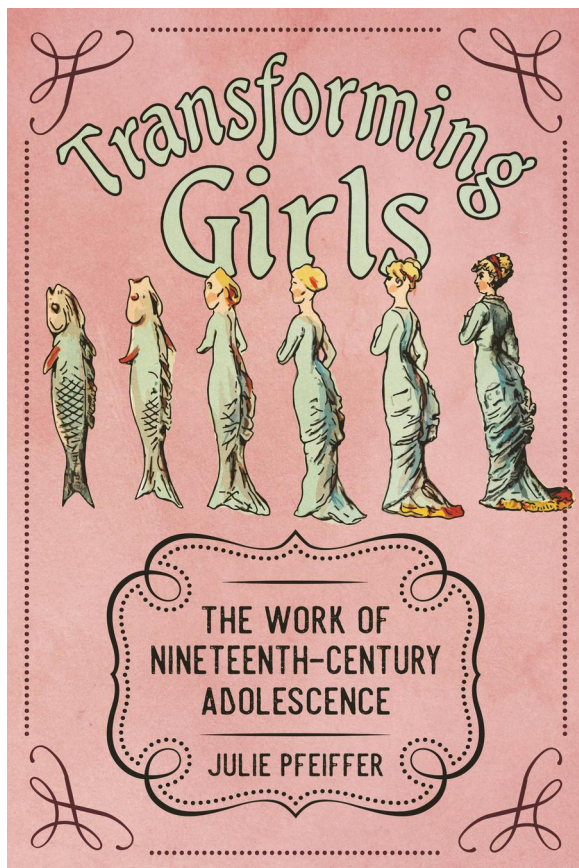


FIGURE 1. *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* (2021)

The author's conclusion regarding the perception of adolescent girlhood through the male gaze is interesting and pertinent. Pfeiffer (2021, p. 24), drawing on Crista DeLuzio's and Beth Rodgers's research, shows that adolescence was seen as a significant process in the US before G. Stanley Hall popularised the concept in 1904. It is remarkable at this point to distinguish between Hall's

male pattern of adolescence, which he based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work (like *Emile, or On Education*, 1762), and the girl's process. The former takes as its model the savage, the rebellious boy, who causes problems, and is therefore well identified and understood. In contrast, the adolescent, shy, awkward girl, who needs support in her transformation into a woman, is not disruptive to those around her, so her adolescence goes unrecognised, unnoticed. But that does not mean it is any easier (p. 25).

Chapter Two, "The Romance of Othermothering," explores the concept of mothering as a collective effort, utilising the Black feminist idea of 'othermothering' to examine how the young female protagonist, Backfisch, receives support from sources outside of her home. Although *Backfischromane* – both the German and the as yet unrecognised American ones – have a theoretical framework for heterosexual romance ending in marriage, it is not the relationship between the future spouses that is central to the story. The chapter describes four ways in which this concept can be used in Backfisch books – the othermother can be the narrator of the novel, a mentor to the main character, another character (such as an older colleague), or the story itself. The concept of othermothering, which Pfeiffer (2021, p. 68) uses to translate these bonds (borrowed from Patricia Hill Collins, 1991), seems to be most accurate, and it also allows for the nuanced gender issues in these novels. In theory, we might expect them to follow a pattern: an adolescent girl leaving for a new environment, which allows her to gain a new identity, which results in getting married, but in fact the pattern is considerably more intriguing and profound. The only doubt one might have about the use of the 'othermothering' theory is its connection to the Black feminism, as it originally refers to the practices of Black mothers in their communities. While the term is useful in Pfeiffer's research, I am not convinced that it can simply be transferred to the novel for White, Protestant, middle-class girls. The author also does not allude to the concept of sisterhood in her book, which is a shame, especially considering the subsection of this chapter entitled "The Adolescent Girl as Othermother." In this subsection, Pfeiffer emphasises the importance of relationships between girls for their growth and development, which is one of the crucial elements of the Backfisch book. The author also draws attention to translation issues (Pfeiffer, 2021, p. 87, 88) and to what extent the English versions of the German novels are Christianised, how the inner voice of the girl is turned into an external authority (teacher of the Bible, commandments, Jesus, etc.). This is an insightful finding, which could contribute to further research into the subject.

Chapter Three, "Converting Girls into Women," focuses on the Backfisch journey into womanhood as a transformation centred around labour. Pfeiffer

uses gender theory as a tool to examine the issue. Drawing primarily on Candace West's and Don Zimmerman's theory of 'doing gender,' the author analyses two novels – *Backfischen's Leiden und Freuden* by Clementine Helm and *Faith Gartney's Girlhood* by A. D. T Whitney. She demonstrates how the girls in these novels are socialised into the role of women and are taught to be feminine. The essential element is that this womanhood does not come by itself – the girls are supposed to make mistakes, learn from them, and the reader is there to watch their transformation. This transformation happens through demonstrative housework like baking and laundry. Pfeiffer (2021) points out that although this is seemingly a very stereotypical image of housewives, it also indicates its appreciative dimension – women's labour, often invisible, here rises to transformative status:

And yet these books draw our attention to a realism often ignored even in contemporary adolescent literature—the work of feeding a family, cleaning a household, and educating the next generation. The Backfisch book is in the confusing situation of making domestic and social work visible in order to hide it again in a return to a fairy-tale narrative of happy ever after. What the reader has learned about the work required to maintain that fairy tale—the shoveling of ashes and kneading of bread—is not unlearned simply because that work again retreats into the background (p. 115).

I would like to draw particular critical attention to a reflection that appears on the 116th page of the book. The thought reflected there is not only surprising, but also alarming. Although the author refers to an article published in the renowned medical journal, *The Lancet*, it is hard not to get the impression that the concept is out of place – integrating medical or, more specifically, psychiatric categories into a literary text is a risky practice, and in this case it even borders on anti-psychiatry. As Pfeiffer claims:

In the twenty-first century, we have shifted from seeing domestic work as the solution to the uncomfortable reality of being human to defining lability as mental illness. A 2019 editorial in *Lancet Psychiatry* argues, for example, that “borderline personality disorder is not so much a diagnosis as it is a liminal state” and a contemporary discomfort with emotional intensity and shifting identities may well be one reason so many adolescent girls in America struggle with depression [...]. When we seek to control girls through psychiatric drugs rather than domestic work, we move to a model that insists on regulating the private space as well as the public one, to creating not just the appearance of stable femininity, but also the inner experience of content detachment (p. 116).

The author points out that in *Backfischliteratur*, both the German original and its American equivalent, the ups and downs of adolescence, including the emotional fluctuations, intense emotions, and self-doubt experienced by girls, are considered a normal and socially accepted aspect of growing up. What is rather surprising, however, is the subsequent afterthought, which does not relate to contemporary literary protagonists of girls' prose or YA literature, but to actual present-day girls. Mental disorders and illnesses, including borderline personality disorder, are a serious concern – throughout history, women and girls have experienced mental illnesses, but they have often been dismissed or misdiagnosed. In the 19th century, for example, women's mental health issues were often referred to as hysteria. However, psychiatric medication is not meant to 'control' adolescent girls, medication – shocking as it may seem to the author – treats and even saves lives. At the same time, the author cuts out a part of a quote from the article that does not reflect its content in any way. The aforementioned *Lancet* article continues:

Borderline personality disorder is not so much a diagnosis as it is a liminal state. Individuals to whom the label applies exist between mental illness and mental health, between experiencing an acute condition and a chronic condition, and between being highly visible to clinicians, yet invisible to major epidemiological projects such as the Global Burden of Disease. The diagnostic criteria for personality disorder fall between the objective descriptions expected of medical manuals, and value judgements based on received opinion (Pearce & Dale, 2019, p. 187)

Borderline personality disorder is a chronic condition where a person remains stuck in a state of emotional instability and intense mood swings, unlike adolescence, which is a temporary phase that eventually leads to maturity and emotional balance. This difference is what sets borderline personality apart and makes it a disorder, a never-ending liminal state, which adolescence is not. I do not comprehend the motivation behind the appearance of this comment in the publication and consider it both unprofessional and unrelated to the actual content of the book.

Chapter Four, entitled “The Backfisch and Fantasies of Growth,” compares the efforts involved in transitioning into womanhood to the efforts needed to cultivate citizenship. The racial issue in girls' books, already quoted in the “Introduction” but admonished several times during the reading, is extremely intriguing. Pfeiffer (2021) claims that the target audience for *Backfischroman* in Germany was White, Protestant, upper-middle-class girls, while in the US it was White, middle-class girls whose families could afford

a period of leisure time before marriage. The remarks about the reclaiming of these books by girls of Jewish descent seem remarkably apt and so does the connection between the Whiteness of girls and femininity and moral virtues (rather than at least social class and having access to soap...). The White – clean – happy triad recalled by the author seems to be a starting point for deeper considerations regarding the sometimes-problematic layers of the novel, such as the hidden focus on Whiteness (p. 136).

Pfeiffer (2021) extensively outlines the historical background – Germany under the Bismarckian regime and the developing United States have much in common. Girls' novels present female teenage years as a significant concept – not only for girls and their families, but also for broader communities that aim to develop mature personalities. These coming-of-age narratives are embedded in the nation's aspirations to become a mature and powerful entity (p. 138). They delve into the relationship between love and suffering and explore ways to transform pain into growth instead of resentment. Backfisch heroines recognise the importance of freedom and the balancing act of control and navigate the dilemma of boundaries and the conflict between inclusion and exclusion.

In Chapter Five, "The Homesick Heroine," the focus shifts to homesickness, but the author notes that it is portrayed differently than in other family stories or orphan girls' novels. In the Backfisch novel, homesickness is not seen as a manifestation of adult longing for their childhood, but rather as a childish feeling that the confident and guided Backfisch must overcome in order to mature into adulthood. The highlight of this chapter is an analysis of *Heidi*, Johanna Spyri's hugely popular novel (in both German- and English-speaking world). Pfeiffer (2021) sees *Heidi* as a moment of transition – the first novel to shift from the model of the girls' novel to the orphan girls' novel (p. 157). The book purportedly uses the arc of Backfisch girls' novels – they provide the structural framework for its storyline. The thing, which definitely sets *Heidi* apart from her precursors, however, is the message of the book. Whereas the heroines of the girls' novels used to teach female self-reliance, their Swiss 'sister' provides more of an emotional experience. Heidi's journey is passive, she does not face the challenges that she herself (aided by a mentor) has to overcome and does not self-develop (p. 162, 163). This is where the girls' novel takes a step back. Backfisch is no longer maturing and overcoming difficulties, but becomes a perpetual child who has to be saved by external factors. Pfeiffer suggests that this state of affairs – a return to more sentimental heroines – is linked to nostalgia. Rather than helping Heidi (and the others) to grow up and overcome obstacles, the adults leave her alone, relinquishing responsibility. Pfeiffer speaks of the anxiety of adolescence:

Orphaned before the novel begins, manipulated by the aunt who first raised her, Heidi is effortlessly cured by the mountain air. A child of nature, she directs the focus of the girls' novel away from self-development and toward community-building and the exaltation of nature. Heidi's tremendous success spoke to something in adult desires to be saved by the natural child from the anxiety of adolescence, and her pattern became the central one in the classic girls' novel of the twentieth century (p. 163).

The research's "Conclusion" is, unfortunately, slightly disappointing – the section, which is only five pages long, does not complete the threads raised in the course of considerations and does not provide many possible conclusions. The author shows that in Backfisch novels it is the heroine who is most important, not the idealised process of adolescence. The journey towards adulthood is only a background for the journey into herself, into finding the inner strength. As a result, in this particular genre, the girl is addressed as the subject rather than the object of growing up. Despite all the critical points I have mentioned, Pfeiffer's book is a needed and highly valuable scholarly contribution. Her approach to the issue of girlhood in the above-mentioned novels is fresh and innovative: by exploring the stories of 19th-century heroines, she shows us that these works were often more progressive and emancipatory than both scholars and readers might have expected. *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* is a captivating addition to both the field of comparative literature and the history of literature.

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