



**Transforming Girls:
The Work of Nineteenth-
Century Adolescence**

By Julie Pfeiffer
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**A STUDY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY YOUNG ADULT
LITERATURE THAT REFOCUSSES THE HISTORY OF
GIRLS' BOOKS AND FEMALE ADOLESCENCE IN THE
UNITED STATES AND GERMANY**

"*Transforming Girls* has the potential to shift the way we think about girlhood reading and adolescence while carving out a different kind of conceptual space for adolescent girls—one that fosters growth while embracing the 'messiness' of the transition to adulthood."

—Sarah Wadsworth, author of *In the Company of Books: Literature and Its "Classes" in Nineteenth-Century America*

"By situating the backfish into a backdrop of well-established texts and critical lenses, Pfeiffer gently but insistently asks scholars to reconsider many of the critical assumptions our understandings of adolescent and nineteenth-century literature have been built upon."

—Ivy Stabell, associate professor of English at Iona College

Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence explores the paradox of the nineteenth-century girls' book. On the one hand, early novels for adolescent girls rely on gender binaries and suggest that girls must accommodate and support a patriarchal framework to be happy. On the other, they provide access to imagined worlds in which teens are at the center. The early girls' book frames female adolescence as an opportunity for productive investment in the self. This is a space where mentors who trust themselves, the education they provide, and the girl's essentially good nature neutralize the girl's own anxieties about maturity.

These mid-nineteenth-century novels focus on female adolescence as a social category in unexpected ways. They draw not on a twentieth-century model of the alienated adolescent, but on a model of collaborative growth. The purpose of these novels is to approach adolescence—a category that continues to engage and perplex us—from another perspective, one in which fluid identity and the deliberate construction of a self are celebrated. They provide alternatives to cultural beliefs about what it was like to be a white, middle-class girl in the nineteenth century and challenge the assumption that the evolution of the girls' book is always a movement towards less sexist, less restrictive images of girls.

Drawing on forgotten bestsellers in the United States and Germany (where this genre is referred to as *Backfischliteratur*), *Transforming Girls* offers insightful readings that call scholars to reexamine the history of the girls' book. It also outlines an alternate model for imagining adolescence and supporting adolescent girls. The awkward adolescent girl—so popular in mid-nineteenth-century fiction for girls—remains a valuable resource for understanding contemporary girls and stories about them.

JULIE PFEIFFER is professor of English at Hollins University. She is editor of *Children's Literature*, the annual of the Children's Literature Association.