



Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High. Margaret J. Finders. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997. 145 pp.

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Amidst a growing but still very small number of books on the topic of literacy as critical social practice, Margaret J. Finders has succeeded admirably in demonstrating the need to think of literate activities in ever broadening perspectives. As a former middle-level language arts teacher, Finders writes in a compelling way about adolescents' literacies--literacies that would likely have remained hidden from view if not for her astute observation while participating in a year-long ethnographic study of four young adolescent females in a midwestern junior high school located in what she calls the Northern Hills Community School District.

In *Just Girls*, we learn how two groups of adolescent girls, the Social Queens and the Tough Cookies, subverted their school's sanctioned literacy practices (narrowly defined as traditional reading and writing activities) by developing what Finders has coined a "literate underlife." Literate underlife at Northern Hills refers to a special kind of nonacademic literacy that enabled the two groups of girls to maintain certain social roles and allegiances in the face of their teachers' and the school's official expectations. For the Social Queens, literate underlife consisted primarily of passing notes, writing graffiti, and reading 'zines (teen magazines)--activities that they perceived as demonstrating their resistance to institutional authority. For the Tough Cookies, literate underlife meant resisting their teachers' attempts to engage them in shared reading and writing activities; they thought of literacy as being a solitary act, one that needed guarding if they were to achieve a measure of independence and success in life.

But *Just Girls* is more than a story of how teenagers subvert adults' expectations. It is also about growing up female in the United States and the dangers of ignoring certain assumptions about student-centered pedagogy and classroom community building. In a nutshell, Finders challenges us to think seriously of how a school's curriculum that restricts students' use of time, movement, and talk conspires to position young adolescent girls, in particular, in ways that limit their potential.

The book's strength lies mainly in the credibility it has for anyone who has ever taught or conducted research in the middle grades. Teachers, administrators, and teacher educators will resonate with Finders's ability to get beneath the surface of what it means to grow up female in the United States. Only someone who has spent years in the classroom teaching young adolescent girls could hope to study them and write about them in the graceful and engaging style that Finders does. Her words ring true, but more importantly, they help us imagine possibilities for a different way of schooling our youngsters.



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If there is a weakness in this finely crafted book, it is the absence of an epilogue. Readers may find themselves approaching the end of *Just Girls* wishing they could find out more about the Social Queens and Tough Cookies as they advanced through the middle grades and into high school. Of course, such wishing only points again to the skill Finders has as a researcher and writer; she draws her readers in, and they want to linger awhile longer.

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