

# Seven Days

## Where the Girls Are

St. Mike's prof Sharon Lamb looks at pink culture, and sees red

by Margot Harrison (09/06/06)

If you haven't mastered the art of choosing the "tabloid-free" aisle in the supermarket, you probably heard what happened to Ashlee Simpson. Pop singer Jessica Simpson's little sister had made a lucrative career out of playing the ugly duckling to her bombshell sibling's swan. Ashlee's dyed black hair and self-styled "punk rawk" singing/songwriting were about as "hardcore" as that Doc Martens-wearing Barbie doll from the 1990s. But her angry songs and bumpy nose — not perfect, like Jessica's — seemed to appeal directly to young girls, offering them assurance that they weren't alone in feeling insecure or ignored.

Ashlee went triple-platinum — and then went prettier. Publicizing her new album, she's appeared with long blond hair extensions, fuller lips and a nose that looks suspiciously . . . like her sister's. Though Simpson refuses to comment on whether she had cosmetic surgery, the message inherent in her transformation is clear. Deep down, even the tough, angsty girls just want to be Jessica Simpson 2.0. Preteens who thought they could choose between identifying with the pretty princess and the "bad girl" now see that, under the styling, the two "choices" are exactly the same.

You may want to reflect on Ashlee Simpson if you're skeptical about the thesis of *Packaging Girlhood*, a new parenting book by Saint Michael's College professor Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel



Brown, a professor at Colby College in Maine. The two women's argument is strong and simple: The media aren't offering girls viable models of what it means to be a girl or grow into a woman. Instead, they offer "images."

"We've been told our world empowers girls by offering them anything they want," Lamb and Brown write in the book's preface. "In reality, it's a world designed by media and marketing executives that targets children as consumers, channels girls' desires, and entices them into predictable types: 'pretty pink dolls,' 'cute little shoppers,' and 'hott teens.'"

Those teens can also choose to go for an "alternative," Hot Topic look, like pre-makeover Ashlee Simpson. But if they want to define themselves in more complex ways, they'll need to do so outside the mall — maybe outside pop culture altogether. Analyzing kids' TV, Lamb and Brown note that boy characters in cartoons "can be brainy, goofy, sensitive, tough, loyal, funny, mean, depressed, or bizarre." Girls, by contrast, "have two types to choose from — girly and tomboy . . . [They] can be either for the boys or with the boys." It's Ashlee versus Jessica all over again.

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Cynical readers, including feminists, may ask, “What’s new about a book like this?” After all, marketing isn’t politically progressive. It has always drawn on stereotypes about male and female roles, and many of the stereotypes Lamb and Brown discuss are as old as the hills. Why should parents suddenly be more concerned now about what their daughters are watching, listening to and wearing?

One common answer is that pop culture is becoming more openly sexual. Conservative and liberal parents alike aren’t apt to be overjoyed to discover their 10-year-old daughters singing along with Fergie of the Black-Eyed Peas about how she wheedles diamonds from men with the power of her “lovely lady lumps.”

*Packaging Girlhood* is addressed directly to parents, and it acknowledges their fears about the pervasiveness of MTV culture. “If you let your daughter watch TV and go to the movies,” Lamb and Brown warn, “you’re essentially enrolling her in a sex education course written primarily by boys and men, using traditionally sexy women as their teachers. Is this the curriculum you want?”

In an interview near her home in Shelburne, 51-year-old Lamb, who has two sons, candidly acknowledges that *Packaging Girlhood* has itself been packaged as a “parental anxiety” book. That aspect was at the forefront when the authors appeared on CBS’ “The Early Show” in early August. They have since penned op-eds in *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Boston Globe*.

But, rather than sexy culture per se, the book attacks the commercialization of girl culture. “What really is new is the reaching down to a younger audience, repackaging it for preteens and younger,” says Lamb. She cites the example of the Bratz dolls with their “party limo and spas,” who are selling the Paris Hilton lifestyle to kids. Also new is “The idea of selling girl-power as a power to make choices to shop . . . to choose between different colors of iPod holders,” Lamb says wryly.

Lamb and Brown don’t recommend that parents try to shelter their daughters or tune out pop culture. Their solution to the scary sex education offered by MTV is more thorough sex ed in school — i.e., not just abstinence promotion — coupled with open discussion in the home. Over and over, the book promotes a talking cure. “We have confidence that parents can talk to their kids and influence them,” Lamb explains. “They don’t have to be so scared of what’s in their world; they can be analyzing it.”

“I had to convince Lyn of this early on, but my philosophy is that you can’t turn off the TV,” she continues. “We have a lot of people here [in Vermont] who successfully have kept the outer world away from their kids. But I don’t think that’s an option for the whole country. I want to reach the people who are shopping at Wal-Mart.”

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*Packaging Girlhood* started with an assignment Lamb hands out in her “Gender Issues” course at Saint Michael’s. “Most of my students come into Gender Issues, and they think there is no more gender bias in the world,” Lamb says. She asks them to compare marketing aimed at boys and girls as it appears in magazines or in retail outlets such as Toys R Us. “It’s very transformative,” she says. “When they look at what the messages are, they start to get mad.”

Lamb shared the assignment with her friend Brown, and “over email, we decided we’d write a book

about it,” she explains. Both had written about girl culture before; Lamb authored *The Secret Lives of Girls* and Brown took a feminist approach to the trendy issue of “mean girls” in *Girlfighting*.

The project took four years, with two devoted to research. Lamb and Brown conducted a lengthy online survey on *Girlzone.com*, a Vermont-based site, to find out from girls “what’s in their world.” The next step was immersing themselves in it. For the chapter on music, for instance, Lamb compiled girls’ answers to the question “What’s the song that’s going through your head right now?” Then she asked her college students to download the songs and burn her a CD. Lamb soon learned that the respondents hadn’t censored their choices. “My kids are hearing me in my office listening to Jack Black’s ‘Fuck Her Gently.’ ‘Oh my God, Mom!’” she mock-shrieks, imitating a teenager’s embarrassment.

Lamb and Brown also conducted focus groups and surveyed school guidance counselors and parents. Then they started writing. “It was all done over email,” Lamb says of their interstate collaboration. “We’re very comfortable rewriting each other’s words. We no longer remember who said what.”

The “reality-based” approach they decided to take wasn’t just a strategy for reaching the average American. “The other secret of why we worked together is ’cause we both actually love TV,” Lamb confesses. “How can you be an intelligent person in this world and watch horrible shows like ‘The Swan’?” — a reference to the notorious reality show on which average-looking women fulfilled their dreams of “beauty” via cosmetic surgery.

The book’s answer: Watch with someone else and discuss it. The authors offer a long series of suggestions on how to talk to your daughter about the things she loves that bother you, rather than banning them. For instance, Lamb says, one could respond to Britney Spears’ “Toxic” by saying, “Oh my God, yet another song about a girl who gives everything up for a guy. Would you do that?” Or to the Pussycat Dolls’ “Don’t Cha” by asking, “Isn’t it boring that two girls are always in competition for a boy?”

Will daughters take such questions seriously, given that the main appeal of such pop songs is in their infectious hooks and not their lyrics? Sometimes *Packaging Girlhood* feels overly earnest. Still, it’s hard not to admire Lamb and Brown for taking a page from Mary Wollstonecraft’s pioneering feminist tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In Wollstonecraft’s time, circa 1792, popular novels celebrated a romantic ideal of feminine sensitivity. Wollstonecraft begged mothers to consider that, while strong emotions were well and good, their daughters might get further on common sense. Call it “meat and potatoes” feminism.

Lamb and Brown take a similar tack when they distance themselves from the many books that address issues of raising girls’ self-esteem and healing them from within. “We don’t buy into the view that low self-esteem is the biggest problem for girls today,” they state baldly in *Packaging Girlhood*’s introduction. “Girls get plenty of self-esteem whenever they can fit themselves into an image that marketers have created . . .” Later, discussing teen novels about problems like anorexia and cutting, Lamb and Brown suggest that such portrayals “connect pathology to girls’ ‘true’ nature, leading them into a billion-dollar self-help industry.”

“We were really sick of girl-blaming books and ‘inner girl’ books,” Lamb explains. “Journalists and parents are just so interested in the ‘inner girl.’ I think it’s great to be self-reflective, but I also think it’s harmful for girls to . . . take everything on themselves. That’s why we wanted to write a book about what’s outside the girl, instead of what’s inside her.”

What's outside the girl is, of course, "the media," the book's de facto villain. Do marketers and the media actually engineer stereotypes, or just propagate them? How did we arrive at the situation chronicled in the chapter on clothing, where it's difficult to find a little girl's T-shirt in a modern chain store that isn't pink, sparkly or emblazoned with the word "princess," "cute," or "cheerleader"?

Lamb is skeptical of market research, suggesting that it may be fishing for the same old answers. She recalls a video game about shopping and dating — that girls supposedly wanted — that turned out to be a bust.

"I think there are arguments in the boardrooms," Lamb says. "A lot of the decisions are made by people with stereotypes already in their heads about what sells. The marketers . . . have no reason to push forward. They think they have no agenda, but they have a mainstream agenda of recreating the same old girly-girl or feisty-girl types."

Those stereotypes certainly appeal. Part of their appeal, perhaps, is that they're so superficial that they lend themselves to fantasies of transformation. The girl who's Posh Spice on Monday can be Sporty Spice on Tuesday; the ugly duckling can become a swan.

Still, Lamb and Brown show that, by valuing girls more for how they present themselves than for what they actually accomplish, we put them in a hall of mirrors that's hard to exit. Ashlee Simpson is fun to watch, but she makes it seem as if getting hair extensions is a better career move than learning to sing on-key.

Maybe it's time to focus on the countless less glamorous but more substantial ways to matter in the world: That seems to be the ultimate message of *Packaging Girlhood*. "We wrote for people who love pink and 'girly' things too," Lamb says. "So that they might say, 'OK, I like it, but there are other colors of the rainbow.'"