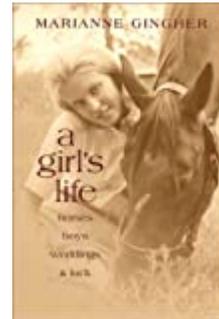




Marianne Gingher. *A Girl's Life: Horses, Boys, Weddings, and Luck.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. 224 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2685-1.



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Snapshots from a Happy Childhood

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In her acknowledgments, Marianne Gingher thanks Michael Vincent Miller for a plea made on the pages of the *New York Times Book Review* in 1994: “Would someone please confess to having had simply a happy childhood that led forward to an adult life of fulfillment and well-being, even without Prozac?”[1] Miller’s wish has been amply fulfilled in recent years. Doris Kearns Goodwin, Madeleine Blais, Bobbie Ann Mason, and others have looked back in print on childhoods remembered fondly as sources of strength.[2] Writer Marianne Gingher’s contribution to the genre is a joyful volume of reflections on her own childhood in Greensboro, North Carolina, in the 1950s and ’60s. Although short on the broad historical context one might expect in a book that covers such tumultuous years, *A Girl's Life* is filled with insights into growing up female in a white, middle-class southern family.

Gingher divides her memoir into three sections. In “Sanctuary,” she reflects on young childhood experiences, defined by home and family. She immerses readers in the sensuous details of activities such as a sum-

mer trip to her grandparents’ house and a Christmas shopping expedition, each seen with a child’s attention to the glorious concrete details. A chapter about penicillin shots suggests Gingher’s own childhood response to the protective interventions of loving adults. Although cousin Melissa runs pell-mell from the threatening syringe, she ultimately allows herself to be caught, secure in the knowledge that her family is chasing her for her own well-being, out of love.

“Truths and Grit” takes readers to the more complicated territory of older childhood and adolescence, when the world turns out to be a mixture of sweetness and various kinds of trouble. Several chapters explore the peculiar ways in which horses both accelerated and delayed Gingher’s transition to womanhood. In one passage she describes the love she and her friends lavished on their horses and their disregard for the horses’ faults “because we were young girls, learning to please, and would some day want to love men and accommodate children, and the horses were teaching us how” (pp. 101-102). On the other hand, the stable with its “no boys allowed” policy also gave Gingher a refuge from the disturbing at-

tentions of a teenage boy. Barn chores offered a welcome respite from “purely female things: skirts, perfume, stockings and garter belts, training bras, the prissy hygiene of shaved legs and tweezered eyebrows” (p. 111).

“Metaphors and Pies” turns to Gingher’s adult experiences. Legacies of her childhood, from Granny’s meat grinder to memories of adolescent angst, continue to play an important part in her life as a writer and mother living in the town where she grew up. The title of this section comes from a question in “Why I Did Not Go to Syracuse,” a chapter about balancing professional and family life: “Which finally matters most, not just to the people I love, but to the world: the making of a pie or a metaphor?” (p. 182).

By its nature, memoir is a distinctly personal form, like a conversation between writer and reader. My own bias as a reader is to prefer stories in the form of a continuous narrative, albeit one that is shaped by selection and metaphor to form a more coherent story than a strict recounting of daily life. I like the way Doris Kearns Goodwin uses baseball to tie together *Wait Till Next Year*, for instance. I came to *A Girl’s Life* unconsciously anticipating that variety of story, and I was initially disappointed. The seventeen chapters relate to each other thematically but don’t build on each other. Events sometimes appear out of sequence. This is particularly jarring when a horse that was sold in a previous chapter reappears without explanation. Incidents or details mentioned in one chapter recur as if the reader has never encountered them before.

Belatedly, I grasped that I was looking for a continuous stream of narrative in a collection of seventeen individual essays. Louisiana State University Press could have helped immensely by packaging the book in a way that sent clearer signals from the beginning about what to expect. A preface from Gingher elaborating on how the individual pieces came to be written and why she decided to collect them in this volume would put readers on the right track from page one. Indeed, I enjoyed the

book much more on a second reading than on the first.

Gingher’s writing is vividly descriptive. She evokes the sticky heat of a summer car trip from North Carolina to Illinois and the exotic comfort of an air-conditioned hotel room “as square and plain and white as the interior of an ice-cream carton” where her brothers tumbled on a carpet “as bright red and icy cold as cocktail sauce” (p. 6). An entire chapter entitled “Help” portrays the various ways in which, in her childhood world, “you could stand perfectly still and the world delivered itself to you, person by person, with courtesy and efficiency, and frequently attired in a uniform” (p. 15). The strength of this volume lies in such insightful depictions and graceful writing.

Readers of H-SAWH are likely to be interested in memoirs not only as literary works but also as possible teaching tools. Regardless of how well it succeeds on its own terms, *A Girl’s Life* is not ideal material to add an individual perspective to a history survey course. Gingher primarily explores personal and family matters. Local and national events stay very much in the background, although some passages vividly evoke the daily life and social expectations of the 1950s and ’60s. The essay “White Girl’s Burden” offers good material for a class discussion about gender and race relations in the 1950s. Other essays might be relevant to discussions of female adolescence and changing societal expectations of marriage and motherhood. Still, this book will be most appreciated by readers looking for narrowly focused personal stories. Like a good photo album, it offers deft pictures of one girl’s particular experiences of home, family, and growing up.

[1]. *New York Times Book Review*, 20 Nov. 1994, p. 12.

[2]. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir* (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1997); Bobbie Ann Mason, *Clear Springs: A Family Story* (N.Y.: Random House, 1999); Madeleine Blais, *Uphill Walkers: A Memoir of a Family* (N.Y.: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001). Like Gingher, Mason grew up in the South.

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