

How Bad Can Bad Girls Be?: Cynthia Voigt Imagines Her Worst

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Bad girls are a muse for feminists. For example, Jane Gallop worked at notoriety. Early in her career as a Lacanian critic, she imagined herself giving a paper at the MLA while hugely pregnant as an unmarried mother, and showing lots of cleavage. Gallop says she attained her dream before the birth of her son Max. Later, her book *Thinking through the Body* featured a cover photo rumored to be that of Gallop giving birth. She presented the image as an example of the head in the midst of the body, showing doctor, nurse, mother and baby entangled for what she calls “a brief pause in an irrepressible progress” (8). Thinking that comes through the body is rare, and fleeting, atypical in a culture that splits mind from body, women’s “issues” (blood, babies, among others) from the “ideas” we call economics, philosophy, and law. Gallop has since startled the academic world by responding to a question about her sexual preference with the phrase “graduate students,” and continuing her cultural analysis by a book on sexual harassment.

I cited the example of Jane Gallop because her work as well as her life offer an example of bad girl unsurpassed in critical discourse. Other critics, other feminists, may disillusion with pettiness, cruel competitiveness, disregard for students’ rights. But Gallop is outrageous for physical display, and I admit to fascination with the path she chooses. Following her seminar on feminist theory in 1985, I found myself painting my fingernails vermilion, my own brief moment, perhaps, of thinking through the body as I marked my students’ papers.

To set a standard for Margalo Epps and Michele (Mikey) Elsinger, the bad girl protagonists of Voigt’s recent four-book series, I want to include one more example of how bad girls fascinate grown women. In a reading group during the nineties, my friends and I offered each other our sample stories of bad girls in our own families. We imagined what it would be like to have these girls—nieces, cousins, never our daughters of course—appear on our doorstep. One prize-winning threat was the drug-addicted niece who might appear, with unsavory friends, to demand money from her aunt. But surpassing that waif in the repulsion she evoked was the cousin who lived as a catbird, leaving one child after another in the homes of relatives. Not the fear of having to raise a foundling was most blood-curdling; the narrative sequence itself seemed to grip the listeners. We didn’t imagine ourselves as violent criminals who would shake down our aunts. But something about the repeated abandonments of children surpassed what we were willing to entertain over wine and cheese.

Voigt’s narratives about bad girls include some of these motifs. Like Gallop, and like the mythic relatives my friends conjured up in worst case scenario family narratives, Margalo and Mikey do their best to be bad. In *Bad Girls*, they begin their fifth-grade lives as new girls who have their own ways of writing initials that spell “me” and of mocking the rules their teacher dictates. Fighting, avenging ostracism, and finally subverting punishments through linguistic skill and mathematical exactness—Margalo writing her “I will not start rumors” repetitive task by adding subordinate clauses like “about Mr. Delaney [the principal] being a former spy for the CIA, in Columbia” and Mikey scrubbing the classroom desks selectively

enough to plant an incriminating graffiti—"HOT BABE" with an arrow pointing to the teacher—on the desk of the girls' antagonist Louis Casselli—they complete the year as fast friends who want to make trouble.

Reading the first book of the series isn't much like reading the Tillerman books. Yet family structure provides an unseen setting, explaining the girls' cognitive and emotional lives. Withholding much, Voigt supplies a fluid family of step and half siblings for Margalo and affluent but distanced parents for Mikey. The worst specter of the bad girl, abandonment of children, thus beckons. The girls are products of contemporary family problems—Margalo's mother is twice divorced and married to a third husband, and Mikey's father used to take drugs. In the second book, *Bad, Badder, Baddest*, Voigt offers a full measure of family that extends from the nurturing hippy mother and stepfather of Margalo, to the disintegrating household Mikey lives in, to the card-reading New Orleans girl Gianette who is shuffled through a corrupt welfare system. Setting out like Nancy Drew and Harriet the Spy to observe the failing marriage and try to avert divorce, Margalo and Mikey try to scare the latter's parents by disappearing for a weekend. This outcome is not "in the cards," however, but the girls find an imaginative and physical solution to Mikey's fear of abandonment. In a narrative move like the story of the catbird leaving her eggs in others' nests that brought my reading group to its realization of what constitutes a really bad girl, Mikey articulates the awful fate of a fox that is being confined on a leash near Gianette's house. This narrative, understood only by Mikey's father, brings a resolution, divorce, to the parents and a functioning father-daughter relationship to replace the virtual abandonment that Mikey feared.

So, there it is. The bad girls, in subsequent books—*It's Not Easy Being Bad* and *Bad Girls in Love* proceed through seventh and eighth grades exhibiting the qualities they learned (or inherited?) from their parents—a kind of feminine peripheral vision Margalo admires in her mother, and a kind of masculine focus Mikey notices in her mother. Popularity, cleverness, and emotion are major themes, and the abandonment fear surfaces only once, when a boy Mikey has a crush on tries to turn her against Margalo. Instinctively, though, Mikey and Margalo know one another well enough not to read betrayal into secrets. Like Betsy and Tacy, these two cannot be parted. Nor does either of them leave off thinking through the body and its entanglements. Clothes, cooking, babysitting, sports and lunch hour provide material for being bad—for defying norms about appearance, money, competition and loneliness. The truly bad girl of the series is Mikey's mother; she remarries without inviting Mikey to the wedding. Yet her recipes, her taste, and her single mindedness serve both girls well. Margalo's mother proves more than stable in her non-logical ways—so much so that both girls thrive in the complexity of step-siblings and half-siblings she supplies.

These books are funny, somewhat picaresque, and yet construct a school series that makes home the basis of interaction. Private and public are capable of unity. Neither as outrageous as a Lacanian analysis, nor as ominous as narratives of failed bonding, Voigt's bad girls aren't bad. Remembering a young colleague who told my students derisively that Voigt's novels are sappy—always about little girls who have to take care of whole families—I smile at the ways these bad girl books aren't about that. Margalo and Mikey take care of M E—Margalo Epps and Mikey Elsinger. Their friendship isn't the product of duty or morality, either. It

emerges from the entangled bodies of family and social structures, and for a brief, unusual set of moments it just is.

Works Cited

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