



American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers

By Nancy Jo Sales

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A *New York Times* Bestseller

Instagram. Whisper. Yik Yak. YouTube. Kik. Ask.fm. Tinder. The dominant force in the lives of girls coming of age in America today is social media. What it is doing to an entire generation of young women is the subject of award-winning *Vanity Fair* writer Nancy Jo Sales's riveting and explosive *American Girls*.

With extraordinary intimacy and precision, Sales captures what it feels like to be a girl in America today. From Montclair to Manhattan and Los Angeles, from Florida and Arizona to Texas and Kentucky, Sales crisscrossed the country, speaking to more than two hundred girls, ages thirteen to nineteen, and documenting a massive change in the way girls are growing up, a phenomenon that transcends race, geography, and household income. *American Girls* provides a disturbing portrait of the end of childhood as we know it and of the inexorable and ubiquitous experience of a new kind of adolescence—one dominated by new social and sexual norms, where a girl's first crushes and experiences of longing and romance occur in an accelerated electronic environment; where issues of identity and self-esteem are magnified and transformed by social platforms that provide instantaneous judgment. What does it mean to be a girl in America in 2016? It means coming of age online in a hypersexualized culture that has normalized extreme behavior, from pornography to the casual exchange of nude photographs; a culture rife with a virulent new strain of sexism and a sometimes self-undermining notion of feminist empowerment; a culture in which teenagers are spending so much time on technology and social media that they are not developing basic communication skills. From beauty gurus to slut-shaming to a disconcerting trend of exhibitionism, Nancy Jo Sales provides a shocking window into the troubling world of today's teenage girls.

Provocative and urgent, *American Girls* is destined to ignite a much-needed conversation about how we can help our daughters and sons negotiate unprecedented new challenges.

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Editorial Review

Review

“This intelligent, history-grounded investigation by journalist Sales (The Bling Ring) finds dismaying evidence that social media has fostered a culture “very hostile” to girls in which sexism, harassment, and cyberbullying have become the “new normal,” along with the “constant chore” of tailoring one’s image for public consumption and approval... Parents, educators, administrators, and the purveyors of social media platforms should all take note of this thoughtful, probing, and urgent work.”

—*Publishers Weekly Starred Review*

“Sales digs into every aspect of girls’ online lives, revealing myriad disturbing details...If you have a teenage daughter, read AMERICAN GIRLS. Have her read it, too.”

—*Newsday*

“This book is an ice-cold, important wake-up call”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Adult readers will be shocked... [they] might be on Facebook and Twitter, but they probably haven’t even heard of most of the apps that teens use, let alone how they use them...What Sales makes clear is just how prevalent social media is in the life of an American teenager.”

—*The New York Post*

“Based on interviews with hundreds of teens from 13 to 19, this exploration of the hypersexualized, social-media-ruled world girls grow up in today is eye-opening and sobering.”

—*People*

“Social media is life; social media destroys life. For “American Girls,” Ms. Sales spent two and a half years investigating this paradox.... and she’s exquisitely unobtrusive as she does it. Conversations that are not safe for adults seem to open like apps under her fingertips. She has sophisticated methods of infiltration”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Sales forces us to face a disturbing new reality in a book that should be required reading for parents, teachers, school administrators, legislators and the boys’ club of Silicon Valley.”

—*The San Francisco Chronicle*

"Sales painstakingly draws on scholarly research and numerous interviews with girls from New Jersey to California to offer a harrowing glimpse into a world where self-esteem, friendships and sexuality play out, and are defined by the parameters of social media."

—*USA Today*

"American Girls is probably one of the most urgent conversation starters I've read in some time."

—*Psychology Today*

"In her new book *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, readers are afforded the opportunity to understand what is really going on in the lives of teenagers, especially our girls. ..This book stands apart from other books targeted at understanding the concerns and current plight of teenage girls... A must read for all parents."

—*Examiner*

"This is an important book... It's an essential read if you have teenagers or tweens in your life...I highly recommend *American Girls* for anyone who wants to understand how our ongoing revelation is playing out for teenagers."

—*WebInkNow*

About the Author

NANCY JO SALES is an award-winning journalist and author who has written for *Vanity Fair*, *New York*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and many other publications. She is known for her reporting on youth culture and crime and for her profiles of pop-culture icons. She won a 2011 Front Page Award for "Best Magazine Feature" and a 2010 Mirror Award for "Best Profile, Digital Media." Her 2013 book, *The Bling Ring: How a Gang of Fame-Obsessed Teens Ripped Off Hollywood and Shocked the World*, tells the true story behind the Sofia Coppola film *The Bling Ring*, which was based on Sales's 2010 *Vanity Fair* piece "The Suspects Wore Louboutins." Born in West Palm Beach, Florida, Sales graduated summa cum laude from Yale in 1986. She became a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* in 2000. She has a daughter, Zazie, and lives in the East Village in New York City.

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Chapter One

13

Montclair, New Jersey

"SEND NOODZ."

The boy sent the message in the middle of the day, when she was walking home from school. He sent it via

direct message on Instagram, in the same shaky, childlike font as the new Drake album (“IF YOURE READING THIS ITS TOO LATE”).

Sophia stared at her phone.

“Wait what???” she responded.

No answer.

She continued along the empty streets. It was a warm spring day and the wide green lawns were full of blooming trees. Montclair was a pretty place, and it was safe, so a lot of kids walked home from school. She’d been with friends, but they had already peeled off and gone inside their houses, so she was all alone. She hoped to see someone she knew, hopefully a girl she could tell: “Oh my God, you know Zack, he asked me for nudes!” And: “What should I do?”

But there was no one around. She thought about texting someone—most things, observations, gossip, jokes, were shared right away, but this seemed like something new. Something almost . . . private. Secret. That rare thing, something no one else could know.

She had heard of boys asking girls for nudes before, but it had never happened to her. This was her first time. She didn’t know how to respond, or if she should respond. Should she be outraged? Shocked? Her first reaction was: “I was like, Whoa, he finds me attractive? That’s kind of strange. I never knew he found me attractive . . .”

She thought about the boy. He was thirteen, the same age as she, a boy from her eighth-grade class. He was a boy like other boys—he talked loud and rough and wore baggy shorts and snapback hats and had a swaggering demeanor like Justin Bieber, whom he probably would have dissed. He was “cute,” “but kind of gross.”

She wondered if he liked her. “He never likes anything of mine on Instagram, but why would he ask me that if he hadn’t been thinking about me? If I wasn’t in his mind? Boys aren’t gonna come out and just say, ‘I like you,’ ’cause they don’t do that. They have, like, their own language . . .”

When she got to her house, a Victorian house with a wraparound porch, the place where boys had once come calling for girls, she went upstairs to her room. Plugged her phone into the charger. It was almost out of juice. She’d been up most of the night texting under the covers so if her mother walked in she wouldn’t see—texting friends in her group chat who were still awake, sending words and emojis and giggling over inside jokes. And then during the day she had texted all through school. She woke up tired a lot of the time, but, she said, “I just drink a Red Bull.”

She went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Peered at herself. Pursed her lips. Stuck her tongue out to the side, Miley-style. Tossed her hair. She knew that she was “attractive,” so she wasn’t all that surprised that the boy had asked her for nudes. “I get, like, a hundred likes on all my pictures and people comment, like, ‘Gorgeous . . .’?”

But she wondered what it would be like if someone actually had a naked picture of her, and she wondered what that picture would be. “Not like I was gonna do it—oh my God, no—but if you did, like, what would you send so it looked good, and not ratchet?”

She wondered if the boy had thought about kissing her. If he was going to be her first kiss. She'd been wondering what it would be like to kiss a boy, to have one want you so bad he would take you into the park or even his room and press his lips against yours, wrapping his arms around you, holding you close.

She heard her phone ding from inside the bathroom. A text alert. She ran to see. It was the boy, responding to her message:

“I really need this 'cause I have to win a bet I wont show anyone,” he wrote.

“What serious who else did you ask,” she texted, her heart beating fast.

“nobody lol I need it from you please”

“Why”

“so theres this high school kid I think hes a senior who hooks me up with lq”—booze—“he said hell get us as much as we need cause hes rich if me and jack show that we can get nudes no disrespect im just asking you cause youre the prettiest girl and the best person to ask”

She stared at the phone, thought about it a moment, and wrote: “lol”

New York, New York

At the Barnes & Noble on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan in May 2015, Kim Kardashian was launching her latest book, *Selfish*, a collection of selfies and nudes. It was more than 400 pages of Kim staring into the camera, pursing her lips, looking sultry and suggestive. It was Kim naked in a bathroom mirror, naked in a bedroom mirror, clutching her naked breasts, leaning naked over a bathroom sink, sticking her famous behind up in the air; Kim leaning naked over a bed in the grainy dark, Kim in lingerie and bathing suits, lounging beside electric-blue swimming pools, doing “leg shots.”

“Oh my God oh my God oh my God oh my God,” said a thirteen-year-old girl waiting in the line snaking through the store.

There were pictures of Kim from 2006, when she was still an L.A. party girl and friend of Paris Hilton's, to 2014, after she had become one of the most famous women in the world. In those eight years, which had seen the introduction of the iPhone in 2007, and the global spread of social media through mobile technology, Kim had become social media's biggest star. In 2006, she had just 856 friends on Myspace—where she announced in her profile, “I'm a PRINCESS and you're not so there!”—and now she had 31 million followers on Instagram, second only to Beyoncé, whom she would eclipse in a few months, climbing to number one. She had 34 million followers on Twitter, where she posted more selfies daily, most of which got thousands of favorites and retweets.

“I love her,” said another girl in the store.

What was the meaning of Kim Kardashian? Why was she here, and why wouldn't she go? Why did anyone care about her, and how had she become so ubiquitous? Throughout the years of her ascendance, people had been trying to figure this out. Some seemed furious at her success, which in 2015 included TV shows, endorsement deals, makeup, fragrances, clothing lines, one of the most popular of all mobile apps—in which a Kim avatar showed you how to become as famous as she—and a net worth of \$85 million. Still, she was

called “vain,” “shallow,” “frivolous,” “egotistical,” “materialistic,” and many other more vulgar insults in endless media pieces and online rants. “I have never heard more anger and dismay than when we announced that the people you are about to see were on our list,” Barbara Walters told viewers before airing a segment on the Kardashian family in her 10 Most Fascinating People show of 2011. “You are all often described as famous for being famous,” Walters leveled at sisters Kim, Khloé, Kourtney, and their mother, Kris, who sat before her in sleek couture. “You don’t really act, you don’t sing, you don’t dance, you don’t have any—forgive me—any talent.”

The Kardashians tried, in their mild way, but they couldn’t quite seem to explain to Walters, who had come of age at a different time, that this was actually the point—talent didn’t matter much in becoming famous anymore. Or perhaps what served as talent had transformed. It was now enough to know how to become famous purely for the sake of fame.

“She’s amazing,” said another girl in Barnes & Noble.

The Kardashians, a family of American girls, had come on the scene, swept forward by the gown of Princess Kim, in a kind of perfect cultural storm: there was the fascination with fame that had always danced at the edges of American identity, and now, with the explosion of a celebrity news industry fueled by Internet blogs and TMZ, had taken over the aspirational longings of the young. A 2007 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 51 percent of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds said their most or second most important life goal was to become famous. Sixty-four percent said their number one goal was to become rich.

A girl waiting in line for Kim said, “I want her life.”

There was reality television, which stoked a thirst for more and more intimate details of the lives of celebrities and newly minted reality show stars. And there was princess culture. For a generation of girls raised on the Disney corporation’s multibillion-dollar line of so-called princess products, the five sisters of Keeping Up with the Kardashians were real-life princesses who lived in a Calabasas, California, castle, unabashedly focused on the pursuit of beauty treatments, expensive fun, and luxury brands—the latter a national fixation spawned in the “luxury revolution” of the last thirtysomething years, in which most of the wealth of the country had traveled into the hands of a few, with the rest of the population looking on longingly as the beneficiaries of a new Gilded Age flaunted their high-end stuff. And entertainment media, from Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous to Keeping Up with the Kardashians, provided them with ample opportunities to do just that.

“I get letters from little girls begging me to adopt them,” Kim once told a reporter. The Kardashian lifestyle was the fulfillment of a new American dream that had been embraced by many girls and young women, unsurprisingly enough, at a time when everything around them supported it as an ideal: it was to be beautiful, famous, and rich, and to have amazing clothes, bags, and shoes and tens of millions of followers on social media. It was to get tens or even hundreds of thousands of likes on all your selfies.

“I want to take a selfie with her,” a girl in Barnes & Noble said excitedly.

Behind the Kardashians’ lifestyle, there was a mother, but it wasn’t Kim; it was Kris Jenner, Kim’s own mother and tireless manager, who took 10 percent of all her daughters’ incomes. “My job is to take my family’s fifteen minutes of fame and turn it into thirty,” Kris once declared. That her family’s fifteen minutes had begun with a leaked sex tape of her daughter and the singer Ray J didn’t seem to give her pause; in fact, it was just after the release of the tape that Kris started shopping her family’s reality show, a move she likened to “[making] some lemonade out of these lemons.” The scandal which Paris Hilton had already

endured wasn't much of a scandal anymore. Porn stars were writing best-selling books and appearing on The Oprah Winfrey Show. For the biggest, darkest cloud in the perfect storm that brought Kim Kardashian rising out of the ocean of wannabe celebrities like Venus on a flip phone was the widespread consumption and normalization of online porn. In 2014, Pornhub reported in its "Year in Review" that Kim was number eight in the top ten most popular "porn stars" in the world.

"Kim, you're doing amazing, sweetie," Kris said in an iconic moment on Keeping Up with the Kardashians, in which Kim, naked except for jewelry and heels, is on her knees, arching her back, and posing as a photographer snaps pictures—as does Kris, with a little personal camera. The moment is striking in its depiction of another element of the cultural tempest that delivered us Kim: the hypersexualization of American girls and women.

"She's hot," said a boy waiting in line to see her.

"Is Kim Kardashian a feminist role model?" asked Jezebel in 2013. The website answered "no" and "nooooooooooooooo." But already the worm of popular opinion was starting to turn. Kim was being touted as a "businesswoman." She was being called "powerful"—and didn't achieving power, any kind of power, by any means, make a woman a feminist? So blogs and think pieces argued. Was it Kim's marriage to a powerful music industry player and self-described "creative genius," Kanye West, or their joint appearance on the cover of Vogue in 2014—a nod from establishment media moving Kim onto the A-list—that began to mute her haters? Or was it that Kim's true talent, her skill at using social media—the real secret of her success, all along—was finally being recognized for the power it commanded?

"Something about Kim is very appealing to digital natives," Re/code founder Kara Swisher told Rolling Stone in 2015. Yes, and that something was becoming very clear: Kim successfully used the technological tools now available to almost everyone to get what everyone wanted. What she'd been doing relentlessly since the introduction of smartphones and before, now everybody was doing—using social media to self-promote, to craft an idealized online self; and girls coming of age in the second decade of the twenty-first century were using it to present a sexualized self. "My little cousin, she's thirteen, and she posts such inappropriate pictures on Instagram and boys post sexual comments, and she's like, Thank you. It's child porn, and everyone's looking at it on their iPhones in the cafeteria," said a seventeen-year-old girl in New York.

Presiding over the pornification of American life was Princess Kim, who'd been crowned the "Selfie Queen." Posting selfies, once thought to be embarrassingly narcissistic, was now as common as brushing one's teeth—or putting on makeup, the subject of many of the selfies in Kim's new book. For the last and loudest thunderclap in this perfect storm, the precipitous rise of narcissism in the American psyche—charted in studies since the 1970s, and accelerated by social media, according to psychologists—was personified and glamorized in the image of a dewy, contoured Kim staring into her iPhone screen.

Slate called *Selfish* "riveting." The Atlantic, in a review titled "You Win, Kim Kardashian," gushed, "In declaring herself, against all common sense, as art, she mocks and dares and provokes. She rejects what came before. And with her candor about who she is and what it takes to make her that way, she might also, against all odds, move us forward." Whatever that might mean.

At the Barnes & Noble in Manhattan, Kim, then thirty-four, was wearing a tight, high-necked white lace dress and glistening with products. She sat behind a table, signing books for her hundreds of awaiting fans.

"You've inspired me to be hot and famous," a teenage girl told her, blushing.

“Aw,” said Kim. “I love you.”

Though there had been a ban on selfies at the signing, Kim stood up and took a selfie with the girl. They posed together, staring into the girl’s smartphone, pursing their lips.

“You are a role model for my daughters,” said someone’s mother.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Reginald Hunter:

A lot of people always spent their particular free time to vacation or maybe go to the outside with them family or their friend. Are you aware? Many a lot of people spent they will free time just watching TV, or even playing video games all day long. If you want to try to find a new activity here is look different you can read a book. It is really fun in your case. If you enjoy the book that you simply read you can spent all day long to reading a book. The book American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers it is extremely good to read. There are a lot of folks that recommended this book. These people were enjoying reading this book. In case you did not have enough space to deliver this book you can buy typically the e-book. You can m0ore very easily to read this book from a smart phone. The price is not very costly but this book features high quality.

Peggy Gillman:

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