



Disciplining Girls: Understanding the Origins of the Classic Orphan Girl Story

Joe Sutliff Sanders

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At the heart of some of the most beloved children's novels is a passionate discussion about discipline, love, and the changing role of girls in the twentieth century. Joe Sutliff Sanders traces this debate as it began in the sentimental tales of the mid-nineteenth century and continued in the classic orphan girl novels of Louisa May Alcott, Frances Hodgson Burnett, L. M. Montgomery, and other writers still popular today.

Domestic novels published between 1850 and 1880 argued that a discipline that emphasized love was the most effective and moral form. These were the first best sellers in American fiction, and by reimagining discipline as a technique of the heart rather than of the whip they ensured their protagonists a secure, if limited, claim on power. This same ideal was adapted by women authors in the early twentieth century, who transformed the sentimental motifs of domestic novels into the orphan girl story made popular in such novels as *Anne of Green Gables* and *Pollyanna*.

Through close readings of nine of the most influential orphan girl novels, Sanders provides a seamless historical narrative of American children's literature and gender from 1850 until 1923. He follows his insightful literary analysis with chapters on sympathy and motherhood, two themes central to both American and children's literature, and concludes with a discussion of contemporary ideas about discipline, abuse, and gender.

Disciplining Girls writes an important chapter in the history of American, women's, and children's literature, enriching previous work about the history of discipline in America.

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