

**Off to School! an analysis of the role,
purpose, and context of Elinor M Brent-Dyer's
Chalet School within the genre of schoolgirl
fiction between the wars.**

By Ruth A Jump

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Chapter One

**Introduction – the historical context of interwar
schoolgirl fiction**

Introduction – the historical context of interwar schoolgirl fiction

Elinor M Brent-Dyer wrote 58 Chalet School books, between 1926 and 1970 (the last title was published posthumously), as well as 38 other novels, most of which were also aimed at the schoolgirl market. Schoolgirl fiction in this period is a very specific genre, which was at the peak of its popularity in the 1920s and 1930s. This study seeks to explore the role and purpose of these books against the socio-historical backdrop of the period, one of great change and uncertainty, particularly for women. Brent-Dyer's fiction represents a snapshot of how girls were being addressed by literature at the time, through which we can seek to understand how girls, and the women who wrote for them, made sense of their world.

The period between 1918 and 1939 is bordered by two lengthy wars, both politically significant enough to warrant the title "World War" to subsequent commentators. The relatively brief intervening period, barely a generation, is almost entirely defined by these two conflicts. For the whole of that period, people viewed their personal histories as segmented, into "before the war" and "since the war". Towards the end of that period, the horrors of one war informed the dread of another, as Chamberlain tried desperately to diffuse the political ramifications of what had gone before, and ultimately, failed. However, it was also the period in history when women gained the vote for the first time, and when the battle for women's rights made more progress than at any other time. This chapter examines the diversity of women's fears, aspirations and influences in this period, in order to establish the context within which we can understand Elinor Brent-Dyer's Chalet School.

The impact of World War I is perhaps best described by Dora Russell, during an interview with Dale Spender.

'It's almost impossible to explain to anyone who didn't experience it, what it was like before 1914,' she said. 'We were leaving behind the Victorian era and were convinced that everything would go on, getting better and better. We couldn't see, and we wouldn't have been able to comprehend, what was coming. That

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enormous crash and carnage. It could never have been visualised, and when it came, it changed us all profoundly and probably permanently. We no longer trusted. We no longer had faith in authority.’¹

When it first broke out, the country responded to the war with a reasonable degree of enthusiasm. This was a generation that had been brought up to know its duty, and to give accordingly. The war was expected to be “over by Christmas”, and women, particularly middle- and upper-class women, threw themselves into the business of war. Depending on means, and presumably upon individual talent, they “organized sewing guilds, raised funds to send parcels to the soldiers or prisoners-of-war, arranged entertainments for the wounded, and promoted endless flag days for war objects... When all else failed they knitted socks and mufflers for the men at the front, or as Caroline Playne put it: ‘the great era of knitting set in; men should fight, but women should knit.’”² There was little indication, at the beginning, that there would follow four long, weary years of mechanised warfare, which would decimate a generation of young men. A little of the bitterness of a lost innocence can be found in Dora Russell’s comments on the subject, and a hint that if she had known at the beginning what she knew at the end, she might have taken an entirely different approach to the war.

Up to this point, the Suffragettes had been engaged in a campaign of “militant” demands for the vote. The militant strategy was considered unpatriotic in the face of national crisis, and so was dropped by the key women’s suffrage societies. As Cheryl Law has pointed out, however, it was a complicated time. Whilst the suffrage movement is frequently described as

¹ Spender, Dale, *There’s Always Been A Women’s Movement This Century*, (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 89.

² Horn, Pamela, *Women in the 1920s*, (Stroud: Alex Sutton Publishing, 1995), 4.

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having “stepped down for the war effort”, the movement was actually responding to the new political climate of war. The war brought them to a shift in strategy, but not a real shift in philosophy. The priorities were fiercely contested, and varied significantly across the movement, but any real reduction in the commitment to women’s suffrage would have been a betrayal of the previous fifty years of fighting, and of the women who had fought, and in some cases died.³ Instead, the majority of the Suffragettes settled on a strategy of making themselves as useful as they could possibly be, to thereby assert their worth, and their deserving of the privilege of the franchise. They took up a place in the “public sphere” of British society, demanding a voice on government committees, and campaigning for fair wages and conditions in factories, and they were keen for their work to be recognised as supporting the original demand, for the benefit of the war effort. This did, of course, mean that they frequently found themselves opposing the government, in their effort to support it.

The war made new demands on most women, but it also presented new opportunities for many, most particularly in the field of employment. By July 1918, the number of women employed in Britain had increased by 891,000⁴, and when the war ended, the expectation was that women would step back from the workforce, to make way for the returning males. Horn tells us that:

When peace came there was a wish among the majority of women in all classes of society to put the sorrows and fears of the preceding four years behind them and to return to their pre-war way of life. Some, admittedly, lamented the loss

³ Law, Cheryl, *Suffrage and Power: The Women’s Movement, 1918-1928* (I B Tauris: London, 1997), 13.

⁴ Woollacott, Angela, “Maternalism, Professionalism and Industrial Welfare Supervisors in World War I Britain”, *Women’s History Review*, Volume 3, Number 1 (1994), 32.

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of opportunity to exercise their abilities and skills in the way they had done between 1914 and 1918, but most desired only to resume their customary daily round.⁵

Whilst it is certainly true that the overwhelming feeling across the nation, at the end of the war, was of intense relief, since now, at least, life could return to normal, Horn underestimates the effect of wartime freedoms upon the expectations of women, and the great sense of frustration which this expectation engendered in some.

Female unemployment soared shortly after the war, as women were dismissed or bullied from jobs in favour of the returning servicemen, and gradually, as the decade of the 1920s became established, the apparent gains of the war disintegrated, and the employment of women was sidelined. Whereas by the end of the war, 40 per cent of the female workforce was married⁶, during the twenties, employers started to reintroduce "The Marriage Bar", particularly in the case of local council workers. Female employees were routinely dismissed upon marriage, and the women's movement was outraged, but they fought the move without noticeable effect.⁷

At the same time, the realisation was beginning to dawn upon middle-class men that they could not afford to support their unmarried daughters and sisters indefinitely. Since the war, females over the age of twelve now outnumbered males by 1.7 million, with the discrepancy

⁵ Horn, Pamela, *Women in the 1920s*, (Stroud: Alex Sutton Publishing, 1995), 25.

⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

⁷ Law, Cheryl, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement, 1918-1928* (I B Tauris: London, 1997), 85.

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most concentrated in the 20 to 35 age bracket.⁸ There were simply too many single middle-class women for the number of men available to support them. Taxes were rising, investment income was falling, and salaries were unable to make up the shortfall.⁹ As the statistics made it likely that many single women would remain unmarried, an aging generation of spinsters was obliged to look for new means of support.

In the worst situations, women found themselves equipped and trained for nothing, and moved from drawing room to kitchen, as a waitress, or domestic servant. Others found a talent for writing, and turned to pursue literature or journalism. Some women threw respectability to the winds, and went on the stage, a horrifying prospect to most middle- and upper-class parents. With a little capital behind her, a woman might manage to make something of a small commercial venture, such as a hat shop, or a dress shop.¹⁰

Middle-class women who managed to gain an independent income for themselves found it to be a great source of self-esteem, and of emancipation from the dictation of parents and brothers. Interestingly, working-class women regarded work in precisely opposite terms. Most regarded it as a sign of emancipation, and of their improved social status, when they could stop working for money, and live entirely on the wages of their husbands.¹¹ Freedom, it would appear, can only be evaluated with reference to that which imprisoned one in the first place. Working-class women were bound by the requirement to work long and difficult hours for enough money to survive, and so were freed by the opportunity to stay at home

⁸ Horn, Pamela, *Women in the 1920s*, (Stroud: Alex Sutton Publishing, 1995), 20.

⁹ *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 33-34, 56.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 98.

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and take care of their families. Middle-class women were bound by their financial dependence upon family, and so were freed by the opportunity to be paid for their work.

In a great many cases, however, the education of women was insufficient to the new requirement for self-support. During the war, illiteracy was still a significant problem among working class women, some of whom struggled to apply for the separation allowance to which they were entitled.¹² Whilst most middle- and upper-class women could read and write, their education was frequently patchy, at best.

Rebecca West's education was typical of its type. She gained a scholarship to the George Watson's Ladies College in Edinburgh, and she describes it most unfavourably:

"My fellow pupils and I were not deterred from preparing to earn our livings, because it was evident that for the most part our parents would refuse to support us in idleness; but it was tactfully suggested to us that, rather than attempt to storm the world by genius and personality, we had better court it by conformity to convention... Moral passions were discouraged and there was engendered in the girls a habit of compromise and avoiding decisions. Power does not lie that way."¹³

West regards it as fortunate that her education was cut short at the age of fifteen, since she considers its purpose as being to rob her of all power and independence as a woman, and to turn her into an accepting and submissive subordinate. Education in her experience had little

¹² *Ibid*, 1.

¹³ West, Rebecca, *The Clarion*, 14 February 1913, quote in Spender, Dale, *There's Always Been A Women's Movement This Century*, (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 51-52.

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to do with stretching her understanding, her intellect, and her investigative powers, and was rather more concerned with restricting those things to within very limited boundaries.

Nor was she alone. The pursuit of academic excellence was frequently the last consideration when the education of girls was being decided. Horn asserts that for many middle-class parents (interestingly, she attributes the decision to middle-class *mothers*), the social status of the school was much more significant than its academic status, “in order that they might learn ladylike behaviour and associate with a ‘nice class’ of girl”.¹⁴

Where parents were of professional occupation, there were more likely to seek an academic education for their daughters, and in these cases, a school might be chosen based upon its academic record. Such schools tended to be overtly focussed on academic development, to the exclusion of all domestic subjects, and girls would be channelled into a very limited range of career options: ideally, university was the next step; for some girls, teacher training college would be considered suitable. Other options were neither encouraged nor supported, and girls who might choose instead to take entrance examinations for the Civil Service, for example, found themselves with little guidance or advice from the school.¹⁵

Where education was given by means of a governess, as happened in most upper-class households, and certain middle-class ones, too, the academic content could be still weaker. Horn refers to one example, where a governess is employed almost entirely for her capacity to maintain discipline, and to keep the children as far from their parents as possible. The

¹⁴ Horn, Pamela, *Women in the 1920s*, (Stroud: Alex Sutton Publishing, 1995), 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 52.

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academic qualifications of the woman for the post were almost non-existent, and her charges were taught very little, with no mathematics finding its way onto the curriculum at all.¹⁶

With this state of affairs, marriage remained the most desirable and realistic “career” for most girls in the inter-war period, but the divorce rate was also beginning to soar. Whilst it did not come close to the statistics surrounding modern marriage and divorce, the number of marriages ending in divorce did leap significantly shortly after the war, particularly amongst the upper-classes, whose fear of scandal was less firmly embedded than with the more insecure middle-classes. This was partly the result of a relaxation of the divorce laws at the time, but Horn sees the pressures of the war itself as the most important factor.

After the ‘emotional urgency’ of marrying a man who might be killed in a few weeks, the fact that so many bridegrooms came back created unforeseen difficulties...¹⁷

In short, wartime couples found great difficulty in looking beyond the immediate dangers to a life after the war, and when it came, many found themselves unable or unwilling to continue in their marriages.

The 1920s was a period well before the equality of the status of women was secured by law, in the way it is today. Within weeks of the end of the war, the government saw fit to grant the first women the vote, ostensibly in recognition of their contribution to the war effort. However, there was still significant opposition to the move, and when the offer came, it was on far from equal terms with those of the male electorate.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 41.

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The act was only to give women over 30 the vote, subject to a property qualification and a sizeable number of other restrictions which became the subject of the movement's continued suffrage struggle throughout the post-war decade.¹⁸

The women's movement accepted the offer, because it at least enshrined in law the right of women to vote, and thereby set the precedent upon which future legislation could rest. It was far from unqualified support, however, and the churlishness of the offer reflected the view that many men took of the status of the women around them.

The great number of restrictions applying to women, when they were first granted the vote, were, in Law's opinion, "parliament's way of ensuring that the male electorate was not 'swamped' by women voters: the prevalent fear being that if all women had the vote at twenty-one, they would outnumber the men by over 2 million and institute some kind of female rule." In addition, "'girls' of twenty-one were not regarded as being responsible enough for the exacting task of citizenship. It was hoped, in some quarters, that by making marriage one of the methods of entitlement, control of the women's vote would be achieved via their more stable partners. In this way erratic female behaviour might be minimised at the ballot box."¹⁹ The underlying hope would appear to be that the female electorate could be balanced by the good sense of the male electorate, or controlled by the good sense of her husband. The risk of that for which young, passionate, *single* girls might choose to vote, simply could not be afforded.

¹⁸ Law, Cheryl, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement, 1918-1928* (I B Tauris: London, 1997), 36.

¹⁹ Law, Cheryl, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement, 1918-1928* (I B Tauris: London, 1997), 183.

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A woman's place was still seen by many men as being in the home. Any attempt by a woman to take on a public role, be that a professional post, or a political stance, would be met with questions over her capability, combined with questions over the moral appropriateness of the attempt.

Women who sought professional careers either side of the turn of the century faced scepticism about their abilities, questions about their dress and manner as professionals, doubts about their capability to travel and speak in public, and outright hostility on the grounds that they were ignoring their sacred and patriotic duties as mothers.²⁰

Woollacott goes on to identify maternity as the overriding justification for any female activity, and as such, she sees it as in direct conflict with any kind of professionalism. It was possible for women to balance the two things, but most did not manage the conflict with much success.

Dale Spender observes that Rebecca West saw her role as a member of staff at the *The Freewoman*, a particularly radical feminist publication, as to undermine the perceived identity of women. In order to demonstrate that they were quite capable of doing so, the magazine addressed every unpleasant and/or serious matter that they could think of.

"... West later wrote that the 'greatest service that that paper did its country was its unblushingness', for 'it mentions venereal disease loudly and clearly and repeatedly and in the worst possible taste' and therefore 'by its candour did an immense service to the world by shattering, as nothing else would, as not the

²⁰ Woollacott, Angela, "Maternalism, Professionalism and Industrial Welfare Supervisors in World War I Britain", *Women's History Review*, Volume 3, Number 1 (1994), 32.

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mere cries of intention towards independence had ever done, the romantic conception of women'.²¹

The 1920s and 1930s were a complicated time for women. It was a time of recovery, from the effects of the worst war of all time. It was a time of emancipation, financially, socially and politically, but also of restriction, financially, socially and politically. It was a time when the separation between rich and poor was perhaps at its highest. It was a time of overwhelming loneliness for many, of disillusionment with the wisdom of the authorities, and with human nature itself, as well as a time of optimism – the war was over, and everything possible needed to be done to prevent such a thing from ever happening again. It is against this background that Elinor M Brent-Dyer found herself writing books for girls, the new generation of women upon the future now appeared to depend.

²¹ Spender, Dale, *There's Always Been A Women's Movement This Century*, (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 47.

Chapter Two

***The School at the Chalet* – working out a new
femininity**

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Female role models – today and for the future

More than in most adult fiction, it is a feature of children's literature that the action follows a single key character. The narrative is generally presented to the reader from the perspective of this character, even if the authorial voice itself takes the role of third-person narrator. Consequently, the opinions and ideas presented by this character take on a particular importance, since they are the opinions and ideas that the reader is encouraged to share. Given the heightened didacticism of children's fiction, that character can also be seen as a role model, whom the reader is invited to emulate.

However, the task of identifying this protagonist in *The School at the Chalet*, is not as straightforward as one might immediately assume. The book is aimed at children, and it is easy enough to identify the character of Joey as the most significant of the child-characters. The book maps her growth and development into a vibrant, healthy girl, from the rather lonely, sickly child of the beginning of the text. The new friends, the location, and the school itself all contribute to the broadening of her horizons, and strengthening of her health. In subsequent books, Joey is undoubtedly the central character, and remains so at least until her leaving school. However, in this book, Madge's role is almost as prominent, and in the earlier part at least, it is from Madge's perspective that the reader is introduced to the people, places, and circumstances of the novel.

Madge is an unlikely lead, in a book of this type. In *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of "Classic" Stories for Girls*, Shirley Foster and Judy Simons hold up Angela Brazil's *The Madcap of the School* as the first and originating text of the genre, and in doing so, they demonstrate that it rests on certain key devices: the protagonist is a young, vibrant, tomboyish, middle class girl, aged between eleven and eighteen, and the action focuses on

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her life at school, preferably, but not necessarily, boarding school.²² By this definition, Joey is clearly the lead character, and a reader with previous experience of the genre is likely to interpret the book in this way. Nevertheless, Madge is quite a young heroine, only twenty-four when the action opens – twenty-four may seem very old indeed, to a fourteen-year-old reader, but Madge is presented as little more than a girl herself: “Rien à déclarer!” replied Madge firmly, with one eye on her two charges. For all her self-confidence, she suddenly felt very young to be the sole guardian of two girls of twelve and fourteen.”²³

Throughout the first part of the book, situations are viewed from Madge’s perspective, rather than from Joey’s. The adventure, of taking her young sister to Austria and starting a school there, with little concrete evidence of a demand for such a school, and few friends when she gets there, is Madge’s adventure. Joey is no more than the dependent child whom she must bring along. Whilst it is certainly true that without Joey, Madge would have no need to start a school at all, the idea is entirely her own. It is only as the book gets underway that Joey becomes a character in her own right, and begins to gradually steal the limelight from Madge.

The character of Joey is much more the traditional schoolgirl heroine. She is a high-spirited twelve-year-old, orphaned since she was a tiny baby, and at the start of the novel, thrust into an entirely new lifestyle, so to grow and develop as a result. It is important to note, however, that for Joey to be orphaned, Madge, too, must be orphaned. This is, of course,

²² Foster, S and Simons, J, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 192.

²³ Brent-Dyer, Elinor M, *The School at the Chalet*, (London: Chambers, 1926), 31. All future page references are to this edition, and are included in parenthesis in the text.

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necessary to the narrative – the girls are sisters, and the story would make little sense if one were orphaned and one not. However, this situation is also a literary necessity. It contributes to the clear parallel to be drawn between Madge, the adult role model, and Joey, the child role model. They are positioned as two points on the same time-line, the only real difference between them being their age.

It would appear that one exemplar is insufficient. It is not enough to demonstrate to the reader how to be as a twelve-year-old – all ambiguity must be removed, by demonstrating, too, the adult goal to which she must work. Likewise, the goal itself, as shown in the character of Madge, leaves too much open to question – it is not enough to see the destination, the reader must also see how to get there, through the character of Joey. The environment is being tightly controlled, allowing the girl reader little room to project her own ideas or aspirations onto the ideal. She cannot develop the Joey role model into anything undesirable, because its development is also exhibited for her. Her childhood, and her adulthood, are both being dictated to her, by the text.

Kimberley Reynolds highlights this degree of control as being integral to the purpose of schoolgirl fiction in the early part of the century. She points out that as the genre emerged, the social anxiety concerning what girls did read seemed to reduce, and she concludes that “the key to this tolerance can be located in the success of the new girls’ fiction in creating a reader who could be relied upon to read – and probably to select – safely.”²⁴ She goes on to say that the tight controlling of girls’ positions in relation to these purpose-written texts helped to form in a them a view of the world, that influenced their perceptions of other, less

²⁴ Reynolds, Kimberley, *Girls Only? Gender and Popular Children’s Fiction in Britain, 1880-1910*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 100.

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well controlled books. A much better long-term solution, then, than trying to control what girls read, was to teach them how to think about what they read. Once that was achieved, it no longer mattered what they chose to read, because they could be trusted to judge it according to pre-ordained standards.

The characters of Joey and Madge, then, have a particular purpose: they are created to guide girls in the creation of that world-view. Once the reader has understood and internalised the idea that she should become like Joey, and ultimately like Madge, her response to other, perhaps less "suitable" books has been conditioned. She will interpret those books in the way that she expects Joey would interpret them. Neither is it necessary that books be the only recipient of this form of conditioned judgement; when the girl is presented with people and situations of many different types, she can be relied upon to judge it according to the standards of Joey and Madge, for those standards have been absorbed into her moral frame of reference.

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The absence of parents is a useful and much-utilised plot device in schoolgirl literature²⁵, and in children's fiction, generally. Child-characters can be released from the constraints of family life, if parents are removed from the equation, and can therefore be allowed to engage in more exciting activities, making for more thrilling reading for the child-audience. However, it is also true that this parental absence represents a tension in the anxieties of almost every child: the tension between the desire for freedom from parental control, and the fear of loss and abandonment that would inevitably come with that freedom. It is hardly surprising to learn that children's fiction has always been preoccupied with this most fundamental concern, from *Peter Pan* to *Harry Potter*. Through the medium of fiction, children are allowed the opportunity to experience both extremes of that tension. Specifically, Joey and Madge share an adventure abroad, far from their commitments to family and society, in an enclosed and relaxed environment. This is their freedom, and is a great deal removed from the social niceties of their English home. It is true that for Joey, at least, her mother-figure has come

²⁵ In Dorita Fairlie Bruce's *The Senior Prefect* (later published as *Dimsie Goes To School*), the ten-year-old Dimsie has lost her mother rather more literally – she ran away from home in the midst of a nervous breakdown, which is rather less common within the genre. In addition, Grizel of the Chalet School has lost her mother, Juliet is abandoned by her parents during the course of *The School at the Chalet* (and, poetically, is orphaned by the end of the book anyway), and the lead characters of Elsie J Oxenham's Abbey books, Joy and Joan Shirley, are cousins with only one parent between them. This trend is bound to reflect the greater likelihood of a child losing one or both parents in this period, through less reliable medical practices, or as a result of World War I. However, it should also be regarded as a plot device: the absence of parents frees a child-character to have more independent adventures than they otherwise might.

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to share the adventure with her, but Madge's position also betrays the isolation of that adventure. When things go wrong, she is obliged to turn to the parents of her Austrian pupils for this kind of support. Just as the presence of Frau Mensch and Frau Marani in the sick room can be seen as maternal, so the worldly-wise advice of Herr Marani, when Madge finds herself responsible for an abandoned teenager, can be seen as paternal.

The absence of father figures for our protagonists is more starkly apparent than the absence of mother figures. Neither girl has any permanent figure in the "father" role. Dick does try to take some disciplinary interest in Joey, at the beginning of the book, but it is a half-hearted attempt, at best, and his continued absence in India makes his role of little consequence for the majority of the time.

Male characters rarely feature in most schoolgirl fiction, and much has been made of the creation of an entirely female world, where female characters can play out their ambitions for careers, academic achievement, leadership positions, and physical prowess, unencumbered by the comparison with males, and uninhibited by male authority. As Foster and Simons recognised in their study of Angela Brazil's *The Madcap of the School*:

Within the enclosed territory of Marlowe Grange, the setting for *The Madcap of the School*, girls and women are able to adopt positions of authority that were relatively inaccessible to them in the outside world. Through focus on sport and extra-mural activities (both denied Brazil in her own schooldays), they can realize qualities of leadership and initiative that allow them to engage in heroic action and that inspire the admiration of their peer group. The new educational opportunities themselves are thus seen as directly responsible for encouraging a perception of self that revises the conventional female models. Moreover, in Brazil's recognition of adolescence as a formative stage of development, girl

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characters can experiment with female identities in an environment of licence that was frequently withheld from them in real life.²⁶

The Chalet School is such an enclosed world, almost exclusively female, and separate, as with other schools. The social taboos, which restricted the pursuit of female ambition in society at the time, have been sidestepped. Roles of leadership and public speaking have become acceptable, because the audience is also entirely female. Demonstrations of sporting success are permitted, as long as those demonstrations are measured against and viewed by a female community. Careers and academic talent can be pursued, because a career in a girls' school poses no threat to the male workforce.

However, the Chalet School is also separated in a more physical way – the world of the Chalet School can be expanded to include the village, the valley, even the country of Austria, because the environment remains entirely removed from English life and expectations. That the local society does not operate according to the rules and conventions of English middle-class expectations, allows the author to open up her world to a broader range of possibilities. As a result, relationships between male and female characters can be portrayed in a more relaxed setting, and it is because of this that more male characters feature in *The School at the Chalet* than in most books of its kind. The role of those characters will be considered more deeply, later in the chapter.

²⁶ Foster, S and Simons, J, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 195.

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Flights of fancy and imaginative excess

The medium of fiction is entirely dependent upon the imaginative capabilities of both the reader and the author. Without either, fiction would cease to function as such, so the way in which imagination is addressed within a work of fiction is significant. It is noteworthy, therefore, that Madge's role as the responsible adult seems to include the routine squashing of any flights of fancy in which her young companions may choose to indulge. For example, when Joey declares that "éclairs, I could go on eating for ever!" Madge feels the need to add "And beautifully sick you would be," as if there was a serious risk of Joey's attempting to do so (40). Similarly, when the party arrives in Innsbrück, Madge goes to buy train tickets for the party, and as she is counting her change, Joey comments "Hullo, Madge! Got them all right? Doesn't it feel grand to count in hundreds and thousands?"(51) Madge's response that it is no more than a nuisance, gives the reader the same sense of having been snubbed. In both cases, Joey commits the crime of allowing her excitement and imagination to come to the fore, and rather than laughing with her Madge sees fit to squash the inclination to get carried away. It is Joey's imagination which must be controlled, and the reader is expected to side with Madge, the responsible adult whom we trust. An overactive imagination, it seems, is a bad thing in itself, and must be checked at every opportunity. The female role model is practical and down-to-earth, and does not allow her imagination to distract her from her duty to perform the job at hand.

This is a stern message indeed for the girl reader; and in fact, the message that the text passes back to the author is not unremarkable. The idea that imagination, of all things, should be dismissed in this way, and in a work of fiction, is a significant contradiction. Without the imaginative inclination of the reader, there would be no market for Brent-Dyer's books – and whilst she could not know it at the time of writing, the Chalet School series would support Brent-Dyer financially for the rest of her life. Even more significantly, it is the imaginative inclination of the author that makes the existence of the text possible. At best,

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this is an admonition to the author to keep that imagination firmly under control, within the limited confines of her fiction, rather than to allow it free reign in all aspects of life. Narrative fiction becomes an outlet, by which the imaginations of author and reader can be indulged, whilst justifying itself through the text's criticism of that indulgence. At worst, there is an acute tension between the inescapable nature of the author's imaginative creativity, and the firm belief that she presents in the text, that such imaginative excesses are both extravagant and self-indulgent. Since the traditionally self-sacrificial view of feminine duty was tightly bound up with responsibilities to family and home, and precluded extravagant self-indulgence, the implication is also that to surrender to one's imagination is a form of personal greed, and fundamentally unfeminine. Just as her insatiable appetite for chocolate éclairs cannot be allowed to supersede, so Joey's desire to indulge her imagination must be checked and controlled.

In the post-war environment of 1920s Europe, to advocate the rejection of self in the interests of duty is significant. In many quarters, Edwardian ideas of duty had been undermined by the war.²⁷ *The School at the Chalet* could therefore be interpreted as taking an old-fashioned line, which is no longer relevant to the changed society, and which conceals a naïve refusal to accept the reality of the effects of the War.

The more convincing possibility, however, is that Brent-Dyer took this line for precisely opposite reasons. Whilst it is true that the rhetoric of the state surrounding the war was concerned with the duty of every man to defend his country²⁸, it is also true that many young

²⁷ Spender, Dale, *There's Always Been A Women's Movement This Century*, (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 89.

²⁸ Horn, Pamela, *Women in the 1920s*, (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1995), 4.

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men were enticed by the romantic appeal of war. The drama, the excitement, and the heroism of fighting for ones country, abroad, was what attracted so many soldiers to join up, voluntarily²⁹, and these attractions bear a close relationship to the flights of fancy for which Joey is admonished in the text. It seems more likely that the author was condemning the human tendency to be carried along by imagination, to the exclusion of the mundane facts of real life, be they death, destruction and mechanised warfare, or the inevitable effects of eating one too many chocolate éclairs.

This latter idea is supported by the work of Alison Light, in her investigation of Agatha Christie's detective fiction. Among other things, she points out that Christie's female characters are "the antithesis" of the Edwardian "fluttering female", as if she has rejected the entire pre-war definition of femininity.

We can also recognise Christie's idiom as historically representative of that generation of respectable women who seemed to be incapable of speaking the language of romance after the trauma of war. It is as though reticence was one way of breaking that connection between femininity and the private world of feeling and spirituality, a femininity which had been the disastrous complement to that heroic masculinity destroyed in the war: without the one, the other made little sense; worse still, it might be accompanied by feelings of guilt, embarrassment and grief.³⁰

²⁹ Spender, Dale, *There's Always Been A Women's Movement This Century*, (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 89.

³⁰ Light, Alison, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 108.

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Within the world of the novel, of course, Joey is just a child. She is old enough to be aware of the war, but not old enough to remember the impact at the time, or to be able to compare how life and attitudes had changed since the pre-war era. Nevertheless, the author (aged 33 at the time of publication, in 1926) is old enough to remember, and she appears to project that knowledge onto Madge, as the older character. Pre-war femininity was caught up with Light's "fluttering" sense of romance and imaginative diversion from the harsh realities of life. Above all else, Joey must be trained not to make the same mistake, even if this is against every inclination of the personality that the author has given her.

That is not to say that Joey's personality is entirely dismissed by the way it is treated in the text. In much of the early part of the book, Joey is contrasted with the less sympathetically-drawn Grizel. In Paris, Madge observes that Joey is dreamy, romantic, and attracted to the art, literature and history of the city, whereas Grizel, "now that her first wonder was over, so obviously took all that side of it for granted, and devoted herself to its life and people." (36) Joey's imaginative streak is contrasted with Grizel's matter-of-fact approach. Both traits are tempered, however: Joey compensates for her imagination, by being sympathetic, warm, friendly, "maternal" (71), and rarely unkind; balanced against the advantages of her more down-to-earth view, Grizel is presented as a hard-hearted girl, self-absorbed, and unlikely to be moved by the emotions of others, since "... neither Grizel nor Jo wanted to leave her out of things, but they had a trick of referring to their past good times together which had the effect of making the little French girl feel that she was not wanted. Perhaps Grizel was the worst offender in this way. It was the natural reaction from the effects of her home-life." (69)

Grizel lacks Joey's selflessness and sensitivity. She is practical, but unemotional. Although Joey is criticised from time to time for being excessively "dreamy" and imaginative, it is her kindness, sensitivity, and delight in storytelling that are given the authorial approval.

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The message is a little ambiguous, then. Light describes Christie's heroines as "sensible and unassuming" women, "self-reliant and quietly efficient... with an even-tempered common sense and competence", they "sacrifice the romantic in favour of the domestic".³¹ This description seems to fit Grizel much more closely than it does Joey, and Grizel's character is presented as rather more of a warning to the reader, than as a role model. Nothing could speak more of traditional femininity than the description of Joey as "maternal". Brent-Dyer, it seems, still retains a certain respect for more traditional views of femininity, despite their decreasing popularity in other parts of the literary community.

Female beauty and suitable femininity

Since we have recognised the importance of role models in all children's fiction, and have identified the dual role that Madge and Joey play in this respect, it is necessary that we consider the nature of those role models. By understanding the characters that girls were expected to emulate, we can begin to understand what was expected of the girls themselves.

When Madge is first introduced, at the beginning of *The School at the Chalet*, she appears as a cheery, attractive person. Brent-Dyer emphasises her "merry laugh", and the uninhibited way in which she "threw back her head" to give way to that laugh (9).

Not pretty in the strict sense of the word, yet Madge Bettany was good to look at. She was slight to the verge of thinness, with a well-poised head covered by a mop of curly dark-brown hair. Her eyes were dark brown too – the colour of old brown sherry – and were shaded by long, upcurling, black lashes. Dark eyes and hair presupposed an olive complexion, but there, Madge had deserted the tradition of the Bettany women, and her skin showed the wonderful Saxon

³¹ *Ibid.*

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fairness of her mother's family. Her mouth was wide, but with well-cut lips, and her slender figure was as erect as a young poplar. (9-10)

The description is vivid, and the author seems keen to point out the elements that remind one of a traditional heroine: the incongruously fair skin, the "poise" of her head, and the strength of her posture. The most peculiar statement in this passage, from the perspective of the reader, is in the opening phrase. *Madge is not pretty*. It is not easy for the reader to interpret quite what this means, since Madge *is* "good to look at", and the long eyelashes and fair skin do suggest a traditional idea of prettiness. It is not so much that Madge is not pretty, than that the author did not wish us to think of Madge as pretty. Since the rest of Madge's description is quite appealing, and the reader is invited to like Madge, it would appear that the author sees something unappealing in the traditional idea of "prettiness", and whatever connotations she sees as associated with that term. A comparison must be drawn with the sorts of characters that Brent-Dyer *will* allow to be described as "pretty". Wanda von Eschenau is introduced to the reader as "a slim, fair person" (127), and she and her sister, Marie, are shortly described by Joey, in such terms as, "What *pretties*, Gisela!" (128), and "You remember the two pretty girls like fairy princesses?" (128) Madge is good looking, but not pretty, whereas the von Eschenau girls are blonde, and beautiful.

Wanda and Marie von Eschenau remain extremely two-dimensional characters throughout the book, although Marie, at least, develops a little more as the series progresses. The message to the reader, nevertheless, is that it is better to be vaguely attractive, with an interesting personality, and strength of character, than superlatively beautiful, but dull. Madge has a certain life and vitality, both as a character on the page, and as a personality within the world of the novel, that make the author regard the word "pretty" as demeaning.

If Madge is not pretty, then Joey runs the risk of being described as ugly. Her hair is black (not blonde...), "so straight as to almost be described as lank" (15), and largely

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unmanageable. Her black eyes stand out from her white face in a way that is “startling”, hardly an adjective that denotes attractiveness. Many, perhaps even the majority, of the characters in *The School at the Chalet* are described as attractive, in one way or another, and it is a remarkable departure, that such a key character as Joey is at no point described in these terms. Again, the message to the reader is that physical attractiveness is all well and good, but the best people do not need such things – their strength of character more than compensates them for the loss.

Quite what point the author was trying to make, by separating her lead characters so firmly from any description of physical beauty, is not entirely clear. Whatever the perceived evils of such a description, they were not so significant as to affect the majority her characters, most of whom were presented as generally, as well as physically, attractive even if they were not especially exciting or charming to the reader. Beauty is not, in itself, a bad thing. In denying Joey this attractiveness, and in doggedly refusing to describe Madge as pretty, when every other adjective used makes it clear that she is, Brent-Dyer is calling upon her readership to reject any attachment to the idea of beauty. There are two opposing possibilities, in the reasons for this, which I believe to be intertwined into an ambivalent standpoint that the author never entirely resolves.

Brent-Dyer, herself a child of the rather austere late-Victorian period, seems to be seeking to preserve the purity of her readers, by focussing on the strengths of a person’s character, rather than on the strengths of her looks. One could argue that the author is promoting the “angel in the house” idea, of woman as the guardian of men’s (and consequently, society’s) moral character. Foster and Simons observe that L T Meade, writing in 1886, for an earlier generation than Brent-Dyer (writing, in fact, for Brent-Dyer’s own generation – she was born in 1893, less than ten years later, so could reasonably be expected to have read Meade’s

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fiction as a child, as an almost-contemporary schoolgirl) emphasises these values in her fiction:

Popularity and moral righteousness are incompatible here, and the book suggests that the judgement of young people is fallible and requires continual guidance. Attractive but posing a threat to fixed principles of gendered behaviour, Annie is consequently made into the protagonist of a melodramatic narrative so that her high spirits, her love of daring and her winning ways become only salutary illustrations of the 'moral weakness' she embodies.³²

It would appear that Meade's moral lessons reject not just physical beauty in favour of moral superiority, but also personal charm, and popularity. Brent-Dyer's characters are allowed that charm and popularity, without being presented as guilty of "moral weakness". Nevertheless, the rejection of beauty can be seen as a rejection of the moral temptation that beauty could present to a character, and is in keeping with a traditional view of female duty and responsible behaviour.

Conversely, Brent-Dyer can be seen as rejecting traditional femininity in her most important characters. As have seen, the Edwardian concept of the "fluttering female"³³ was losing its popularity in post-war Britain, and the idea that Joey and Madge can be charming, kind, dynamic, but not beautiful, is a creation of a new type of femininity. Brent-Dyer wants her women to be stronger and more independent than their fictional predecessors, and she

³² Foster, S and Simons, J, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 200.

³³ Light, Alison, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 108.

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encourages these traits in her characters, and consequently in her readers. However, she still sees them in terms of moral responsibility for the world around them, and ultimately, presumably, for the masculine world beyond. She is embracing the ideas of the new decade, but is unwilling to entirely release those of the pre-war era.

This ambivalence concerning those female characteristics that are considered positive within the text has been noted by Kimberley Reynolds, in the context of Victorian and Edwardian fiction for girls:

The discrepancy between the presentation of... new values, and the traditional values they actually confirm is the result of a number of factors. One of these is the general conservatism characteristic of children's literature which extends from subject matter to a concern with preserving conventional narrative strategies. Children's literature resists change at all levels.³⁴

It would appear that the uniquely protective, almost parental relationship between the producers of children's literature, and the implied reader, makes for more hesitation in accurately reflecting the changing moods and values of the time – whenever that time may be. When compared with the work of Christie, an adult novelist of the same period, Brent-Dyer shows much less willingness to discard the values of the previous generation. Just as Reynolds found in her study, the character of Joey reflects much more traditional femininity than is at first apparent.

³⁴ Reynolds, Kimberley, *Girls Only? Gender and Popular Children's Fiction in Britain, 1880-1910*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 98.

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Male beauty and suitable masculinity

Amongst male characters, the distinction between physical beauty and moral integrity is even more marked. The only man to be described by the book in terms that connote any kind of sexual attractiveness, is the villainous Captain Carrick, the father of Juliet. He is a “tall, bronzed man, with erect, soldierly bearing” (84) and is a Captain of the Indian army. He has all the combined appeals of an exotic past spent in India, the strength and valour suggested by a military background, and the more physical advantages of height, and a sun tan, implying an active, outdoor lifestyle. He is an exciting character, but quickly proves also to be untrustworthy. He is attractive, but dangerous. His attractiveness does not directly influence his villainy, but it is quite possible that the author considers him to be dangerous *because* he is attractive. Brent-Dyer is demonstrating to her readers why such men are to be avoided – an attractive man, the text tells us, will always be a dangerous one.

By contrast, Madge’s brother, Dick, is described as neither exciting nor handsome. Instead, the author chooses to use such words as “fair” and “boyish” (9), evoking a sense of pre-pubescent safety. Dick lacks Carrick’s excitement, but can therefore be trusted. Instead of sexually enticing men, readers are advised to aim for men who present themselves in an uncomplicated, brotherly manner. Nevertheless, Dick spends the vast majority of the book in India, well away from the action of the narrative. By his distance, Brent-Dyer indicates that whilst Dick is the more appropriate masculine figure, he, too, should be regarded as unattainable. It seems that girls are being offered a role model for a future husband, but at the same time, told that now is not the time – that, in essence, they are too young to consider any sexual partnership.

The types of men that are allowed close and continued proximity to the Chalet School are neither villains nor brother-figures – they are in fact the fathers of such Austrian pupils who live in the vicinity, namely Herr Mensch and Herr Marani.

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Herr Mensch is presented as large and jovial, reminiscent in many ways of the modern portrayals of Santa Claus. He is “a big, jolly man”, whose “children obviously adored him” (78). He engages in conversation with the girls, and the author describes his contributions as “serious” and “solemn” in a way that implies mockery, or condescension. He expresses great pride in his country, particularly the local area from which he comes, talks to the girls for some time about the mountains and the lake, including descriptions of their weather, their mythology, and their risks. When Grizel expresses a desire to climb the difficult and dangerous Tiernjoch, he calmly sets her aright, safe in the knowledge that his word is law.

“I want to climb the Tiernjoch,” said Grizel suddenly. “I like difficult things!”

The kindly giant – he really was almost a giant! – looked down at her with a smile. “Na-na, mein Kind! A good Mädchen will wait till there is time for a whole day and a guide. That cannot be until the summer. Then, perhaps, it may be possible. But the little expedition up the Mondscheinspitze can be made on a Saturday, and we will take the herdsman some tobacco, and drink of their milk, which is very rich with cream, and so come back. To climb the Tiernjoch one must start very early in the morning before the sun has risen, and climb for six – eight hours before one reaches the summit. But the Mondscheinspitze, that is a nice little climb.” (81)

Herr Mensch clearly means to explain why the Tiernjoch is not an option for an inexperienced fourteen-year-old girl, and thereby settle the matter. His constant references to the Mondscheinspitze as a “little expedition” and a “nice little climb”, however, only manage to patronise Grizel, and to some extent, the reader. It is little surprise to the reader when Grizel does attempt to climb the Tiernjoch, but Herr Mensch clearly does not anticipate his opinion being disregarded in such a way. He expects to be obeyed, and does not consider the alternative (85).

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The character of Herr Marani is little different to that of Herr Mensch. He is less big, physically, and arguably, he displays a little more wisdom and sensitivity in dealing with the egos of adolescent girls, but he, too, is a gentle, peace-loving Austrian, devoted to his family, and insistent upon obedience. His particular sense of honour is used to show up the dishonour of Captain Carrick's behaviour.

Herr Marani swore deeply in German when he had finished reading this heartless letter. Then, realising that Madge could understand him, he apologised hastily.

"I crave your pardon, Fräulein. It is the callous impudence of this man! He is not worthy of the name of either "man" or "father!" That poor child, to be abandoned thus!" (168-169)

Cleverly, he demonstrates his own sense of honour, by reacting to Captain Carrick with such hostility – "real" men do not behave in this way. Then, almost immediately, he reinforces his position, by apologising to Madge for his language. Clearly, whatever the circumstances, it does not do to swear before a lady. In the light of Carrick's revelation, it seems little short of comical to be so concerned about language. Yet, just as the reader has compared Herr Marani with Carrick once, one can hardly help comparing them again, and knowing, almost instinctively, that Carrick would never have such qualms about swearing in front of Madge.

The men to whom the girls of the Chalet School are most consistently exposed are gentle, strong, kind, firm, and not remotely attractive. Indeed, they are almost entirely asexual, and consequently, they are safe. Girls are being advised not to attach particular value to their own beauty, and not to be carried away by the attractions of handsome men. This relates to Reynolds' earlier point about training girls to read and select reading matter appropriately: clear guidance is offered, here, on the sorts of men with whom girls may be allowed to

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fraternise, and this can be seen a form of training, which allows them to be trusted to make acceptable decisions when outside of the tightly controlled environment of the home.³⁵

Male gaze and females as property

The tension between the largely female environment, and the potentially damaging nature of the masculine world, is illustrated through Madge's adamant refusal to allow an American film-maker to shoot footage of the Chalet girls at play. The reader is not party to the interview between the headmistress and Mr Sindon, but we are told that he "was not so thick-skinned that he could not feel the disdain in Miss Bettany's icy voice when she had refused his suggestion..." (118) When compared with the "direct simplicity which was so much a part of her charm" (32) that Madge displays for the slightly over-familiar Yorkshire man whom they meet in the train to Paris, it seems that whatever qualification entitled the self-made Bradford wool manufacturer to her open friendliness, Mr Sindon did not possess it.

The reader is not told, precisely, what the offending factor might have been. One possibility is that of Mr Sindon's nationality, and the perceived vulgarity of all Americans. It is not uncommon for books of this genre to demonise the American lifestyle as vulgar and inappropriate.³⁶ However, this seems to be the least likely explanation in this case.

Throughout the series, Brent-Dyer brings a variety of American characters into the Chalet School, and whilst it is true that some descend into caricature, for at least a part of the

³⁵ Reynolds, Kimberley, *Girls Only? Gender and Popular Children's Fiction in Britain, 1880-1910*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 100.

³⁶ Examples include *Strangers at the Abbey*, by Elsie J Oxenham, and Zerelda in *Third Year at Malory Towers*, by Enid Blyton.

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time³⁷, most do not, and progress through the school with no more than passing references to their nationality.

A more likely cause is his occupation as a film-maker, and the perceived vulgarity of the cinema in general. We saw in Chapter One how horrifying the middle and upper class community found the idea of a daughter acting in the theatre. The theatre was, at least, an age-old profession – cinema was an extremely new medium when Brent-Dyer wrote *The School at the Chalet*, and it brought with it the unease of knowing that one might be viewed, not just by those who were present, but by any number of audiences, anywhere in the modern world, at any point in the future. If the theatre lacked respectability, then the cinema was very much its vulgar younger cousin.

Madge does not appear to have entertained the thought of featuring the Chalet School in a film for a moment, and the author is quite certain that the idea is an appalling one.

“It’s a shame!” cried Juliet, to a select gathering on the afternoon of the day on which she learned of her headmistress’s decision. “Why couldn’t we be filmed?”

³⁷ Most notable is Cornelia Flower, who enters the series in book four, *Head Girl at the Chalet School*. Cornelia is presented as a well-rounded, three-dimensional character, with an unorthodox sense of mischief, and personal problems mostly stemming from the early death of her mother. However, Brent-Dyer also gives her an unfortunate propensity for extraordinary slang, a favourite expression of vexation being “Why, you rubber-necked, four-flusher!” There is little information to support the theory that affluent, privately educated American girls in Europe were inclined to use such language, and it is the most implausible element of Cornelia’s characterisation.

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Big schools like Eton and Winchester are! But Miss Bettany always does that sort of thing! She's thoroughly narrow-minded!"

"No, she isn't!" returned Grizel, who had moments when she realised that her present behaviour was anything but what Madge had the right to expect of her.

"It's different photographing boys at sports, and doing us here by the lake. Oh, I can't tell you how, but it is!" And from this position she refused to budge.

(117)

It is Grizel who defends Madge's decision, and tellingly, does so as an attack of conscience. Brent-Dyer seems shy of specifying quite what this apparently inescapable difference is. We are expected, in part, to trust the judgement of Madge, our responsible adult role model, supported by Grizel's unshakeable assertion that it is just different. To the reader, though, and certainly to the modern-day reader, the difference is clear and identifiable. Eton and Winchester are boys' schools. The Chalet School is not.

Implicit in this short incident is the fear of what the effect upon girls might be, if they were displayed for the viewing pleasure of, in the words of Madge's brother, "any idiot" (269). Whatever the effect, clearly it is very different from the effect that similar displaying might have upon boys. To unpick this anxiety, then, we must consider the general question of how girls are considered to be at risk, against how boys are considered to be at risk.

Kimberley Reynolds identifies the crux of these anxieties, when she talks of the need of the time, "of keeping young ladies pure by deflecting them from inappropriate reading matter and the knowledge of the world it might impart. Such knowledge would render them unfit for

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a marriage market that demanded docile, domestic angels.”³⁸ Reynolds’ study is rather more concerned with pre-war Victorian and Edwardian values, than with the shifting sands of post-war ideas, but nevertheless, we see a shadow of those anxieties in this chapter of *The School at the Chalet*. The long-standing concern for respectability among girls was to preserve them for marriage. The only possible reason for cinematic appearance to be seen as acceptable for boys, for not for girls, is that it would undermine a girl’s purity. Were it an issue of honour, then it would affect boys equally, since boys are also held to codes of behaviour. However, purity is not a concern for boys; Victorian and Edwardian men were called to be honourable, brave, and heroic, but not pure.

Somehow, then, the act of regarding a female gives a male some kind of ownership of that female. Just as marriage, and the implicit sexual relationship, traditionally gave a man ownership of his wife, so being able to watch a female, and watch without her knowing it, gave every man in every cinema a certain degree of ownership of the girl on the screen. It was not acceptable for a woman to be pre-owned, in the sense of having lost her virginity to another man, and equally, it was not considered respectable for these girls to be part-pre-owned by a great number of other men, through their gaze. Women were being defined by how they appeared, and to whom they appeared. Brent-Dyer was preserving her young female characters from being sullied in this way, in order that they might remain respectable, and marry well. She is advising the reader to protect herself in a similar way, so that she, too, may not be spoiled for marriage and family. No real alternative is entertained, and traditional feminine ambitions remain paramount.

³⁸ Reynolds, Kimberley, *Girls Only? Gender and Popular Children’s Fiction in Britain, 1880-1910*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), xviii.

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The Schoolgirl Code of Honour and a masculine femininity

Towards the latter part of the book, Madge's overall persona becomes much more headmistress-like, and her role within the narrative diminishes significantly, as Joey takes the more dominant position. More of the action focuses on the doings of the girls themselves, and Madge's contribution is only displayed in the context of its effect upon the younger characters. She has set her school going, and largely, it seems to run itself without intervention. She is the disciplinarian, upon whom her prefects can call in times of crisis, but for the rest of the time, she leaves the girls to themselves. An example of this is found when Gisela, the Head Girl, makes her first report of bad behaviour to the Head, and is positively discouraged from doing so.

"I have come to make a report to you," replied Gisela steadily.

Madge's face sobered. "To report a breach of rules? Must you, Gisela?"

All indecision had vanished from Gisela's mind now.

"Yes, I must," she answered firmly. (96)

It is a feature of the genre that Madge institutes a prefect system from day one, and that with the ludicrously small number of nine pupils, there is appointed a Head Girl, a Second Prefect, and two Sub-Prefects. Consequently, day-to-day discipline and behaviour are managed by the girls themselves, and only serious matters are brought to the attention of the headmistress. We are told, a little later, that Madge has "a theory that it [is] better to trust girls than to watch them continually" (119), and she discourages her prefects from reporting matters that they are capable of managing themselves – Chalet School prefects are not there to spy on the girls. All of this is tied in with the code of honour that is implicit in most schoolgirl literature, and the expectations that Brent-Dyer, specifically, has of the girls in her Chalet School.

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Joey's "straight" sense of honour is a characteristic for which she is repeatedly praised in the text. Contrasted at times both with the sporty, unsympathetic, impatient Grizel, and with the tearful, possessive, moping Simone, Joey is presented as unshakeably loyal to Madge, and faultlessly truthful at all times. When Juliet's abandonment has not been explained, and Joey only knows that Captain Carrick's letter appears to have upset Madge, she reacts quite fiercely, saying "If he's worried Madge, I – I'll take it out on Juliet!" (178) Once she understands the situation, she becomes much more sympathetic to Juliet's own predicament, but at this early stage, her loyalty to Madge is seen to be paramount. She has a clear sense of her own priorities, of what is acceptable behaviour, and what is not, and she is incapable of deviating from those values. Loyalty to the older sister who has brought her up is hugely significant to her.

She is also unswervingly honourable in her expectations of others. When Simone plays a trick on Grizel and Juliet, causing them to be late getting into bed, and to get into trouble as a result, Joey has no questions as to the appropriate course of action.

"Grizel is furious!" reported Simone to the others. "She would not regard me."

"If you mean 'look at,' I'd say so," murmured Joey. "When are you going to my sister to say it's your fault?"

Simone's eyes fell, and she began to play nervously with the end of her girdle.

"I – I don't know," she stammered.

"Why not? I should go after breakfast an' get it over."

"Ye – yes!"

Joey turned and looked at her incredulously. "You surely don't mean you're goin' to funk it?" she demanded. (255)

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Joey cannot conceive of anyone stooping so low as to fail to own up in this situation. She believes wholeheartedly that the fun of the prank must be paid for by whatever punishment or trouble comes from being found out, particularly as other girls are facing the consequences of being caught out of bed after lights out. Equally, when Grizel runs away from her solitary confinement, to climb the Tiernjoch, the girls are horrified, not because the enterprise is dangerous (in fact, at this point, they do not know where she has gone), but because it is a betrayal of Madge's trust.

"D'you mean you think she's – run away?" ventured Margia at last.

"Of course she hasn't!" exploded Joey. "She's broken bounds, that's all! An' I think she's a beast!"...

[Madge] turned and left the room as she spoke, leaving a startled group behind her. They did not quite know what to think. Up till this moment they had felt a good deal of sympathy for Grizel; and her brilliant idea of vaselining the blackboards had rather captivated them. But this was quite another thing. It was untrustworthy, and, as Margia said later, "not cricket". With all her wilfulness, Grizel had never yet failed to play the game... (285)

Joey is "straight"; she will not tell a lie, she will not break a promise, and she sees her world entirely in terms of the responsibility that she has for it, whether that be the responsibility to protect Juliet from awkward questions, to try to keep Simone happy, or to bring Grizel back from up the side of a mountain. She certainly would not be prepared to break the terms of a punishment, however unfair she might have felt it to be. The distinction, then, in most schoolgirl fiction, between "acceptable" misbehaviour, and "unacceptable" misbehaviour seems to rest on this concept of "honour". It is not uncommon for novels in this genre to comment negatively on girls engaging in activities which would certainly be forbidden, if only

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anyone else had ever thought of doing such a thing.³⁹ It seems that the reader is expected to behave in a way that is not only reliably honourable, but also predictable. It is a great inconvenience to find oneself surrounded by those whose word cannot be trusted, and the reader is encouraged, here, to make sure that she speaks the truth, keeps her promises, and crucially, understands and conforms to her duty in whatever situation she finds herself.

There are unmistakable parallels between expected behaviour, in this context, and the expected behaviours exhibited in boys' fiction of this and the immediately preceding period. In his analysis of "Imperialism and Manliness in Edwardian Boys' Novels", Peter J Hugill observes a "perceived crisis of masculinity in late Victorian Britain", in which he maintains that young men were regarded as inadequate and unsuitable for the requirements of the Empire: "The solution to these problems was to spread the doctrine of imperialism and, by extension, manliness to the newly literate classes from which the administrative and military cadres of the Empire had to be drawn."⁴⁰

During the course of his article, Hugill offers us a series of illustrations of masculine ideas of honour and manliness, including pride in the community (school or nation) superseding personal interests⁴¹, commitment to and behaviour that is in keeping with Christian ideals⁴²

³⁹ Dorita Fairlie Bruce's *Dimsie Among the Prefects* uses this idea as a key plot device, when new girl Hilary Garth insists that she cannot and will not break the rules, but that there are plenty of ways to get into mischief by thinking of things that have yet to be forbidden.

⁴⁰ Hugill, Peter J, "Imperialism and Manliness in Edwardian Boys' Novels", *Ecumene*, Volume 6, Number 3 (1999), 319.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 321.

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(with particular reference to lying, stealing, cheating and other “cad-ish” behaviour), and the exhibition of traits of bravery and resourcefulness, preferably in the context of exotic locations across the Empire.⁴³ It is not difficult to see how the emphasis of these characteristics was intended to produce young middle-class men suitable for and capable of managing the increasingly unmanageable Empire, in environments that might be physically or politically hostile, and that would certainly allow plenty of scope for a young man to abuse and exploit his position, being so far from the restraining influences of English society.

It is slightly more difficult to understand why so many similarities exist between the characteristics encouraged in male children, through the fiction of this period, and those encouraged in girls. Certainly, the similarities exist. Loyalty to school and nation is given an over-riding importance, as well as loyalty to family – in Joey’s case, to Madge and Dick. Responsibility and the execution of duty are important in boys’ fiction, but Joey’s duty to protect Juliet from comment, and to help Simone out of her misery similarly supersede her personal interests (“Slipped off again!’ [Joey] thought. ‘Well, my practice must just wait – though it’s a shame to be indoors on such a gorgeous day! But I must find her first...’” (69)). As we have seen, the expectation of the Chalet School’s pupils is that they should behave in a reliably honourable fashion, and in a way that is in keeping with the ideals of Christian teaching. The Empire requires men who will take orders, and who can be relied upon to be responsible and self-sacrificing when necessary. Grizel has disobeyed orders in order to take her jaunt up the Tiernjoch. The trip was neither responsible nor self-sacrificing, since she desperately wanted to go, despite, or even because of, the danger, and since she had no

⁴² *Ibid*, 322.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 323.

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particular *need* to go. Joey's, conversely, was both responsible, since she alone guessed where Grizel had gone, and no adults were around at the time to be told, and self-sacrificial, since she did *not* want to go, and was distinctly afraid of doing so.

The Chalet School is training leaders worthy of an Empire, then. Yet, the Chalet School is training girls, for whom no leadership role exists in the Empire.

The most obvious reason for this is that there was perceived a need of women to continue to train boys in these matters. The earliest lessons taught to young men were taught by their mothers, and Victorian and Edwardian society, scathing as it could be about the negative influences of feminine homemaking on small boys, knew that girls had to be able to teach these things, when the time came. Traditional femininity was epitomised by wifedom and motherhood, so in a slightly contradictory way, this training in masculinity was a training in femininity.

However, the conflict that is implied by this contradiction is felt in the text. Grizel's decision to run away is greeted with horror by her classmates, but a male character who chose to rise to the challenge of the largest mountain around the lake would have been unlikely to face such a reaction. Within the text, Herr Mensch describes how he climbed the mountain himself, as a boy, and incurred the wrath of his father: "I had gone in disobedience, you understand, and his stick was ready for me; but my mother begged me off, and there was no punishment that time." (79) For the eleven-year-old Mensch, the escapade is against the rules, and frowned upon, but there are no lasting repercussions, and no punishments. We have seen that boys' fiction was encouraging the path of adventure, for without a desire for adventure, from where would a desire to see and serve the Empire come? Grizel's thirst for the same kind of experience can be seen as the natural result of this rather more masculine kind of femininity that has been presented to her. Its result is not that she is able to teach

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masculinity, but that she has absorbed the ideals and ambitions of that masculinity for herself.

Grizel's treatment by the text makes it quite clear to the reader that this internalisation of masculine values is not what is required. The femininity that is offered, here, is the femininity of Joey and Madge – it is maternal, self-sacrificing, responsible, adventurous and resourceful. It has, in fact, all the same traits as the picture of masculinity that we have been considering, with one crucial addition: the femininity of Joey and Madge knows its place. We observed at the beginning of the chapter that the almost exclusively female environment of boarding school stories allows for female characters to pursue their ambitions in an enclosed environment. The femininity of Joey and Madge is capable of physical prowess, leadership, public speaking, business and career success, and academic achievement. The femininity of Grizel, however, takes on a masculine form, in pursuing these things outside of the safety of the school environment, and by bringing her female masculinity into direct competition with the male masculinity of the outside world.

Masculinity and the Empire

Dick Bettany is the first character to appear in *The School at the Chalet*. The book's first sentence is spoken by him, and with it he expresses his deep sense of responsibility for his two sisters, Madge, his twin, and their much younger sibling, Joey.

"If only I knew what to do with you girls!" said Dick in worried tones.

"Oh, you needn't worry about us!" replied Madge.

"Talk sense! I'm the only man there is in the family – except Great-Uncle William; and he's not much use!"

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“Jolly well he isn’t! Poor dear! He’s all gout and crutches.” And Madge threw back her head with a merry laugh.

“Well then! I ask you!”

She got up from her seat on the Chesterfield, and walked across the room to her brother. “Dear old Dick! You really mustn’t worry about Joey and me. We shall be all right!”

He lifted his fair boyish head to look at her. (9)

The impression that the reader gains of Dick, during this short exchange, is of a man out of his depth. He expects to have the ultimate responsibility for his sisters. With phrases like “I’m the only man there is in the family”, the author suggests to us that he takes the burden of that responsibility very seriously, but it is also quite clear that he does not know what to do, so the responsibility is beyond him. He is described as “fair” and “boyish” (9), and this sense of a rather more carefree person seems to fit him better. Dick shows definite signs of being brought up to expect to be in charge, and to be responsible, but at the same time, of being insufficient to the task.

Just as we have seen, then, that there was a perceived crisis of masculinity in late-Victorian Britain, resulting in an avalanche of juvenile fiction aimed at boys, and intended to present suitably manly role models for boys to follow, so we have Dick, keen to be that manly man, and take responsibility for his family, but equally inept and emasculated when he tries to fulfil that role.

Dick’s manliness begins to revive a little, once the big decisions are taken. As soon as the Bettany family are committed to the move to Tiern See, Dick is wholeheartedly in favour of

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the proposal, and it is he who sounds the positive, optimistic notes, against Madge's understandable apprehension.

"Tosh!" he said easily. "You won't fail! You've got too much grit for that. Other people might; but you'll go on! Buck up, old thing!"

"But I'm so young," she said – "only twenty-four, Dick!"

He gave her arm a reassuring squeeze.

"You'll pull through all right! Keep your hair on, old girl! We'd better be getting back now. You're tired and ought to be in bed." (47)

Dick is back in control of things, now. He is dynamic, decisive and confident. He is firm with the beggar children outside the station in Innsbruck, likening them to the beggars in India – India, where he knows his position, and is in control of his environment. Dick is a public school imperialist, and when he can liken his situation to colonial India, where he spends most of his time, he becomes more carefree, and drops more schoolboy slang into the conversation. In addition, he is placed in the more comfortable position of taking control of Madge's physical needs – she is tired, and he declares that she ought to be in bed. These day-to-day matters are within his capabilities, and Madge can allow him to take control of things which are not really important. The big decisions have already been taken, by this point, and once Dick is back within the realm of his own experience, he is unlikely to say anything that contradicts his sister's ideas.

Dick's work in India is precisely the career for which the Victorian code of masculinity has attempted to prepare him. However, the Civil Service has empowered him only as an enabler, and he is unable to take the lead at a strategic level. He appears to lack the imagination to produce real ideas to plan for the family's future. That role is left to Madge,

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who is unencumbered by any training in the masculinity that is worthy of an Empire, and therefore free to think for herself of ideas that may go beyond the orthodoxy of expected possibilities.

By contrast, as the plot of the book works itself out, the character of Captain Carrick takes on the role of a villain. He, too, is the product of imperial rule in India, but demonstrates the untrustworthiness that can result from a morally inadequate form of masculinity being granted an excess of power in the running of the Empire. Even before the reader learns of his plan to abandon his daughter to the care of the Chalet School, Brent-Dyer is already offering hints as to his true nature. The girls stumble across him in Innsbrück, when he is thought to be in Munich with his wife. He explains, most unconvincingly, that he has returned merely in order to use the bank. He asks after Juliet's health, but does not wait for an answer. Then he requests that Joey take a note for him, addressed to Madge, "something about summer frocks, I think." (164) If all this were not suspicious enough, Joey looks "puzzled" after this exchange; she cannot explain why, but is apparently unnerved by some part of the Captain's manner. The reader is clearly expected to conclude that Joey's instincts are to be trusted on such things, and that Captain Carrick's purposes are in some way nefarious, as indeed they prove to be.

Carrick's role in the text associates two otherwise unrelated ideas – that of Empire, and the type of masculinity appropriate to its management, with that of the dangerous villain. Again, this presents a certain ambiguity. Dick's role in the Empire is a positive one, more positive, perhaps, than his role at home. Carrick represents the Empire as failing, particularly in terms of its moral character, and its ability to accept its responsibilities. The abandonment of Carrick's daughter can be seen as analogous to the idea that Britain is abandoning her Empire, with the same casual disregard for "parental" responsibility.

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We have already seen that the imaginative ploys used to draw young men towards the battlefield of World War I were being rejected in post-war fiction; similarly, here, the author would seem to postulate that those same tools when used to attract boys towards the Empire could be equally problematic, creating a form of imperial masculinity that could not be trusted to act with honour or responsibility. In Dick, Brent-Dyer offers us the possibility of a positive form of this masculinity, but in Carrick, she attempts to reject it, as a further form of self-indulgence and self-delusion.

Female management of men: a gendered hegemony

When Madge first announces her intention to start a school, the reader may well find it rather implausible, but it is, at least, an idea – her brother, Dick, has none. As the first chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that he is little more than a foil, against which Madge's decisive, imaginative, fearless proposal can be seen to shine. Dick's chief contribution is to air all possible objections, thus enabling Madge to explain those objections away, for the benefit of the forgivably critical reader.

As the conversation develops, we discover that this is not, as is first suggested, an idea that came to Madge during the previous night, but that in fact, she has spent a period of some weeks investigating the possibility. She has approached Mademoiselle La Pâtte, who appears to have been working as a governess, and therefore has at least some teaching experience (19); she has confirmed that the "large chalet" (12) that she once "went over" (14) whilst on holiday – several years previously, presumably on little more than a whim – is vacant; and she is confident that "the Corah Mine people" will be keen to buy their house and furniture from them, and that the Cochranes will gratefully offer up their daughter, Grizel, to her venture: "'I wouldn't have agreed to the idea if you had consulted me,' he replied. 'As it is, I suppose I must say "yes". You'll do as you like, whether I agree or not. I know that!'" (14)

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Dick appears to believe in the importance of his responsibility for his sisters. Men are portrayed, here, as in charge. However, since the real responsibility for solving the problem falls onto Madge, this male lead is little more than tokenistic. However responsible Dick may feel, he knows and acknowledges that his opinion is immaterial.

One is reminded of the apocryphal housewife, whose legacy of “influence” was so entirely rejected by Virginia Woolf, some years later. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf refers to the “late Sir Ernest Wild”, and his great belief in “the great influence which women exerted over men”.⁴⁴

Man liked to think he was doing his job himself when, in fact, he was doing just what the woman wanted, but the wise woman always let him think he was running the show when he was not. Any woman who chose to take an interest in politics had an immensely greater power without the vote than with it, because she could influence many voters.”⁴⁵

For reasons of her own, Woolf chooses not to address the possibility that the power of influence is available to women with or without the vote, and, indeed, to men, should they prove able to utilise it. Nevertheless, Woolf rejects the idea that the disenfranchised woman is better off than the transparently decision-making woman, and points out that the power of influence is an unscientific business, at best, and is entirely dependent upon the available men who might be influenced – a woman with the ideas and intelligence to be, for example, a Member of Parliament, cannot do so by proxy, unless she happens to hold a male Member

⁴⁴ Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own; Three Guineas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 171.

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of Parliament within her field of “influence”. For those talents to be utilised properly, she must be admitted into the House of Commons in her own right.

Brent-Dyer, it seems, still values the power of feminine influence to peacefully steer male decision-makers in a suitable direction. Madge’s relationship with Dick can be seen as a form of gendered hegemony, but not in the manner in which we are accustomed to recognising such things. The power, in this relationship, lies with the woman, and it is her brother who finds himself choosing between a fight he knows he cannot win, and a decision of which he does not appear to approve. The message to the young-girl readership is to choose your moment, use whatever manipulative techniques are available to you, plan as much as possible in advance, to present a *fait accompli*, and only resort to open argument in an emergency.

Brent-Dyer seems to have fallen victim to the temptation to over-simplify the situation: “influence” and persuasion have achieved the required acquiescence from Dick, but in reality, he is still the character with the power. Dick has the vote, Madge, at twenty-four, does not. Dick has a young, but promising, career in the Civil Service, who at the time of the book’s writing, were still dismissing women employees on marriage, regardless of the quality of the woman’s work, or her personal preference on the subject. In any case, starting her own business was Madge’s only hope to achieve an income for herself and her sister, that could support them and their middle-class lifestyle and expectations – few jobs were available, even to single women, that would compensate them adequately for their lack of parental support. Brent-Dyer chooses to overlook these considerations, emphasising Madge’s strength in manipulating her brother into agreement. The author appears to support the traditional feminine strategies of “influence” over direct power.

Dick does attempt to compensate for this rather emasculating conversation, and is more successfully authoritarian with Joey, his pasty-faced twelve-year-old sister. When Joey first

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dashes down the stairs to find out what has been decided, she brings on a severe fit of coughing which exhausts her, and frightens Madge.

“I say, old lady,” he began, “you mustn’t sprint about like that!”

Jo lifted her eyes to his. “I’m sick of ‘don’t!’” she remarked. “Why did you call me, Dick? Anything settled about us yet?”

“I suppose so,” he growled. “But just listen to me for a minute. I’m sorry you’re sick of “don’t” but I think you might have a little more consideration for Madge.

You know how she worries when you cough.” (16)

In this situation, Dick is much clearer as to the action required of him. He is firm, he knows what is best for Joey, and has no concerns about imposing his ideas onto her. He uses the rather brusque phrase “you listen to me”, more than once. He outlines the plan to her in a few, curt sentences, and appears unwilling to tolerate discussion on the subject.

It must be admitted that Joey is not noticeably subdued by this exchange. She, too, is playing a game of appearing to accept his word with docility, whilst at the same time paying little attention to his asserted authority. At the end of the conversation, when Joey returns to her bedroom to finish *Quentin Durward*, Dick gazes after her, and comments, “Best thing in the world for her” (19), in a way that suggests he is almost embarrassed. It seems as if he needs to believe that she is going because he sent her, not because she chose to, just as with Madge, he agrees to her plan, rather than argue against it, and lose. The strategy lacks integrity, but reduces the risk of his losing face.

So against the likelihood of external factors, such as her age and gender, Joey, too, manages to exceed Dick’s masculinity. She has made a decision of her own, concerning how she will spend the rest of the afternoon, and so far, at the end of Chapter One, Dick has made no

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decisions at all, other than to choose to acquiesce. Both of the women in his life appear to be more confident, decisive, and sure of themselves than he is. Even Joey's name is traditionally masculine, and indicative of her freedom to choose for herself. Not only does the author reject the external truths of male-female power relationships, but in doing so, she also circumvents the adult-child power relationship. Joey's behaviour is more masculine than Dick's, but in so being, it becomes more adult, than Dick's, too. If traditional femininity was concerned with treating women as children, without the power or responsibility to make adult decisions, then Brent-Dyer is completely disregarding that fact, by making the girl-child more adult than the man.

Again, reasons for this can be traced to two opposing sources. It is possible that Brent-Dyer was so influenced by the traditional view of femininity that she chose to present its strengths to the reader, and a series of strategies for making that power relationship work in women's favour, in an attempt to confirm the societal gender hegemony as the true and correct path. If the alternative was for women to throw respectability to the winds, as had happened in the earlier days of the Suffrage campaign, then someone of the author's background could be forgiven for believing that the more manipulative route was the better one.

It is equally possible that Brent-Dyer saw this as a way of presenting strong female role models to her readers, with precisely opposite ideas in mind: women in the Chalet School *are* capable of leading, of supporting themselves financially, of making their own decisions, and this can be seen as an encouragement to girls to do the same.

As with previous points, it seems unlikely that either perspective is entirely false, and the author displays a degree of ambivalence, here, to the rejection of traditional femininity, and the embracing of the respectability that is bound up with that tradition.

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The other English males feature only very slightly in *The School at the Chalet*. Mr Cochrane, the father of Grizel, is described scantily, chiefly by the description of other characters, and barely speaks at all in the text. The first thing that we learn of him, is that he married his current wife, without ever mentioning the existence of a daughter from his first marriage. By any calculation, this is extraordinary behaviour, and Brent-Dyer's biographer, Helen McClelland, has postulated that the situation could reflect a similar revelation in the marriage between the author's own mother and father.⁴⁶ Certainly, though the event is confirmed later in the text, by the presumably omniscient authorial voice, it is never adequately explained to the reader, which does suggest a drawing on personal experience that did not seem to the author to require further explanation.

Much of Grizel's behaviour and personality is attributed to the response of the second Mrs Cochrane to her sudden appearance, coupled with the preceding five years of spoiling by her grandmother. Mr Cochrane's part in this is not mentioned. Whether Grizel saw him during her time with her grandmother is not stated, and the possible effects of his sudden departure when she was five, or his equally sudden demand that she live with them, when she was ten, are not entered into. All that we do know is that while Grizel and her step-mother descended into a state near to open warfare, "Mr Cochrane, never a particularly loving parent, refused to interfere." (23)

The picture painted, here, is of another man who needs to believe that he is in control of his household, but who is clearly quite out of his depth. He is unwilling, or unable, to diffuse the situation between his wife and his daughter, a situation that was largely created by him. Like

⁴⁶ McClelland, Helen, *Behind the Chalet School: a biography of Elinor M Brent-Dyer*, (London: Bettany Press, 1996), 6.

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Dick, he has key issues over which he is keen to be seen as taking charge, the most obvious of which is the decision that Grizel should be removed from her grandmother's home, and brought to live with him and his new wife. Unlike Dick, he does not give way to the women around him, when they try to persuade him to change his mind.

To say that the second Mrs Cochrane was indignant is to describe the state of affairs much too mildly. At first, she insisted that the child must go to boarding-school. Her husband calmly replied that one reason for his second marriage was that he wanted Grizel under his own roof. He also pointed out that if she were sent away at once people would talk. Mrs Cochrane desired that less than anything, so she gave way. (22)

Mr Cochrane appears to be as ill-equipped to take significant decisions for his family as Dick, but he is also stubborn. His decision to keep Grizel in his household is a disastrous one, and is presented as entirely selfishly motivated and ill-conceived. The clear and reiterated message to the reader is that men perform best when managed properly, and managing them properly means creating the illusion that they are successfully managing their women. Mrs Cochrane's attempts to "manage" him fail dismally, and the consequences of his decision affect the whole family.

Mr Cochrane does see the error of his ways, in at least some sense, when Grizel is finally leaving. He is described, in those last few days, as "unusually indulgent" (24) and presents his daughter with a "folding Brownie Kodak" as a leaving gift. Additionally, he gives Madge a significant amount of money, over and above the school fees that she is owed, with which to treat Grizel in Paris, to, amongst other things, the opera. "He was not a devoted father," the author tells us, "but some strange feeling of regret that he meant so little to his only child had prompted him to do this." At some level, Mr Cochrane recognises that he has clearly

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done something badly wrong with this daughter, and when it is far too late, attempts to fix the problem. His attempt is weak, and not noticeably successful.

Mr Cochrane makes only one decision in the entire text. Every previous and subsequent choice appears to be made by either his mother, in arranging to take the five-year-old Grizel into her home, rather than have her remain with her father, or his wife, in insisting that Grizel finally be sent away to boarding school. His one decision is made apparently without female influence, and the author offers us a warning as to the potential effects of leaving men to decide alone. With Dick, we saw the tension between independent femininity, and the cautious manipulation of male opinion. With Mr Cochrane, we see the author in greater support of feminine manipulation, without which Cochrane makes the most regrettable mistakes. He is not so much censured for his actions, by the text, as pitied for being left to make those mistakes alone. Mrs Cochrane's strategies of manipulation seem to involve scolding, insisting, and temper tantrums, and the author is clear that they achieve very little towards a decision to rectify the problem.

In a similar way, the character and behaviour of Captain Carrick, in his first appearance in the novel, are entirely outshone by those of his wife. Like Mr Cochrane, he is married to a harsh, scolding woman, and like Mr Cochrane, he appears neither to notice nor care.

Carrick's first significant act is to send a letter to Madge, via the care of some Chalet School girls he happens to meet in Innsbrück, through which he abandons his daughter, Juliet, to her care. The note explains, in a tone that could be described as flippant, that Captain and Mrs Carrick have neither the desire nor the financial resources to keep her, and that they are disappearing from the area, to prevent any forced reunion with their child. The magnitude of the act is displayed in the effect it has upon Juliet.

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At these words, a slight figure rose out of the bushes which came up to the edge of the verandah, and a sobbing voice said, "Miss Bettany! Oh, have they left me again?"

"Juliet!" cried her headmistress. "How did you come here?"

Herr Marani made three strides and was off the verandah and beside the child in a moment. He gripped her by the arm and drew her in to Miss Bettany, who looked at the red-rimmed eyes in the white face with a softening glance.

"What did you mean by 'again'?" demanded the Austrian.

Juliet flung herself down on her knees by Madge's side.

"Oh, I was so afraid when they made me a boarder!" she sobbed. "They did it once before in the Hills; but that time the Head found them and made them take me back. Then we came here, and ever since I have been afraid they meant to leave me. In one way, I'd rather be with you, because you are kind to me. But oh, it is so dreadful to be thrown on people's charity!" she finished with a little dry sob. (169)

In some ways, Captain Carrick can be seen as the third piece of evidence of the same type of man. Dick avoids making bad decisions, by being manoeuvred away, and limited to less important matters; Mr Cochrane occasionally makes bad decisions, and stubbornly refuses to relinquish those decisions, but at least regrets their effects over time; Captain Carrick, we are led to believe, is incapable of making a good decision. Whereas Mrs Cochrane failed to influence her husband when it mattered, Mrs Carrick is not portrayed as making any attempt to do so. Indeed, all the evidence suggests that she is in support of this action. It is the role of women, then, to steer men away from bad decision-making, in as gentle and unobtrusive a

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way as possible. If one succeeds, then no harm is done: like Madge, one is able to follow one's dream, as well as solve the serious problems that present themselves. If one tries, and fails, then, like Mrs Cochrane, one must live with the effects of that failure: in her case, this meant sharing the house with an unmanageable step-daughter, but it also meant Mr Cochrane having to live with his own regrets. However, if one does not try to influence one's man for the better, the effects are disastrous: Captain Carrick, lacking the positive influence of a "good" woman, behaves as a villain, without any moral scruples whatsoever.

The overall message is that whilst men make the decisions, it is the responsibility of women to manage those decisions. Morally, the buck does not appear to stop with the men. Brent-Dyer again pays tribute to the idea of woman as the moral guardian, with overall responsibility for the behaviour of men and of society.

Summary

It seems, then, that Brent-Dyer is preoccupied with this theme, born of the horrors of the war, and the changing world of the 1920s. At every point, she attempts to reject the flighty femininity of the Edwardian era, and the Victorian masculinity of adventure and excitement, in favour of a desexualised, pragmatic, self-controlled form of personal identity. In so doing, she also rejects traditional ideas of feminine beauty, flights of fancy of any kind, and the enticing appeal of highly sexual masculinity. However, she also embraces some of those values: feminine beauty does appear in the text, and is not entirely dismissed; she maintains an affirmation of feminine self-sacrifice, and moral responsibility in family and wider society; she confirms the role of masculine ownership of females, through marriage, fatherhood, and gaze, and in so doing, she confirms the traditional need for virginal females, suitable for a respectable marriage. There is much confusion in the text, concerning which of these ideas should supersede, and Brent-Dyer seems to reflect the upheaval of the times in her writing.

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The consequent effect upon the reader is inconclusive. Since the author firmly advocates several contradictory points of view, to some extent the reader is left free to choose whichever happens to suit her purposes at the time. However, if a definition of femininity is difficult to isolate, the reader cannot escape the requirement in the text that she adopt a femininity of some kind – as opposed to adopting the values and behaviour of a masculine role model; if a form of masculinity suitable in a potential mate is only vaguely offered, forms that should be avoided are made very clear; and if the nature of the power-relationship between man and woman is left in a state of ambiguity, then the message that woman can and should control her own destiny, one way or another, remains the over-arching theme.

Chapter Three

***The Chalet School in Exile* – the new femininity put
to the test**

The Chalet School in Exile – the new femininity put to the test

Female role models – today and for the future

By the time the author has produced her first dozen Chalet School books, the rather ambiguous question of protagonists has been largely resolved. Since the character of Joey was seen to gradually take the lead in *The School at the Chalet*, she has continued to occupy that role, as she successfully, among other things, breaks bounds to attend a forbidden Ice Carnival, is recognised as a talented writer, rescues a kidnapped princess, nearly dies rescuing girls from another school from drowning in the lake, becomes a prefect, becomes Head Girl, and leaves school to pursue a career as an author. Merely in order to fit all these escapades in, it is clear that Joey must occupy the central space in the majority of the books covering this period in the character's existence.

The Chalet School in Exile is the thirteenth book of the series, and it is unusual in several ways. It is thematically unusual, in that it aligns the narrative more closely with specific historical events than at any other time in the series. In it, Brent-Dyer covers in some depth, and ahead of her time, the issues surrounding a British-based international school in an Austria that had come under Hitler's rule; most schoolgirl fiction of the period referred to the war only in passing, and novels of the genre frequently ignored the outbreak of war altogether. Modern readers familiar with the popular film *The Sound of Music* might be forgiven for considering the flight of a group of schoolgirls across the mountains as too similar to the escape of the fictionalised von Trapp family to be coincidence, but for the fact that Brent-Dyer's book preceded the film by some twenty-five years, and that Maria von Trapp's autobiography, published in 1953, makes no reference to such a dramatic escape.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Von Trapp, Maria, *The Sound of Music: the Trapp Family Singers*, (London: Fontana Books, 1966).

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When Britain was naïvely hoping that Chamberlain's appeasement policy would be enough to control Hitler's ambitions, and, later, believing that the war would be over by Christmas⁴⁸, Brent-Dyer was beginning to recognise that Nazi Austria was not a place in which her fictional school could be expected to thrive for long. By the time the war was twelve months old, *The Chalet School in Exile* was published, with references to the Gestapo, concentration camps, U-boats in the Channel, and a clear understanding of the power of the Nazi regime over a people who either could not see the danger, or could not fight it.

Only the young men remained awake to consult together as to plans, and when they had reached a decision, they, too, curled up. So they slept for the four hours Gottfried had given them. But when the time was up, he woke automatically, and prepared another meal. Then he woke the rest, though it went to his heart to see how white and weary they all looked. Most of them were only children, however plucky they might be. The young Austrian ground his teeth together as he thought how, in his proud, free land, things had come to such a pass that schoolgirls must be fleeing before the government.

He said nothing of his thought, but Joey, with her queer gift of insight, guessed at them, and as he gave her her cup of soup, she put her hand on his for a moment. "Gottfried! It isn't *you*; it's the Nazis. We don't blame you; we don't even blame the German people for all this. It's rather a case of setting beggars

⁴⁸ Cadogan, Mary and Craig, Patricia, *You're a Brick, Angela! A new look at Girls' Fiction from 1839-1975*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1976), 268.

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on horseback. But never think that we blame *you*. We've lived in Tyrol too long for that!"⁴⁹

Through her main character, here, and at several other points in the text, Brent-Dyer declares that war is complex, that the influence of Nazism in central Europe is complex, and that ordinary people everywhere have a right to be accepted for who they are. Not only does she insist that the deeply distressed and ashamed Austrian doctor cannot be blamed for the behaviour of the regime, but the German people themselves are also vindicated repeatedly. The reference to "beggars on horseback" betrays an acknowledgement of the role that Germany's political disempowerment had played in her predisposition towards fascism and war. Even Gertrud, the fifteen-year-old German spy who infiltrates the school in Guernsey, is presented as a victim to the regime, who, when exposed to good food, early bedtimes, and kindness, grows to bitterly regret the job she has been sent to do, under threat of danger to her family in Germany.

Cadogan and Craig devote no more than a few pages to Brent-Dyer's Chalet School series, and in so doing, they group her with other major contributors to the genre, commenting that, "Social awareness was the last quality which most of these authors wanted to display..."⁵⁰ In Brent-Dyer's case, this was only partially true. The author shied away from detailed

⁴⁹ Brent-Dyer, Elinor M, *The Chalet School in Exile*, (Bath: Girls Gone By Publishers, 2003), 119, 120. All future page references are to this edition, and are included in parenthesis in the text.

⁵⁰ Cadogan, Mary and Craig, Patricia, *You're a Brick, Angela! A new look at Girls' Fiction from 1839-1975*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1976), 204.

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references to marriage, engagement, childbirth, and adolescent development, but in this one text, she embraces the social and political realities of the world at the time, and she comments upon them openly. She takes the opportunity to deviate from the established narrative formula and expand the enclosed world of the Chalet School to take in a much greater spectrum of issues. As a result, she is able to express a sentiment that flies in the face of the jingoism and xenophobia, which most often dominates the public debate in war-time, and which genres of children's fiction, in particular, were most likely to reflect. As Reynolds has pointed out, children's literature is a particularly conservative form.⁵¹

The Chalet School in Exile is also structurally unusual, in that it is written in two distinct parts, which could almost be interpreted as two entirely separate books. The first part is set in Austria, and depicts the effects of the German Anschluss, the presence of the Gestapo, and the escape of a small group of the girls, including Joey, over the mountains to Switzerland. In the second part, almost a year has passed, Joey is married, and settled on Guernsey, and the story describes the reopening of the Chalet School there, at around the time of the beginning of World War II. Joey's role, whilst still prominent in this second part, is diminished: the action focuses more on the school, of which she is no longer a part, being occupied by her husband, the running of her household, and the imminent birth of her triplet daughters.

Within the context of the genre, Joey, like Madge before her, is an unlikely lead character for this text. Just as we identified Madge as too old, in *The School at the Chalet*, so Joey, who is twenty when the book opens, and twenty-two when it closes, is older than the generalised

⁵¹ Reynolds, Kimberley, *Girls Only? Gender and Popular Children's Fiction in Britain, 1880-1910*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 98.

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protagonist offered to us by Foster and Simons.⁵² Nevertheless, she conforms to the rest of this character type. Like Madge, her adulthood is played down, and she is presented as carefree and light-hearted. Unlike Madge, Brent-Dyer suggests a certain immaturity in Joey at the beginning of the text.

She had always hated the idea that some day she must give up her childhood, had clung to it even more than most girls. Yet she had grown up in a land where the girls marry early. Already, many of those who had been at school with her were wives and mothers. Her own beloved friend, Marie von Eschenau, had been wedded at the age of eighteen; and though she had had to wait three years before the arrival of her little son, yet Jo had seen her great happiness. Simone Lecoutier, another of the quartette, was at the Sorbonne, but had confided in Jo about a certain young officer of the artillery, who was urgent that, when she had obtained her *Bachot*, she should not think of teaching, but should settle down with him to army life. As for Frieda Mensch, the last of the four, Jo guessed, though Frieda had said nothing, that young Dr von Ahlen asked nothing better than to carry off the pretty sister of his friend and colleague, Gottfried Mensch. And Jo had her own suspicions of Frieda's attitude. It was, therefore, rather surprising that she should still be so young in her outlook. But so far, Jo remained the complete schoolgirl for most purposes. (61,62)

That immaturity is associated with her lack of experience or interest in a sexual, or at least, romantic relationship, and since she develops such a relationship during the course of the

⁵² Foster, S and Simons, J, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 192, 200.

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narrative, this can be seen as a key element to her growing up. However, it is also suggested that her youthful naivety is eradicated by the traumatic events of her flight from the Gestapo.

In the first part of the text, then, Joey is presented as having an unnaturally immature outlook, but is able to take a major role in the narrative, just as if she was still a pupil at the Chalet School. In the second part, it is inescapable that she has grown up, and consequently her role in the story is greatly reduced.

This split, between the two halves of *The Chalet School in Exile*, is a significant turning point in the series. Rarely will Joey occupy the lead role, from this point onwards. At times, she will disappear altogether, and where she does feature it will be increasingly as the wise counsellor to a new generation of schoolgirls.

Flights of fancy and imaginative excess

We saw, in *The School at the Chalet*, that any kind of imaginative excess was discouraged as self-indulgent and dangerous, and that this attitude had grown out of a contradictory mixture of self-sacrificing feminine traditions, and the rejection of those traditions in the face of World War I, with its uncontrolled masculine flights of fancy. In *The Chalet School in Exile*, this theme is much less well developed, but it is nonetheless alluded to. Perhaps it is not surprising that this, the most dramatic of the Chalet School books, should demonstrate less interest in suppressing the imagination of girls. Certainly, of all the books in the series, this one veers furthest from the genre of "schoolgirl fiction", and aligns itself more closely with that of "adventure story".

However, references are still made, in this text, that would appear to support the earlier position, if less sternly than before.

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But Robin was not thinking of the children. She sat down on the arm of her guardian's chair, and looked into the sweet face with troubled eyes. "Madge, I – I overheard something Jem said when I was passing your door just now."

It was Madge's turn to look disturbed. "What was it, Robin?"

"About the Nazis," replied Robin. "The door was open – I didn't *mean* to hear. I couldn't help it though."

"I know that, my pet. Don't worry about it." Madge glanced across at the little ones who had run off to various ploys of their own. "Jem feels he has a good deal of responsibility with the Sanatorium, and the School, too, and he's worried about the way things look like going. That's all. Don't repeat what you heard, Rob," she added. "Not even to Joey. We'll be talking about it later, and you only caught a sentence or two. And don't think any more about it." (30)

Madge makes no attempt to snub or subdue Robin, here, as she snubs Joey and Grizel in *The School at the Chalet*. This could be because of Robin's oft-stated delicacy and sweet nature, which demand gentler handling from Madge than the more robust and independent Joey does. It could also be because of the seriousness of the subject matter, when compared with the seriousness of Joey's appetite for éclairs, though this reason alone would be unlikely to have the desired effect upon an imaginative teenager – Robin could be excused for panicking a great deal more, if she felt that she was being handled much more gently and seriously than on previous, apparently similar occasions.

Nevertheless, the child is discouraged from dwelling on the snippet of information that she has overheard, and the clear implication is that nothing good can come of imagining the worst – even though the worst turns out to be precisely the case. Robin's imagination is still checked, albeit more sympathetically than Joey's was, and if the author has retreated from

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the severity of her earlier position, she has not changed its direction noticeably. In addition, Robin's acquisition of knowledge and understanding are also checked, suggesting that if imagination is dangerous, real information is even more so. Robin's childish innocence can be undermined by either, and however significant the actual danger, the reader is advised, along with Robin, not to concern herself with issues that she cannot expect to understand.

Yet, the very issue that Robin is told not to think about is the main subject of the text. In *The School at the Chalet*, we saw the author condemning imagination within the text, as if it were important to be seen to be doing so, whilst actually indulging the imagination of writer and reader through the very existence of the text. Now, we see her treating issues of political threat and personal safety in the same way: the message from the book is that we should avoid the social and political issues of the war, as Brent-Dyer confirms the traditional belief that such matters are not the concern of women and children, yet those issues form the backbone of the narrative, and the reader is drawn to consider them in depth. By being seen to reject such subject matter as unsuitable, she is able to create a loophole with which to address those issues directly.

Female beauty and suitable femininity

Superficially, Brent-Dyer's attitude to female beauty remains the same in *The Chalet School in Exile* as in *The School at the Chalet*, published fourteen years earlier. She continues to appear wary of presenting her primary female characters as "pretty", though the majority of her sympathetically-drawn characters are described in these terms. Less time and attention is devoted to visual descriptions of the main characters, presumably because of the assumption that the reader is already familiar with them, from the reading of twelve previous books. However, the author repeats the earlier treatment of Madge, by asserting that Jo is not pretty, but still attractive in some intangible way.

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They went up the path, tall Jo, with her delicate, clear-cut face, straight black hair, and glowing black eyes, leading. Not pretty, there was something about her that made people look at her twice. As a child she had been very fragile. But her years in Tyrol had ended all that and she was now a wiry young person, who rarely ailed anything. (31)

No longer are Jo's eyes "startling" or her hair "lank".⁵³ Again, the message is confusing to the reader: Joey is not pretty, but she is evidently attractive in some way, because people look at her twice. She no longer looks ill, or fragile, since the apparently magical qualities of the Tyrolean mountains have restored her to health and vitality. As with Madge, her description here leaves ample opportunity for the reader to consider Joey to have grown pretty since the earlier book, but as with Madge, the author expressly forbids it.

We observed, earlier, that a possible reason for Brent-Dyer's refusal to accept her heroines as "pretty" was an embracing of the traditional model of femininity, with its self-sacrificing morality, and its responsibility for the moral tone of home and society. This idea, too, is given added weight in this book, as the girl-characters are encouraged to take on that moral responsibility.

"... There is much that is wrong nowadays, girls. You, who are to be women, and the mothers and teachers of a future generation, can do much by showing the children to come that divisions and false ambitions, cruelty and unfairness, must always make for misery. I look to you – we all look to you – in the days to

⁵³ Brent-Dyer, Elinor M, *The School at the Chalet*, (London: Chambers, 1926), 15.

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come, to show that the Chalet School has taught you this at least: Be upright;
be honest; be brave..." (52)

Spoken as part of a speech to the school at large, this is a much more overt reference to this kind of femininity than we have found in any part of *The School at the Chalet*. Both within the narrative, and within the wider social context of the novel, it is clearly motivated by the political situation in Europe at the time, and the call goes out to the girl-reader, as well as the fictional listeners, to stand against "false ambitions, cruelty and unfairness". The author is attributing the responsibility for the moral health of society, to women and girls. She does not stand against war itself; rather she chooses to advocate the role that women must play in achieving the desired outcome.

Not only is this form of femininity embraced rather more firmly than in the earlier text, but the extent to which Brent-Dyer also rejects that femininity is reduced. We saw earlier how Brent-Dyer, if less thoroughly than her contemporary, Agatha Christie, rejected the flighty, "fluttering", romantic female character type, in favour of something rather more active, decisive and practical.⁵⁴ In this text, however, she appears to have retreated from this idea, back to the relative safety of traditional ideas of womanhood. Whereas before, Joey was a leader, capable of rescuing Grizel from her own foolishness, and at great personal risk, now she is presented as much more of a liability, and a responsibility to the male characters.

"In fact," concluded Jem, "if you'll take my advice, you'll marry Jo out of hand, and take her and Robin out of this country. Margot is to go with all our small fry in a fortnight's time. You might go with them, and settle them down at La Rêve.

⁵⁴ Light, Alison, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 108.

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Then you and Jo can take a honeymoon in France, and be ready to welcome us when we all come.”

Jack Maynard was only too ready to agree. And Joey, after a little, was persuaded to it, though, as she said, she had had no idea of being married for at least a year yet. (99)

The decisions are taken entirely in Joey’s absence, even the decision over when she should marry her fiancé. Jem seems keen to relieve himself of the responsibility of Joey and Robin, and Jack to take that responsibility on. Little reference is made to the opinions of the two females concerned, or to the possibility that Joey, at least, might be considered old enough to take care of herself. As a character, she is reduced to the level of a dependent, and the reader is hence advised to step back, and allow the men to run the war.

This is a significant turnaround. In the earlier text, we saw Brent-Dyer, like other writers of the period, rejecting the tradition of unquestioning faith in male decision-making, precisely because it was men who had run World War I. Here, at the beginning of World War II, the emergency of the situation seems to have persuaded her to backtrack, and revert to the safer and less radical ideas of the Edwardian era. The rejection of male romanticism over the glory of battle would appear to be too controversial to withstand a wartime atmosphere. In turn, this suggests that in the fourteen years that have elapsed, that rejection had failed to overcome its own controversy, and become assimilated into popular opinion. The “new” form of 1920s femininity remained a radical idea throughout the inter-war period, and did not significantly influence the broader views of society.

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Male beauty and suitable masculinity

Representations of masculinity change little between the beginning of the Chalet School series, and this book. There is some minor shifting of roles, but the essential types of men that we identified in *The School at the Chalet* all exist.

The role of villain is largely fulfilled by the off-stage form of Hitler, and the occasional appearance of members of the Gestapo. So much of the book is preoccupied with the escape from the Nazi regime that it seems that Brent-Dyer found it unnecessary to expend much energy defining the masculine villain. It is enough, it appears, to state that Nazism is evil, and that the characters of the novel must escape from its reach. The danger, in times of war, is much less subtle, and can be readily identified by the reader, without assistance.

There is no hint, here, of guiding the reader in the identification of and protection from dangerous men; the great concern that girls might be fooled into trusting an archetypal villain is no longer evident. Instead, girls are encouraged to recognise evil in the form of a regime, and to judge ideas of patriotism according to a separate belief system: "Later, we may have to tackle outside things. But before everything else, let's remember that we're Chalet girls, and that Chalet girls hang together even though they're far enough apart at times." (53)

The role of the Austrian men remains essentially the same, although the circumstances of the narrative create new ways of illustrating that role. Herr Marani, who is demonstrated as a trustworthy character in the first book, is imprisoned in a concentration camp, in this one, for refusing to acquiesce to the demands of the Nazis concerning the education of his daughter. He proudly and stubbornly stands against the new government, knowing that it is dangerous to do so, but in the name of freedom – to emphasise the point still further, Brent-Dyer has him martyred there.

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Similarly, Gottfried, the young Austrian doctor, and son of Herr Mensch, is presented as noble and honourable. Without him, with his tracking experience, and knowledge of the little-known paths to the Swiss border, the escape across the mountains would scarcely have been possible. Like Herr Marani, Gottfried is drawn as having a great deal of quiet strength, and bitter regrets over the effect of Nazism upon Austria. His own asexual fatherliness is tempered by a certain amount of youth, but he is a clear representation of a new generation of Austrian man, made to the same model.

Interestingly, this model is also adopted by the English men in the text, who desert the boyish, brotherly character type in favour of this more assertive, decisive, paternal role. At the beginning of the book, Madge's husband, Jem, behaves in a way that borders on dictatorial, in his concern for the future of the school in the face of the changing political climate.

"I've sent for you folk to tell you that the School has to be moved up to the Sonnalpe at once. Your half-term comes next weekend, doesn't it, Hilda? Then you can just get ready, and everything will go while the girls are away. How long are you giving them?" ...

"I don't say they would interfere openly," said the doctor. "But if you broke any of their wretched rules and regulations, it might mean trouble. If that happened – well, you are all women, with no men-folk to defend you as long as you remain here. If you were at the Sonnalpe, there are seven of us British doctors, not to mention the men of the English colony. I should feel happier about you."
(39, 40)

Jem adopts a very similar attitude, here, to that of Herr Mensch in the earlier book. He expects to be obeyed, and whilst he tolerates a certain amount of questioning of his

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decisions, in essence, he takes control of this situation as if the school and its staff were his own children, subject to his authority, and not a separate organisation managed by independent adults.

Brent-Dyer has reneged upon all of her earlier efforts to present the all-female community as an enclosed space for feminine ambitions and leadership skills to be cultivated. It seems that the women of the Chalet School were only ever playing at independence within the confines of certain enclosed parameters, since, when circumstances become rather more serious, they are disempowered, and managed by the paternalistic English doctor.

Foster and Simons note that:

It is the headmistress's authority which is finally validated in *The Madcap of the School*, and her judgement proved to be sound, while the arrogant and patronizing figure of the clergyman (who is also the headmistress's brother), is removed from the action at the end of the novel, much to the girls' relief. The final vision of *The Madcap of the School* is thus an endorsement of female culture, and the school retained as a unit which can operate effectively without male interference, consequently functions implicitly as a critique of masculine hegemony.⁵⁵

To some extent, this can also be said of *The School at the Chalet*: Captain Carrick, Mr Cochrane and Dick Bettany have all been discharged as unreliable and without significance within the narrative, leaving Madge with the power and responsibility for the school. Such

⁵⁵ Foster, S and Simons, J, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 198.

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paternal support as comes from Herr Mensch and Herr Marani is advisory, at most, and does not impinge on the supremacy of Madge's decisions. In *The Chalet School in Exile*, however, the author hands that power back to key male characters, and the women, generally, do as they are told. Again, we see that the rejection of the traditional gender hegemony is silenced by more immediate concerns of war, concerns that require a more conservative response.

The new male character type introduced in this text is that of the available and appropriate sexual partner. Jack Maynard bears certain similarities to the earlier characterisation of Dick Bettany, in that he is young, blond, "boyish" and presented as eminently suitable husband material. The key difference between the two characters is that Jack is also available. Whereas Dick is quickly dispatched to India, where he proceeds to marry and sire offspring entirely off-stage, Jack remains close to the school, even if his narrative role is peripheral, and he is permitted by the author to make romantic advances towards her main character, and to marry her.

The concerns that caused the girls of the Chalet School to be insulated from the influence of the character of Dick show signs of being superseded by even more pressing concerns. The message that Dick is suitable, but that the time is not yet right, is replaced, here, with the message that suitable young men can now be viewed as available. The author is allowing Jo to grow up, and to engage in adult rites of passage. In doing so, she gives her blessing for her girl readers to grow up, and have adult relationships with men.

Jack, however available he may have become, here, remains the public school brother-figure that we saw in the earlier book. Instead of excitement or passion, he offers her comfort and

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reassurance; she recognises his advances, not with the language of romance or sexuality, but with the words, ““Oh, Jack – what a – solid lump – of comfort you – are!”” (87) ⁵⁶

By the time Brent-Dyer allowed Madge to consider marriage, she had lost much of her significance within the text, and Joey had adopted the central role. However, when Joey’s marriage is announced, she is still the character with whom we are expected to identify, and it is therefore our role model who accepts Jack’s advances, to become his wife.

Again, it is reasonable to assume that the onset of war has triggered this change in approach. Just as we have seen a reduction in the independence of female characters in the text, through Jem’s rather brusque leadership, so we now see that Joey cannot and should not be left to fend for herself, as an independent adult female at a time of political uncertainty. She must be passed from the protection of family, to the protection of her husband, and the reader, too, is advised to seek such protection, with the priority being placed with the immediate requirement, rather than with the long term prospects of the match.

Male gaze and females as property

We have already considered the role of male gaze in undermining the purity of women, by placing a claim of ownership upon the watched. We have seen that gaze as a precursor to the total ownership of marriage, and akin to the loss of virginity as a blemish upon the sexual purity of a prospective bride.

This theme is continued in *The Chalet School in Exile*. It is by his gaze that Jack begins the process of gaining full ownership of Joey as his wife.

⁵⁶ It should be noted that the unusual punctuation is an effort by the author to connote sobbing.

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He had known Jo since her stormy youth; had seen her grow up from a mischievous imp of thirteen to charming young womanhood of nearly twenty-one; and, for the last two years, had been quite decided about what she meant to him. (61)

Here, the gaze of the male onlooker is not condemned, as in *The School at the Chalet*, but it is nevertheless the beginning stage in the process of gaining ownership. Since her early teens, Jo has been watched from a distance by this man, and has become part-owned by him, without necessarily realising it. It is only a matter of time before his ownership is made complete, and they are married.

However, in *The Chalet School in Exile*, these themes of gaze, ownership and purity also start to become divorced from the association with gender. No longer are the watchers male, and the watched female.

Hilary's brows were knitted, and her lips were set in a straight line. "That is the same woman that I told you about, Jo," she said.

"What woman?" demanded Jo.

"The woman that spied on us on the train."

"Frau Eisen?" Jo gave vent to a long, low whistle. (64)

Frau Eisen, a female Nazi spy, is gazing upon the mixed-gender group, and achieving a kind of ownership over them. Because of her presence, they become concerned for the safety of one girl ("Joey fears she may be in danger of – well, what they call preventive arrest" (64)), they become cautious about their conversation, and they fail to fulfil the task for which they took their expedition up the mountain in the first place. Not only are they watched, but their behaviour is influenced by that fact, giving Frau Eisen, immediately, and the Nazi regime

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indirectly, a degree of power and ownership over the party. That ownership is made more real, when Jack is arrested by the Gestapo, based on Frau Eisen's report of this particular trip, and held against his will for several days.

If male gaze with sexual intent can be seen as undermining the purity of a girl, then Nazi gaze with the intent to curtail freedom can be seen as undermining the ideological purity of the watched. As we have seen, the Chalet School stands for ideas of freedom, fairness, and kindness to all. These notions are threatened by the Nazi ideology, and the threat begins with Frau Eisen, the observer. Ultimately, the regime seeks to take total ownership of the school and its pupils, and to conquer the opposing ideological stance.

The Schoolgirl Code of Honour and a masculine femininity

As in *The School at the Chalet*, we see in this book the encouragement of certain behavioural traits calculated to run an empire. Matters of honour, of loyalty to school and country, and of duty remain paramount.

An early example of this is Jem's explicitly stated belief that the mistresses of the school can be trusted: "The doctor looked round at them thoughtfully, considering them. They were all honourable women. He decided to entrust them with a part of a secret he had intended it keep in its entirety." (42) If the author's method of proof is a little crass, it leaves no room for doubt. A reliable sense of honour remains of great importance.

So, too, is the resourcefulness that permits the conquering of hostile environments. When Hilary and Robin are followed by a Nazi spy, into a cave in the mountains, they determine to find another exit, despite the apparent unlikelihood of one being present, and with a combination of recently-charged torches, sturdy underwear, and clove-hitch knots, they successfully escape their follower (81-84).

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Girls, then, are still being trained to serve an Empire in which they have no obvious role. We considered in the previous chapter the possibility that this was intended to be training for motherhood, to enable women to bring up men worthy of the task. In this book, that role is more explicitly outlined: "... There is much that is wrong nowadays, girls. You, who are to be women, and the mothers and teachers of a future generation, can do much by showing the children to come that divisions and false ambitions, cruelty and unfairness, must always make for misery..." (52)

One notable absence from the list of imperial qualities previous advocated by the author is that of leadership. As we have seen, self-government within the school community is significantly compromised by the intervention of Madge's husband. Since the other qualities of the imperialist masculine femininity that we identified remain, it becomes apparent to the reader that the significance lies in the concept of authority. Duty, responsibility, honour, resourcefulness and adventure can all be exercised and indulged by an individual person, within the context of their surroundings. Only leadership requires that the subject be in possession of some kind of authority, with a mandate to make decisions for the group. Brent-Dyer has removed this authority from her female characters in favour of the men in the text - in so doing, she has clearly indicated that her readership should also be prepared to submit to male authority, even in spheres where that submission was not previously necessary. The onset of war has brought the serious issues of life to the fore, and *The Chalet School in Exile* assures women and girls that whatever authority they thought they had should be returned to the men. Only men, it seems, have the necessary skills to navigate a real crisis.

If we considered Brent-Dyer's perspective on masculine femininity to be ambiguous before, it has become significantly more so, now. She continues to advocate imperial qualities of masculinity in her female characters; those characters are finding even more authorial

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approval for their acts of bravery and resourcefulness than they did in the earlier book, as they stand against a recognised evil, rather than the misdemeanours of other girls. There remains great opportunity for characters and readers to internalise that femininity for themselves, just as Grizel internalised it. However, the role of that femininity in preparing the mothers to a new generation of boys is also accentuated in this text, and indicated much more explicitly. The author suggests that this kind of motherhood is the answer to the world's ills, and only just stops short of telling us that Hitler's inadequate mothering is to blame for the declaration of World War II.

Combined with this retreat into more traditional femininity, is a recognisable loss of power to female characters, particularly adult female characters. Brent-Dyer's ambivalence has caused her to advance her position in every direction, and become still more ambivalent as a result. She is now advocating a more traditional, more maternal, and more masculine form of femininity. Her position was paradoxical in the earlier book; this development of her self-contradiction has heightened that paradox, without really changing it.

Female management of men: a gendered hegemony

The delicate balance of power between male and female characters in the Chalet School would seem to have shifted significantly towards the men. Jem, Jack and Gottfried have taken control of the safety and well-being of the school as a whole, and the individual women and girls included in it. However, this should not lead us to assume that the gendered hegemony that we saw in *The School at the Chalet* has entirely broken down. By various means of manipulation, female characters are still contriving to control situations to suit their own requirements.

The first evidence of this manipulation comes when Madge is faced with her husband's heightened sense of panic over the deteriorating political situation.

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“What do Madame and Mademoiselle say?” demanded Miss Wilson.

“They agree with me, though I must admit Madge thinks I’m making a fuss about nothing. Still, she thinks that as I *am* worried, the School had better be moved – and at once...” (40)

The thinly veiled implication, here, is that Madge disagrees entirely with her husband's assessment of the situation, but has judged his determination too great to be worth fighting. She is giving him the necessary control, but in a manner that amounts to little more than humouring his idiosyncrasies. It appears to be a direct role reversal of Dick's position at the beginning of the earlier text, yet it is not. Dick is placed in a position where it is apparent that his opinion will have little effect upon the outcome, so he chooses to comply, against his own better judgement; Madge offers the school to Jem as a plaything, not because she agrees with him, but because she considers his opinion to be insignificant, and the inconvenience a bearable trade for keeping him pacified. Dick is robbed of his adulthood, and placed in the position of a powerless child. Jem, too, is robbed of power, since the power that is given to him can just as easily be taken away, and is therefore not real power at all. Madge soothes and humours him, as if he were one of the children.

By entirely different means, Jo, too, manages to exert her influence over masculine action, and thereby regains some of the ground she has apparently lost, in being passed from brother-in-law to husband, as a dangerous liability.

Joey sighed. “Isn't it possible to get to St Malo without going round by Paris?
I'd much rather do it if we can.”

He shook his head. “No; there's no direct route.”

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“Then wouldn’t Lausanne be better than Geneva? I believe it’s shorter, and more direct. If we did that, we might be able to get to St Malo in time to catch the morning boat on Thursday. We could travel all night. We’d all rather do that than hang about in Europe.”

“I’ll go to the station and see. If that’s the way you all feel, we’d better do it if we can.” And Jack gave a concerned look at her. Her cheeks pink with excitement, her eyes feverishly bright, he felt that the sooner Joey was well away from her present surroundings the better. He would rather have avoided the long journey, but it was plain that she would work herself into a fever over any delays. (131)

Having successfully escorted the party to escape from Austria, and to the refuge of “good Frau von Hessel’s” home (129), Jack’s primary concern has become Joey’s mental health. It is because of her “feverish” tendency, and her frantic desire to go “home” to England that he changes his very sensible plans. His original journey proposal involved a night spent in Geneva, a night spent in Paris, and the possibility of a further night or two spent in St Malo, since “I don’t consider you, or Rob, or Nell Wilson as fit to make a very long journey” (131). Instead, Joey persuades him to travel by sleeper wherever possible, to the extent that they expect to reach Guernsey within thirty-six hours, rather than three or four days.

Given Jack’s belief that none of the party is strong enough to tackle the journey in one block, this is a significant retreat. Joey continues to be treated like a child, and in her vulnerable state is described as behaving like one (“she clung to him like a frightened child”), but she nevertheless uses her position to achieve her goal. Jack fears for her mental and emotional well-being, so can be manipulated into acceding to her wishes, against his own better judgement.

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It is in her particular weakness, therefore, that Joey has the most strength. In Austria, when she was still relatively safe and well, her opinion is barely considered, even on the most personal question of where and when she should marry. Now that she is ill, she has a source of power and influence that proves quite effective.

The advice to the reader, then, has changed little in this respect. Still, Brent-Dyer recommends the careful selection of one's battles. She advocates the illusion of acquiescence wherever possible. She encourages the reader to do all in her power to make the decisions, whilst guiding male associates into the belief that the decision was their own. As in the earlier text, implicit in this approach is the rejection of open argument as a strategy that is both unladylike, and rather less effective.

Summary

Of the key themes identified in *The School at the Chalet*, few appear to have been entirely rejected. Most, however, have seen the author shift her position, usually withdrawing to a safer, more traditional stance. Whereas earlier, we saw "flighty" Edwardian notions of femininity being largely rejected, *The Chalet School in Exile* returns to those notions, at least in part, by presenting female role models as weaker, and as more dependent than previously. Similarly, masculinity is less asexual than in the earlier book, as female weakness presents a corresponding need for a protective male mate.

Brent-Dyer's rejection of "flights of fancy" remains, but it is more subdued, now, as if it seeks to prevent a justifiable panic, rather than an extravagant indulgence. She continues to train girls in the necessary talents for them to be able to train a future generation of boys, but she is firmer about the limits of this role, and no longer tolerates its appropriation for personal female ambition.

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Most of the ideas that we recognised in the first of the Chalet School books could be traced back to the effects of World War I, and the resulting loss of innocence and frivolity. The ways in which these themes have been developed, in this book, are equally attributable to the outbreak of World War II. The earlier distrust of male authority, imperial responsibility, and imaginative, excitable forms of gender identity has been weakened, though not replaced, by the need for a coherent response to a new threat. The balance has shifted in favour of the more traditional forms of masculine and feminine identity, but the ambiguity remains.

With that shift towards the more traditional gender roles, however, comes a shift in gendered power-relationships. Much of Brent-Dyer's earlier attempt to present women and girls as independent, decisive, and autonomous has been overridden by the development of decisive male characters. The author's recession into more authoritative, parental men, and naïve, flighty women has caused female autonomy to suffer. The strength of the female role model in the text has been reduced significantly; the reader is faced with the implication that the war has brought to an end some kind of social experiment, and that times have become too serious to risk any further demonstration of female power.

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Conclusion

Conclusion

Brent-Dyer's representation of femininity definitely changes, between the publication of *The School at the Chalet*, and that of *The Chalet School in Exile*. However, her ideas are so ambiguous to begin with, that the changes can generally be summarised as shifts in emphasis and degree, rather than as fundamental revolutions of ideology. Hence, the rejection of romantic, imaginative indulgence, held in tension with the inherently imaginative nature of fiction, is brisk and curt in the earlier text, but the same rejection becomes more sensitive and sympathetic in the later book, when the focal point is less concerned with fantasy, and more concerned with imagining real-life terrors.

In a similar way, the more masculine form of female identity that we identified in the first book as an option that is presented to the reader, but which she is encouraged to reject, gains more clarity in the second of the texts. The internalisation of that masculine ideology is no longer entertained, and the role of masculine femininity in the training of children is emphasised rather more. We recognised this role in *The School at the Chalet*, but it now exists in a more explicit form.

By contrast, we saw a blurring of gender roles in some areas, particularly with reference to the relationship between gaze and ownership: whereas in the earlier text, the gazer was male and the gazed upon female, later we saw gaze used as an ideological weapon, to enable the Nazi regime to achieve ownership of the "free" individual. Gaze, then, could be seen a form of power, that was not specifically linked with issues of gender, but could be utilised in a gendered power relationship. In either case, partial ownership through gaze represented a loss of purity, akin to a loss of virginity in the first case, and to a loss of ideological innocence in the second.

Interestingly, at the time when gaze is used as a form of male power, the strength that power generally seems to be rather less than it later becomes. *The School at the Chalet* shows apparently independent, autonomous, successful female decision making, alongside

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indecisive, hesitant, and occasionally villainous male behaviour. Yet, when viewed in association with *The Chalet School in Exile*, we are obliged to question the truth of those impressions; the independence of the female role models is secure for as long as the wider environment is relatively secure. When the political situation becomes hostile, Brent-Dyer's power balance shifts towards the male characters and the women lose their autonomous control of their own destinies.

The female power of the earlier book is illusory and insubstantial, since it is later removed. When the obvious power lies with the male characters, such female power that is left is drawn from manipulation and "influence", and is consequently unreliable. However, male power could equally be seen as only permitted in certain circumstances, and therefore illusory: when the men lack the decision-making power, they, too, are reduced to manipulative tactics, of which male ownership through gaze is an example. Which situation should be seen as the "normal" power relationship, and which the "exceptional" one is not clear. However, it seems more plausible to argue that the power relationships of wartime are unusual, given the fact that only five of the fifty-eight Chalet School books are set in the World War II period.

Brent-Dyer intertwines some radical ideas with some extremely conservative ones, in her books. Her earlier suggestions regarding gender identity are diluted by equally remarkable comments on social and political issues. In essence, though, she is able to take these risks, in the conservative environment of the genre, because she has created a supremely safe space in which experiment with them. The author manages her fictional setting to create an idyllic world, which can withstand the threat of changing gender identities. When that world itself becomes less idealised and secure, she retreats on some of her gender role models, to allow space for radical comment on matters of race and prejudice. As a result, the Chalet

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School series is able to provide a reassuring experience to the reader, whilst at the same time challenging much of the popular wisdom of day.

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