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‘Everything a girl could ask for’? Fashioning Feminism in *Just Seventeen*

In October of 1983 the first issue of EMAP’s *Just Seventeen* landed on British newsstands in fighting form. Featuring a scarlet-lipped cover girl posing in a red headguard and boxing gloves, the new fortnightly magazine promised its young readers ‘prizes, pop and plenty of punch’ (20 Oct 1983: 1). While the sales of girls’ magazines had dwindled in the 1980s (Sanders 1983: 42), EMAP’s decision to task editor David Hepworth with producing a magazine that was ‘more expensive, [...] stylish [and] slightly racier’ than other teen titles marked the publishing industry’s renewed courtship of girls as consumers (Hepworth, para. 11).

In light of twenty-first-century debates about the survival of print media in the digital age and speculation about when the magazine industry is likely to heave its final death gasps, *Just Seventeen* has been nostalgically invoked as a cautionary tale about the volatility and precarity of the periodicals market. From its initial publication in 1983 until its usurpation by the monthly *Sugar* (1994-2011) in 1994, *Just Seventeen* led the market in magazines for teenage girls. Tim Holmes, working in the EMAP offices at the time, recalls that in its heyday *Just Seventeen* was selling ‘half a million copies every two weeks and raked in advertising money like there was no tomorrow’. The magazine was so popular that EMAP ‘devised its corporate strategies around [its] continued success’, using its example to ‘set new business models’ and heralding its editors as ‘magazine royalty’ (2008: xiii). By January of 1985, EMAP had appointed a female Managing Editor, Bridget LeGood, to replace Hepworth and in February of the same year *Just Seventeen* moved from fortnightly to weekly publication because, it reminded its readers, ‘YOU ASKED FOR IT!’ (10 Jan 1985: 5). *Just Seventeen* continued to prosper during the boom in the magazine industry that took place in the 1980s and early 90s, but its sales figures declined steadily from 1994. Holmes

remembers that ‘suddenly – almost between one issue and the next – teenage girls stopped buying it’ (2008: xiii). By 1997 the weekly that promised ‘everything a girl could ask for’ had lost two thirds of its readership and EMAP made the decision to rebrand it as a monthly magazine with the modishly abbreviated title of *J-17*.¹ Toppled from its throne by *Sugar* and *Bliss* (1995-2014) – which took many of their aesthetic cues from *Just Seventeen*, but offered edgier, sexier content – *J-17* limped on as a monthly for several years, before finally disappearing from shelves altogether in April 2004.

In order to understand *Just Seventeen*’s phenomenal popularity amongst British girls, and the means by which it engaged such an enormous readership throughout the 1980s, it is necessary to take account of the dynamic media landscape in which the magazine initially appeared. I would like, then, to draw on methodologies developed by Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap and Leila Ryan in their field-shaping work on suffrage periodicals, with a view to approaching and analysing *Just Seventeen* in ‘relational terms’. Unlike the suffrage periodical, of course, *Just Seventeen* is not an activist magazine; it is not affiliated to any social movement. A magazine for teenage girls, *Just Seventeen* nonetheless benefits from consideration ‘in relation to publications that engaged with [it] directly’, and against or through reference to which it sought to define its own position in a ‘complex web’ of 1980s’ media (2011: 78, 200). For this reason, I analyse *Just Seventeen* alongside its early competitor *Jackie* (1964-93), the popular women’s liberation periodical *Spare Rib* (1972-93) and the radical teen zine *Shocking Pink* (c. 1980-82; 1987-92) in order to explore how feminism informs the specific tuning of the magazine’s content, politics and style. If the influence of mainstream magazines for girls is readily discernible in *Just Seventeen*’s regular items, I argue here that the progressive ‘feel’ of the magazine, and its ability to generate a sense of intimacy

between readers that girls experienced as new and necessary, is indebted to discourses that were developed and put into circulation by the feminist periodical press of the 1970s and 80s.

In this chapter I examine how, when and why the discourses of women's liberation are mobilized in *Just Seventeen*, with a view to understanding the ways in which feminism is used as an object of affective (dis)identification in the magazine. With acknowledgement of Barbara Green's path-breaking work on suffrage periodicals, in which she uses Lauren Berlant's theory of 'intimate publics' to illuminate the currents of feeling that animate the politics of activist publications, I ask whether this line of argument might be reoriented in consideration of magazines for teen girls. If the intimate public is a mediated zone in which constituencies of marginalized subjects experience the feeling of emotional contact and 'social belonging' through the shared consumption of certain 'narratives and things', then to what extent does *Just Seventeen* constitute an intimate public of girlhood (2008: viii)? What role, moreover, is accorded to feminism in an intimate public that turns on the 'affective and emotional' attachments of its consumers (2008: 170)? Using Sara Ahmed's work on 'stickiness', I investigate how feminism – though seldom named explicitly in *Just Seventeen* – magnetizes *Just Seventeen*'s readership, developing the 'feel' of intimacy between its readers and producers by catalyzing debates about modern girlhood. I begin, then, with an examination of the discourses of girlhood that *Just Seventeen* develops. In particular, I analyse the extent to which these discourses hinge on assumptions about readers' attachments to certain 'sticky' elements of traditional femininity, asking how the magazine measures the continuing lure of home and family against the promised rewards of education and professional work. I then go on to investigate how *Just Seventeen*'s coverage of 'progressive' topics intersects with,

and diverges from, the coverage of these same topics in the feminist press. In doing so, I assess the ways in which *Just Seventeen* mobilises the feelings of its producers and consumers in order to facilitate discussions about politics without drawing hard political lines. Through special reference to the magazine's coverage of gender difference and discrimination, political events and campaigns, and sexuality, I argue that feminism circulates within the pages of *Just Seventeen* as a locus of fantasy and fear, offering readers a means of understanding the world as it is, and speculating about how it might be in the future.

Prior to *Just Seventeen*'s swaggering 1983 debut, *Jackie* had long held court as the steadfast and sensible companion to British girlhood. As one of the first magazines marketed at teen girls, and by far the most popular, *Jackie* has already attracted significant scholarly attention. Angela McRobbie, in her pioneering work on youth cultures, uses *Jackie* to outline the 'privileged position' that teen magazines occupy within the media, 'introduc[ing] the girl to adolescence, outlining its landmarks and characteristics in detail and stressing the problematic features as well as the fun'. Through its combination of picture stories, pop pin-ups, beauty pages, advertisements and readers' 'true experiences', *Jackie* assumes a 'common experience of womanhood or girlhood' in which 'all girls want to know how to catch a boy, lose weight, look their best and be able to cook' (2000: 69). The treatment of these core themes was scarcely impacted by the political convulsions of the women's movement in the 1960s and 70s. Even in the early 1980s, the 'Cathy and Claire' advice column continued to take a firm line on girls' obedience to authority figures (especially parents) and discouraged its correspondents from letting things 'get out of hand' with boys. A parade of wholesome-looking models smiled out from *Jackie*'s covers, positioned in close proximity to headlined content that gave the impression of being blithely incognizant of feminism's

taking-to-task of sexist double standards and prescriptive accounts of compliant, domesticated femininity: ‘Are you asking for trouble? How not to get yourself talked about’ (5 January 1980: 1); ‘He ruined my reputation’ (24 May 1980: 1); ‘Are you worth a second glance?’ (2 August 1980: 1). Unsurprisingly, given that the aspirational horizons of *Jackie*’s girl were so narrowly focused on snaring an appropriate mate, the moods that prevailed within the pages of the magazine were often at odds with the upbeat messaging and imagery of the covers. As McRobbie observes, ‘the world of *Jackie* [...] is a cloyingly claustrophobic environment where the dominant emotions are fear, insecurity, competitiveness and even panic’ (2000: 70).

If *Just Seventeen* defines itself in part through its rejection of *Jackie*’s myopic valorization of heterosexual romance, then it is just as vitally shaped by the liberationist discourses of feminist periodical culture in the 1960s and 70s. In her pioneering scholarship on girls, Catherine Driscoll observes that no ‘girls’ or women’s magazines exist in a prefeminist state’ because all are affected by ‘the now inevitable questions of whether and how a woman is employed, feminist critiques of beauty culture, and other feminist propositions or practices’ (2002: 280). *Just Seventeen* is no exception. The magazine’s express commitment to providing girls with information about health, educational opportunities and careers, coupled with its coverage of ‘taboo’ sexual topics, registers the changes that feminism – as ideology, politics and mode of critique – had wrought upon the popular field of girl culture by the start of the 1980s.

With its signal abandonment of ‘silly’ romantic photo stories and its image repertoire of bright, bold, youthful femininity, *Just Seventeen* expanded the vista of girlish expectation, offering an appealingly empowered alternative to the ‘neurotically dependent female subject’ who was volunteered by *Jackie*, *Blue Jeans* (1977-1990) and *My Guy* (1978-1990) as the default model for girlhood. Instead, the new magazine set

the stage for a fresh generation of ‘sassy’ girls’ magazines, including *Mizz* (1985-2012) and *More!* (1988-2013), that responded directly to ‘a new climate of confidence and self-esteem among their potential readers’ (McRobbie 1994: 159). In contrast to both *Jackie*’s cloying sentimentalism and *Shocking Pink*’s darkly witty calls to feminist arms, *Just Seventeen* conjures up a luminous world in which young women are primed to capitalize on the activist gains of the 1960s and 70s without becoming mired in the discourses and politics of organised feminism. It is the first mass-produced magazine for teenage girls to imagine how recent legislative victories – including the 1967 Abortion Act, the 1970 Equal Pay Act and the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act – might influence the ambitions, experiences and perspectives of young women in Thatcher’s Britain. At the same time, as a magazine that relies on advertising revenue from the manufacturers of beauty and clothing lines, it continues to celebrate ‘fashionable’ modes of femininity, emphasizing the emergent triumph of the personal over the political in 1980s discourses of girlhood.

In one of the only academic articles to reference the contributions of *Just Seventeen*, *Mizz* and *Etcetera* to the 1980s media landscape, Janice Winship draws attention to the shadowy presence of feminism in these magazines, arguing that the influence of the women’s movement is insistently undermined by a commitment to individualism that precludes the possibility of political organization and collective action. Noting the editors’ studious avoidance of the ‘label of feminism’, Winship discerns in *Just Seventeen* and its competitors a feminism that dare not speak its name, presciently evoking, back in 1987, the ur-critique of postfeminist culture that would come to dominate the scholarly vista in the 1990s (1985: 37).

What it Feels Like for a Girl

In Berlant's characterization, 'intimate publics' act as zones of contact for 'nonprivileged subjects' who are 'marked by a commonly lived history' (2008: xi, viii). Drawing together individuals on the pretext that they are shaped by a shared 'emotional knowledge' that emanates from the 'experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world', intimate publics manufacture fantasies of social belonging that are circulated in and through the mass media (2008: viii). The periodical has, of course, long been conceptualized in similar terms. Manushag Powell has argued that periodicals 'work as the connective tissue in studies of modern societies, pulling together seemingly disparate communities and interests' (2011: 448), while for Heather A. Haveman they are a kind of 'social glue', providing spaces in which these individuals can 'receive and react to the same cultural messages at the same time' (2015: 22, 5). In the intimate public and the periodical alike, the affective lure of a particular shared experience is sufficiently strong to diminish the perceived significance of other, more or less tangible, social differences. As emotion is the dominant currency in the intimate public, so the periodical's viability is contingent upon the success of the emotional appeal it extends to potential readers. According to Fionnuala Dillane, after all, the periodical is an 'affective object', meaning that its 'capacity to communicate [and] the contours, scope, and effects of that capacity [...] are everywhere underscored by a relationality that is charged with affect and emotions' (2016: 7, 5).

The charged relationality described by Dillane is discernible in *Just Seventeen's* preview editorial, intimately entitled 'For Your Eyes Only'. In line with the fantasy realm of Berlant's intimate public, in which individuals who consume common texts and things can experience the 'feel' of intimacy and belonging, this editorial defines the girl, first and foremost, in terms of her position as a consumer of 'girl culture'. She is the target audience for *Just Seventeen*, a 'brand new magazine [...] put together with

the girl readers of *Smash Hits* in mind' that all girls will want to consume: 'No matter how old you are, where you come from or how you pass your time, we think you'll agree that *Just Seventeen* is going to be everything a girl could ask for in a magazine' (13 Oct 1983: 2). While the girl is indeterminate in terms of her age, background and interests, 'girl culture' emerges from this editorial discourse as a magically unifying experience that cuts across racial, ethnic and economic divides.

If and how 'girl culture' might itself be classified is a question that has already been posed by scholars of feminine adolescence. Driscoll argues that the term is 'difficult to strictly delimit because what is most obvious about it – girls – is what makes it hardest to define' (2002: 267). Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh are equally speculative, suggesting that 'girl culture' might be best understood in relation to the broad categories through which it tends to be organised, which would include 'social practices', 'material culture', 'media', and 'bodies' (2007: xxvi-xxviii). Invariably, the exact 'texts and things' that comprise 'girl culture' are forever changing, shaped by the historical, political and social imperatives of any given context, but the girl culture of *Just Seventeen* is as much significant for what it *does* as what it *is*. Girl culture, according to Driscoll, puts into circulation 'the things girls can do, be, have, and make, and in that process defin[es] what processes are particular to girls' (2002: 278). Because the scope of girl culture is so wide, and because its discourses are so diverse, the magazine – with its ability to 'capsize and contradict' – presents itself as an ideal venue for creating and debating experiences of girlhood (Powell 2011: 441). In brief, then, the 'girl culture' that *Just Seventeen* puts into circulation produces a sense of community by presenting readers with a selection of things by which they might be affected, and to which they might be moved to respond. The magazine's desire to generate a sense of shared experience, if not an identical set of responses, is enhanced

by the intimate mode of address it adopts towards its readers: hailed insistently as ‘you’, the reader is co-opted into an imagined community of ‘girls who want to know what’s going on now, because next month is simply too late’. Readers are similarly bonded in their status as discerning consumers: ‘Some people think they can tell you what to wear, who to like, how to behave, what’s best for you. We reckon you can make your own mind up. What you need is information; you need to see what’s around’ (13 Oct 1983: 2). *Just Seventeen*’s appeal to the autonomy of the teenage girl is, of course, largely rhetorical; if she is free to choose what to wear, who to like and how to behave, then the magazine’s carefully curated features, regulars, competitions and advertising determine the parameters of these choices, offering her a circumscribed selection of similar things (sanitary products, cosmetics, clothes, music) to ‘choose’ between.

What Berlant’s ‘intimate public’ emphasizes, and what I would like to explore further through more detailed reference to the content and style of *Just Seventeen*, is the extent to which the ‘feel’ of intimacy that comes from consuming ‘common texts and things’ is not consequent upon consumers feeling the same way about these texts and things, but rather is emergent from the shared experience of being affected – in one way or another – by these texts and things. In its presentation of the ‘things girls can do, be, have, and make’ *Just Seventeen* solicits censure as well as praise from its readers, and in doing so establishes the magazine as an intimate space in which – if not necessarily beyond which – girls’ voices can be raised, heard and responded to.

(Not) Naming Feminism

If, as Winship contends, the nomenclature of feminism would operate as one of the few remaining taboos in a magazine that routinely discussed masturbation, abortion and underage sex, then it would be nonetheless instrumental in furnishing *Just Seventeen*

with a narrative of progress that would situate the reader, alongside her peers, within a ‘commonly lived history’. This history is established as a signal site of affective identification in the first of *Just Seventeen*’s main feature articles. Published in *Just Seventeen*’s preview edition, along with embryonic versions of regular items on street fashion (Spy), work (It’s a Living) and health (Facts of Life), as well as an interview with Nick Heyward, a short story and Melanie McFadyean’s advice column, Louise Chunn’s ‘The Opposite Sex’ strikes the keynote for the magazine’s representation of young women’s opportunities in the early 1980s. As the figure of the girl is habitually instrumentalised within feminist discourse as a pulsating, inchoate embodiment of past, present and future, so she initially appears in ‘The Opposite Sex’ as the offspring of past achievements, a ‘sign of the times’ and, simultaneously, the mercurial embodiment of feminist futurity:

If you had been born 50 years ago, life as a girl would have been very different. Apart from having to wear a hat and gloves in public, your school and job opportunities would have been cut short. Your place in the world would have been neatly planned, from giggling girlhood to marriage and motherhood. Things have changed since then – but not as much as you might think. (13 Oct 1983: 22)

Written in the playfully intimate prose that would come to characterize *Just Seventeen*’s features journalism, ‘The Opposite Sex’ opens with a sobering reminder to its young readers that they are the fortunate beneficiaries of progress. Chunn’s deployment of the direct address – *Just Seventeen*’s favoured vocative mode – co-opts the reader into a cross-generational sisterhood of girls. The mobile pronouns identifying the reader with her bridled ancestor generate a sense of emotional proximity that transcends time and space. Girlhood, it seems, is an affective experience; the feeling of being a girl – and being able to identify with other girls – is, in part, what makes one a girl. The strategies

adopted here are strongly evocative of Berlant's account of 'women's culture', which she takes as her model for the 'intimate public' in *The Female Complaint*; namely, Chunn's article is conditioned on the presumption that subjects who are 'marked by femininity already have something in common' and are 'in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities and even when it is written by strangers'. If *Just Seventeen* participates in a juvenile permutation of Berlant's 'women's culture', then the 'girl culture' it represents is, in 'The Opposite Sex', one that enables its consumers 'to feel that their emotional lives are already shared and have already been raised to a degree of general significance' (2008: ix). *Just Seventeen* trades heavily on this notion of 'general significance', producing a grammar of girlhood that structures itself around the everyday experiences that girls – past and present – are assumed to share in common.

A lot of what makes you a girl is learnt when you are very young. You won't remember it, but you were always dressed in pink. Your brother wore blue. For Christmas you were given a doll. Your brother got a toy car (13 Oct 1983: 22).

Here, particular experiences that may or may not resonate with individual girls are proffered as universal truths. To borrow Berlant's terminology, such experiences are 'understood' by other girls even when they 'are not shared by many or any' (2008: x). Presented in terms of their 'general significance', the validity of these experiences is supplemented by bullet-pointed comments from single-sex groups of boys and girls that detail the 'most annoying' things about the opposite sex, with the girls lamenting that boys are 'only after One Thing' and like 'music papers with long words in them', while the boys complain that girls 'take hours to make themselves look pretty – then won't let boys touch them' and read 'anything with kissing on the cover' (13 Oct 1983: 22-23).

As *Just Seventeen*'s first feature, 'The Opposite Sex' establishes an ideological and rhetorical grammar that subsequent articles would pattern. As well as inaugurating the intimate mode of address that would come to characterise the magazine, Chunn's article also sets out *Just Seventeen*'s investment in heteronormative femininity as a default model for 'common' experiences of girlhood. Just as strikingly, though, it exemplifies in microcosm what Ros Ballaster et al describe as *Just Seventeen*'s 'surprisingly ambiguous' relationship to feminism, in which the magazine's 'progressive coverage of sexuality and employment', as well as 'inequality and discrimination', is 'undercut by content found elsewhere in the same issue' (1991: 155). As is the case with *Cosmopolitan* (1972-), at which similar accusations were levelled a decade earlier, *Just Seventeen* does give the impression of being 'progressive'. 'The Opposite Sex' is informed by sociological accounts of gender-role socialization, of the kind set out in leading feminist studies including Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) and Sue Sharpe's *Just Like a Girl* (1976), and Chunn uses landmark feminist legislative victories to plot her narrative of generational progress. The article reassures readers that the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act have all but eradicated structural inequalities, meaning that '[d]iscrimination on the grounds of sex is illegal', that 'schools and colleges offer the same courses to girls and boys', and that women and men are guaranteed the same wage for the same work. With such robust legislative protections in place, if things have not changed 'as much as you might think', it is because girls have *chosen* not to take up the opportunities that the activist campaigns of the previous decades helped to generate. Indicative verb formations abounding, Chunn instructs that girls 'earn less money than boys' not 'because they're on different wage scales', but because they 'take jobs that offer less pay for less responsibility'. Notwithstanding 'exceptional cases' like Margaret Thatcher, 'girls don't stay long at

jobs. They have babies instead'. 'The Opposite Sex' is a masterclass in feminist ambivalence. In line with *Just Seventeen's* determination to generate a sense of common experience that will stick with its nascent readership, the article presents girlhood as a prescriptive series of facts, predispositions and inevitabilities with which girls will be able to identify, but which are not readily reconcilable to feminism's ambitions for girls of the future. The overarching thesis of the article is that girls and boys are equally capable but constitutionally 'different'. As the daughters of the 1960s and 70s came of age in the 1980s, the monumental gains made by second wave feminism would enable them to fulfill their academic and vocational potential, but 'most' women would still 'like what women are "supposed" to like. They *could* work as plumbers, builders or accountants, but in their spare time they'd still come home and knit sweaters, bake cakes and read romantic novels'. *Just Seventeen's* signal article thus twists into a now-familiar formation, offering an embryonic articulation of postfeminism's vexed neoliberal configuration of choice in which girls '*could*' if they wanted, but 'most' would choose not to (13 Oct 1983: 22-23).

If Berlant's 'intimate public' offers a framework for analyzing periodicals as sites at which constituencies of 'non-privileged' subjects can experience a sense of belonging through the consumption of 'common texts and things', then Ahmed's concept of stickiness offers an insight into how this sense of belonging is achieved and augmented through the (re)mediation of particular 'sticky' signs. Feminism – in thought if not in name – is provocatively positioned here as an object of affective (dis)identification for the readers of *Just Seventeen*; as such, it is understood by both the producers and the consumers of the magazine in terms of its stickiness. As Ahmed explains, a sign becomes sticky when it 'accumulates affective value' as a consequence of being 'used a certain way again and again' (2004: 90-91). Feminism does not have

to be named explicitly in 'The Opposite Sex' for its familiar contours to be perceptible; it swirls menacingly as a potential source of 'bad feeling', a politics of troublemaking that seeks to destroy 'something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness' (Ahmed 2010: 65). In the context of 'The Opposite Sex', feminism is liable to suppress 'natural' differences between boys and girls, deny girls the 'feminine' pleasures of baking and knitting, and force them to pursue activities in which they are 'not terribly interested'. While *Just Seventeen* uses elements of feminist discourse to frame its account of gender inequality, then, it also describes readers' affective attachments to those 'intractable and enduring' institutions – including heterosexuality and the family – that reproduce this inequality (Ahmed 2004: 12). For readers responding to *Just Seventeen's* inducement at the end of 'The Opposite Sex' to 'pay £10 for the best letter telling us what you think', the article – which never refers to feminism directly – was nonetheless readable, simultaneously, as either a feminist critique of sexist double standards or as a rebuttal of feminism's militant attempts to erase the differences between men and women. Featuring in seven of the twenty letters published in the correspondence page of *Just Seventeen's* second number, 'The Opposite Sex' established feminism's topical stickiness. It drew praise from some readers for acknowledging 'that there are more differences between girls and boys tha[n] the purely physical kind' when 'feminists persist in their claims for complete equality and consistently aim to be more like males', while others interpreted it as feminist call to arms. One 'Impressed Consumer' even proffered her own addendum to the article's perceived feminist logic: 'what about the fact that when girls sleep around or are seen with the opposite sex they're slags, etc. but boys are studs?! Forgot to mention it? Never mind. Thanks all the same' (3 Nov 1983: 36).

‘The Opposite Sex’ and the responses it solicits offer a lucid demonstration of how the commonalities around which an intimate public forms might ‘stick’ with its particular constituencies: the stickiness of the content facilitates the sharing that takes place as part of the intimate public. In other words, readers adhere to one another through their engagement with sticky issues – of which feminism would be one. This is not to say that *Just Seventeen* adopts a consistent stance in relation to feminism, only that it is recognized as a site of consternation, or a ‘sticking point’, for young women; it refers to a set of ideas that are likely to rouse strong feelings – whether positive or negative – in the magazine’s readership.

Feminine Pleasures and Feminist Killjoys

Just Seventeen’s ambivalent approach to feminism is especially perceptible when the magazine’s politics are regarded within the context of 1980s periodical networks. The currency of feminism in magazines for young women had been ably demonstrated at the start of the decade with the launch of the underground periodical *Shocking Pink*. As a self-funded, low-budget magazine ‘written for and by young women’, *Shocking Pink* warrants special attention in a discussion of *Just Seventeen*. While its small circulation figures render it distinct from any mainstream competitors, in its debut issue *Shocking Pink* pre-empted the editorial remit of *Just Seventeen* by two years: ‘We feel that magazines like “Jackie”, “Oh Boy” “Blue Jeans” etc don’t give a realistic impression of our lives. We want a magazine that looks at fashion, music, books, makeup, relationships, and all the usual subjects, but from an interesting and realistic viewpoint’ (1980: 3). With definitions of sexism, and items on racism, menstruation and the age of consent nestled alongside role-reversal fiction, a photo story about coming out at school and advice about how to set up a support group for young women, the first issue of

Shocking Pink identifies itself as a feminist concern. Its progressive politics and punk aesthetics were instantly welcomed by young readers, revealing the demand for magazines that departed from the ‘stereotypes’, ‘pathetic love stories’ and ‘crap’ promulgated by other teen offerings (1981: 2-3). With its confrontational politics, crude language and irreverent cartoons, *Shocking Pink* differs sharply from mainstream magazines for girls, but the content of its seven issues from the 1980s, which covers home schooling, coping with sexist GPs, coming out, and the attempts by MP David Alton to impose restrictions on UK abortion law, suggests that *Just Seventeen* might owe a debt to its feminist forerunner.

The ideological intersections of the two magazines are especially palpable in their approach to matters of girls’ health and wellbeing. *Just Seventeen*’s treatment of masturbation as part of its ‘Facts of Life’ series (17 Nov 1983: 19), for example, replicates the informed, reassuring tone of *Shocking Pink*’s article ‘Masturbation’ in its second number. As *Shocking Pink* endorses masturbation as a ‘pleasurable and satisfying’ activity, so *Just Seventeen* laments that this ‘harmless and even necessary act is surrounded by so many cruel and silly myths’. Both items proceed to explore the biology of masturbation in strikingly similar terms, but if the prose is more or less interchangeable, then the ‘feel’ of the presentation is radically distinct. *Shocking Pink*’s article is illustrated by a provocative close-up photograph of a vagina, along with a series of scrawled doodles and celebratory marginalia: ‘bath nights are fun again!’, ‘who needs a teddy bear[?]’ (1981: 18-19). *Just Seventeen*, conversely, illustrates this installment on ‘Sexual Attraction’ with a single, centralized line drawing of a girl and boy, turned away from one another and worrying in thought bubbles about crushes and infatuations. If *Shocking Pink*’s coverage of masturbation is consistently open, affirmative and joyous, then *Just Seventeen*’s is more equivocal: at a textual level, it

recognizes the 'pleasure' of masturbation, but the anxious imagery suggests that the feelings of shame that swirl around masturbation are not summarily dispelled by feminism's 'empowering' discourses about female sexuality. As Ahmed observes, the radical politics of feminism cannot divest us of our emotional attachments to certain social 'sticky' norms, even when these attachments are not necessarily logical. Drawing on feminism's positive accounts of female masturbation, *Just Seventeen* might offer its own 'progressive' approach to the topic, but it does so while acknowledging that the feelings of its readers might be regressively oriented towards guilt and shame.

Feminism's own sticky associations are established in 'Going Spare', a short report in *Just Seventeen* by Jenny Tucker about a forthcoming special edition of *Spare Rib*. In trying 'to attract a younger readership', explains a representative of *Spare Rib*, the edition will aim to place 'more emphasis on fashion and music, without losing the political tone of the magazine'. Tucker responds with exaggerated incredulity, proclaiming that *Spare Rib*'s special issue 'doesn't seem very likely' to attract young readers 'when there's a feature questioning the politics behind fashion; are girls pressured to wear the "right" type of clothes?' (4 Oct 1984: 59). Tucker's inventory of *Spare Rib*'s other youth-oriented features includes 'one woman's account of heroin addiction, getting the most out of your dole money, your first sexual experience and a variety of interviews with female singers'. Tucker queries the appeal of this 'pretty meaty' content to a target audience of young women, but *Just Seventeen* had, by its first anniversary, explored almost all of these topics in one form or another: money, drugs and homosexuality were covered in early installments of the magazine's 'Facts of Life' series, and the very first issue had featured an interview with Annie Lennox in which the star discussed the sexual politics of clothes. Even Tucker's own column, in which the piece about *Spare Rib* appears, marshals items (about Rape Crisis and new Family

Planning Association initiatives targeting men) that would not appear out of place in *Spare Rib* itself. *Spare Rib* appears here, however, in the guise of Ahmed's 'feminist killjoy', threatening to displace the happy objects of *Just Seventeen*'s girl culture with the apparently grim topics and 'bad feelings' that Tucker gathers together under the sign of feminism (2010: 66).

There are, inevitably, moments when *Just Seventeen*'s coverage of 'live' news items overlaps with that of the feminist press. The occupation of Greenham Common Air Base by women opposed to its housing of nuclear arms is a case in point, with articles venerating and dismissing the actions of the protestors appearing across the mainstream and alternative periodical press throughout the 1980s. Offering a corrective to popular figurations of the women protestors as 'dykes' and 'dirty animals', Vicky Newell's warm account of her five days at Greenham for *Just Seventeen* turns on the feelings she experiences during her time at the camp, where she is arrested repeatedly for her participation in the protests. With its photos of Greenham's wire fences and smiling protestors, Newell's personalized approach to the political controversy at Greenham echoes that of Roisin Boyd, Jan Parker and Manny, whose ambivalent responses to the camp, and the feminist politics of the protest, had been published in *Spare Rib* two years earlier (February 1983: 18-19). Stressing the normality of the Greenham women, Newell refers to them in terms of their 'families and responsibilities at home', but she also speculates sympathetically about the soldiers who guard the base, reflecting that they 'must feel silly facing women more like their grandmothers, mothers and sisters than the enemy' (3 April 1985: 22-24). This barometric sensitivity to feelings on both sides of a political dispute is broadly typical of *Just Seventeen*'s coverage of other current affairs in the 1980s, creating spaces in which the reader is confronted with competing ideas and left to 'make up [her] own mind'. From teachers'

strikes to teenage pregnancy, the magazine uses political crises to stimulate the mediation of feeling, and in the process withholds any final judgment about particular debates. *Just Seventeen* adopts a similarly ‘personal’ approach to the controversy generated by MP David Alton’s Private Member’s Bill, which in the mid 1980s threatened to amend and restrict the 1967 Abortion Act. As *Spare Rib* urges its readers to ‘Dig out [their] “A Woman’s Right to Choose” badges’ and ‘fight for their rights before it is too late’ (Barker 1987: 8), *Just Seventeen* adopts a more ‘personal’ approach, using the eventual failure of the Bill as a framing device for a ‘Chatback’ feature on abortion in which a group of readers share their feelings about the current legislation (2 Nov 1988: 34-35). This – as with other features investigating ‘feminist’ issues – generated such a ‘massive response’ that it was followed up by another ‘personalised’ item, ‘Answer Back’, featuring letters from ‘girls who have been through the experience [of abortion] themselves’ (30 Nov 1988: 46).

Cannily drawing on aspects of feminist periodical culture, *Just Seventeen* is engineered in a such way as to *seem* progressive. The carefully curated selection of images, texts and things through which the magazine signifies its contemporariness highlight the autonomy of the ‘new’ freethinking girlish subject and her difference from the dewy-eyed girls who populate those unnamed publications that tell readers ‘what to wear, who to like [and] how to behave’. At the same time, astute readers would identify inconsistencies between *Just Seventeen*’s rhetorical flourishes about independence, individuality and self-acceptance – in which readers were reassured that ‘[e]veryone is individual and has something unique and “special” about them’ – and the particular models of youthful femininity that proliferated within its pages (Monro 21 Dec 1988: 37). In light of feminist critiques of Western beauty culture and simmering debates about intersectionality that were being addressed in other branches of the periodical

press (not least by *Spare Rib* and *Shocking Pink*), the progressive gloss of *Just Seventeen* would look less than earnest to some readers. Tanya from Stirlingshire begins her letter by heralding *Just Seventeen* as ‘the best magazine for [her] age group’, but laments that it is ‘let down’ by its choice of models: ‘I thought that an unconventional act like yours wouldn’t sink to the capitalist idea of using “perfect” women who fit into the female stereotype to wear your clothes. Looking at these women can be bad for people’s confidence and make them feel left out if they are plump or skinny’ (17 Nov 1983: 44). The magazine’s lack of racial diversity is also a source of debate. As ‘two black teenagers who wish to see the media reflect more of everyday life as it actually is and not what you would like it to be’, Donna McConnell and Sharon Sawyer write in to express their surprise at ‘the lack of multi-racial articles for such a supposedly progressive magazine’, wondering whether *Just Seventeen* is ‘unwilling to touch upon potentially volatile subjects’ (21 August 1985: 34). While similar queries about diversity in *Spare Rib* set the stage for an extended debate amongst editors and readers that would eventually lead to a radical reconfiguration of the magazine’s scope, contents and personnel, the questions leveled at *Just Seventeen* remain unanswered. In contrast to *Spare Rib* and *Shocking Pink*, then, the magazine provides a space for criticism, but – it seems – little potential for change.

Who’s that Girl?

Like her sisters of periodicals past, *Just Seventeen*’s girl is hitched to her time, a pivot point between tradition and progress, perfectly poised to capitalize on the feminist gains of previous generations. For this reason, she is invariably framed as a question: What she will do with her freedom? What will she achieve? What will she become? In *Just*

Seventeen, the question of who or what the girl will be or become in the future is posed to her directly and repeatedly in the form of quizzes, surveys and questioning articles: ‘How liberated are you?’; ‘Are you the marrying kind?’; ‘How good a shopper are you?’; ‘A-levels: what are your options?’; ‘Would you take your clothes off for £45 an hour?’ The question mark hovers hesitatingly as the concluding punctuation of many of *Just Seventeen*’s feature titles, a typographical cue to the reader to engage in the (endless) process of subjective scrutiny that the magazine mandates as a route to self-knowledge and self-improvement.

The magazine’s regular ‘It’s A Living’ column suggested it had high – and sometimes unconventional – expectations of its readership, showcasing interviews with women drag racers, helicopter engineers and record producers, while ‘superwoman’ Lindsay Shapero, author of the short-lived ‘Dare’ column, was pictured jumping out of planes, presenting television interviews and trying her hand as a gorilla telegram. If nothing else, feminism had expanded the precincts of girlhood; no longer confined to home and school, girls could go almost anywhere and do almost anything. At the same time, however, articles on sexual harassment, rape and unwanted pregnancies reminded girls of the dangers and responsibilities that would accompany their increased mobility.

While *Just Seventeen*’s articles and quizzes do not necessarily tell readers ‘how to behave’, they do identify certain types of behavior as undesirable or risky, happily designating the tight parameters within which the modern girl should aim to operate. In the quiz ‘A bitch or a doormat: what sort of friend are you?’, for example, the reader’s score determines whether she is a ‘thoroughbred bitch’, a ‘wimp’ or a ‘perfect pal’ – the latter of whom balances precariously on the friendship tightrope, refusing to ‘be walked over’ but ready with a ‘shoulder pad to weep into’ for any friend who offers ‘the same attention in return’ (10 September 1986: 21).

A more discursive account of female assertiveness is advanced in Rosalyn Chissick's article 'Do people walk all over you?' Some people, Chissick leads, 'ask to be walked over [...]. Are you one of them?' In order to avoid their exploitation by 'friends, parents [and] work colleagues' readers are urged towards a regime of strict self-surveillance, excising any perceptible gestures of 'non-assertiveness' from their behavioural arsenal. Even when women have banished their bad habits, however, they must take additional care to ensure that their confidence is not misinterpreted. Dr Susan Jeffers, one of the experts Chissick consults in the article, cautions that women '*need to know how to be tactfully assertive when dealing with men, as they have a tendency to interpret female assertion as aggression*'. Put simply: 'At work, a man who constantly gets his own way is "a shrewd business man"; a woman who does the same is "a bitch"' (20 Oct 1983: 34-35; emphasis in original).

This response to sexism in the workplace, in which the individual is tasked with managing the misbehavior of wayward colleagues and exploitative bosses without being 'a bitch', is repeated in *Just Seventeen's* more serious coverage of sexual harassment. In 'Harmless slap 'n' tickle...or sexual harassment?', Suzie Hayman traces the experiences of young women who have suffered sexual harassment at school or in the workplace. Ultimately, Hayman's article advises readers to be proactive: 'you can cope with it, or fight it. But you *shouldn't* put up with it'. The personal testimonies, however, act as sobering cautionary tales of what happens when young women do not 'put up with it': 'Chris' is fired when she reports being raped by her boss and 'Trish' is punished by her parents when she complains about a teacher who is later jailed for assaulting a 13-year-old girl. Jenny's informal course of action – which consists of banding together with female colleagues to undermine her workplace harasser – is presented as the most effective, but its success is contingent on the willingness of other

women to ‘rock the boat’ at a time when unemployment is perilously high (9 August 1984: 52-53).

A later article from 1988 adopts a similar approach to the inevitability of sexism. Ranging over ‘typical problems’ the reader is likely to encounter in the workplace, where ‘most women will experience a form of sexual harassment’, Penny Quinn’s ‘Sexual harassment: all in a day’s work?’ would seem to answer the question it poses in the affirmative. While Quinn identifies some potential sources of support, the article emphasizes that there ‘is no law against sexual harassment’ so until such time as ‘females feel free to voice complaints over harassment without fear of being laughed at’, the ‘solution’ must lie with the individual: ‘what can you do to help yourself?’. As well as keeping a ‘diary of events’ and contacting union representatives, Quinn encourages readers to ‘tell someone’: ‘if you *are* a victim of this type of behavior, the way out of the situation is to share your problem with others, rather than becoming trapped into a frightened silence’ (9 Nov 1988: 32-33). What is striking about these articles, and what they share in common with other items that focus on ‘feminist’ issues, is how closely *Just Seventeen*’s combined use of personal testimony, practical information and sympathetic intonation draws on patterns of presentation established in women’s liberation periodicals. As a lifestyle magazine, *Just Seventeen* does not openly agitate for direct political action, but neither does it equivocate about the need for change. As Quinn proclaims, ‘[i]t is time that women who object to offensive behavior from their male colleagues were taken seriously and not dismissed as being “up tight” or “over sensitive”’ (9 Nov 1988: 33). However desirable changes to institutional structures and sexist attitudes might be, it is the individual’s ability to negotiate the particular challenges of her own situation – albeit with the acknowledgement that she is ‘not alone’ – that takes precedence over collective action.

Feminism, as both politics and critical methodology, is often implicit in *Just Seventeen*'s framing of sexist phenomena, but it is never named. Rather, feminism is obliquely associated with those women in Hayman's article whose complaints are dismissed as 'over sensitive', 'unnatural' or 'queer' (9 August 1984: 52), or with the aggressive, careerist 'bitch' Chissick describes (20 Oct 1983: 35), not with the *Just Seventeen* reader, who might be forgiven for thinking that sexual harassment is 'a bit of a joke': 'Isn't it natural', asks Hayman, 'for men to whistle at girls and try to chat them up?' As *Just Seventeen* petitions for the legal safeguarding of women from sexual harassment in the workplace, then, it does so while seeking to distinguish between 'a whistle or a comment that makes you feel good, and one that makes you feel threatened' (9 August 1984: 52).

In contrast to activist periodicals, which have, since the 1960s, used the personal as a means of politicizing women and spurring acts of collective dissent, *Just Seventeen* in the 1980s offers a more 'juxtapolitical' instrumentalisation of the personal, in which feeling is the basis for the reader's imaginative attachment to other subjects in the 'intimate public' of girlhood. Feminism is thus positioned as an object of affective (dis)identification within the magazine, one of the key means by which readers experience a sense of connection with – or disconnection from – other girls. In *Just Seventeen*'s coverage of reproductive rights or discrimination or violence or sexuality, feminism emerges as the lens through which producers and consumers of the magazine tend to assess particular political positions; it is always there, in features, quizzes, the advice pages and correspondence columns, shaping the feel of, and the feelings in, the magazine, even when it appears to be absent.

If no single magazine can deliver 'everything a girl could ask for', then *Just Seventeen* in the 1980s at least began the process of imagining how feminism might

shape *what* girls ask for. Enabled and informed by feminism's language of intimacy, *Just Seventeen* created a space in which girls could 'feel' together, while also modeling modes through which the girl reader might articulate her desires, expectations and anxieties in that transitional adolescent moment when 'everything' appears to be within her grasp.

Endnotes

¹ An article in *Marketing Week*, 'Just Seventeen Reduced to Monthly', records sales figures for January to June 1996 at 162,490.

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