CHAPTER ONE

Are Girls Taking Over
the World?

> By virtually every measure, girls are thriving in
> school; it is boys who are the second sex.
>
> Christina Hoff Sommers, "The War
> against Boys"

Wren was all set to take on the world after graduation.[1] About to
complete her senior year as an honor roll student, she was
beyond excited about the prospect of starting university in the
fall—the first in her family to do so. Involved in her school
council, captain of the scrap-booking club, and an A+ pupil (her
school average was a cool 92 percent), Wren had already been
accepted to two of the four schools she had applied to and felt
confident that the other two would come through. Like all the
girls in her working-class[2] group of friends, Wren's future looked
bright. She was optimistic, passionate, and caring; she knew that
she wanted to change the world for the better. "The majority of
my girlfriends are as driven as me," she told us. "They all know
what they want to do, where they want to go, and are very moti-
vated about pursuing those goals." When Wren noted that the
vice president and secretary of the school council were both

girls, as were the editor of the school paper and the president of the film club, she reflected for a moment and then said, "Girls are just generally more organized with their thoughts about what they want to do …[3] Yeah, I think a lot of my female friends are generally more motivated to succeed."

"I've always been a pretty academic student," Wren said, sitting across from Shauna during her interview, wearing her class-of-2015 dark blue hoodie, sporting a loosely tied ponytail, and displaying the bronze manicure she had just gotten in preparation for the semiformal fundraiser that Friday night.[4] Her goal was to study international development and then, if all went well, embark on a short-term career as a humanitarian aid worker before possibly becoming a teacher. And Wren's determination was certainly paying off. She was considered a good bet for receiving the citizenship award at her graduation ceremony and felt passionate about the legacy she was leaving behind as she embarked on the next leg of her academic journey. Indeed, she was the most recognizable person in her school: "I would say I'm popular because everyone knows me." She wasn't popular for being a party girl or gossipy, as is often the case; rather, she was popular for being kind, hardworking, and thoroughly dedicated to her school. "I care about my school quite a lot," she emphasized. "Some of the things I do are invisible to the students, so I don't always get praised for it, but my goal is to make it the best time of everyone's life." Though she was involved in the anti-bullying club, art club, choir, leadership camp, and ME to WE (an organization that empowers youth to change the world through volunteerism and social involvement) and had recently instituted the flourishing scrap-booking club, she still found time to make good on this goal. Before graduation, she had a few more projects up her sleeve: trips, fund-

raising, spirit activities, and then … prom. "I've worked up to the power," she said of her status. "It's a good feeling. It's nice to have it pay off."

Though not a "girly girl," Wren admitted that she would enjoy the ritual of dressing up for graduation day when it came in June—but that outfit would not be anywhere near as fancy as the one she had for prom. She had saved up money from babysitting and other odd jobs to buy her moderately priced, yet stylish, graduation dress. Friends would come over to do their hair and makeup and compare their dresses. But ultimately, they would talk about how unreal it all felt. "It's kinda scary to think about it," Wren admitted, "but it's also quite meaningful. It's not the end of your school life, but it symbolizes the end of your child life. It just symbolizes moving on." When Wren walked across the stage that summer in cap and gown, she would do so with sheer exhilaration and pride. "It feels like I've earned this," she stated matter-of-factly. "I work really hard, about a 9.7 out of 10." The other 0.3 was lost to a recently acquired Netflix addiction. "Part of stress relief," she joked. "Otherwise, it'd be a 10 out of 10." Wren's laughter reminded her that taking time away from school work was *not* the end of the world, even though sometimes it felt like the whole world might come crashing down on her head if she did not keep her eye on the prize at all times.

SMART GIRLS: THE FACE OF THE FUTURE?

Are girls taking over the world?[5] It would appear so based on Wren's story and many others just like it. In fact, throughout the Western world, we have been bombarded with accounts of girls' skyrocketing academic success. The twenty-first century smart girl is defined by her ability to glide through high school collecting

As, racking up awards, and paving her own way to a bright future. Single-minded "alpha girls,"[6] over-scheduled "perfect girls,"[7] even-tempered "gamma girls,"[8] and do-it-all "supergirls"[9] can be found in books,[10] magazine articles,[11] and newspaper headlines, giving the impression that there is an endless parade of young women who epitomize ubiquitous, seemingly effortless success. Such descriptions offer an enduring image of bright, disciplined, hardworking girls who excel in school and are poised to not just take on the world but take it over. Examples include: "The New Girl Power: Why We're Living in a Young Woman's World"; "Why Are Girls Higher Achievers?"; "Compelling statistics show boys rank behind girls by nearly every measure of scholastic achievement"; "At Colleges, Women Are Leaving Men in the Dust."[12] This narrative has also frequently played out in popular culture. From Hermione Granger of the *Harry Potter* series to Gabriella from the *High School Musical* franchise and from Dora of *Dora the Explorer* to Alex Dunphy of *Modern Family,* girls have indeed become the face of academic stardom. Beyoncé even chants it in her pop hit, *Run the World (Girls):* "I'm reppin' for the girls who takin' over the world, / Help me raise a glass to the college grads!"[13]

This girl, we are repeatedly told, is the face of the future. But after reading numerous descriptions of girls' unstoppable, inevitable success, we began to wonder about the story that was not being told. While not all girls are academically successful, the ones who are face differing contexts that radically shape their experiences. Why are accounts of girls' high achievement in school reduced to a standardized story that makes it appear as though being smart is stress-free and unsurprising? Where are the stories of struggle, tension, and negotiation? Where are the stories of sexism in classrooms and social worlds that still create stumbling blocks for girls?[14] Where are the stories about what

happens to girls after high school and college, when they face gender inequality in the workplace? And where are the stories of girls who are silenced by a homogeneous narrative that leaves so many significant contexts, including passion, frustration, and concession, to the wayside?

Joining in a conversation with other feminists working in the areas of gender, schooling, and academic success,[15] we wanted to investigate the smart girl experience precisely because it has become a highly visible story in Western culture with real power to shape how we think about, treat, and allocate resources to girls. The typical story of girls' academic success narrowly shapes adult perceptions of girls, restricting what is considered to be normal ("Aren't girls supposed to do well in school?"), possible ("But girls today can do anything, so achieving your goals should be a snap!"), and realistic ("Juggling straight As, student council, and soccer is what it takes to succeed in today's world!"). These limitations become all the more poignant when we consider the diversity and inequality that this smart girl stereotype erases. After all, who *is* the successful girl featured in books, magazines, and newspapers? Most likely, she is white, middle- or upper-middle-class, Western, and from a progressive household, where higher education is not just valued but ingrained in the family's culture. "Race,"[16] socioeconomic class, sexuality, religion, nationhood, age, and other crucial contexts are woefully underrepresented or completely ignored, suggesting that a girl's success is based solely on her gender[17] ("Girls are just smarter than boys"), but without an understanding that gender is never a stand-alone category that operates in exclusion of all the other contexts that feed into who a girl is and how she comes to see herself.

In order to offer a different kind of story—one that digs deeper into the complex and intersectional identity of smart

girlhood—we talked with girls who saw themselves as academically successful (or as potentially academically successful) and asked them what it was like to be smart within the context of their schools.[18] What we found was that, although most were doing very well academically, all of them had stories to tell about how they managed and negotiated[19] high achievement, what it had cost them socially or emotionally, and what concerns they had about the future that related to being independent and making a good living. For the most part, we learned that being a smart girl was not an easy identity to occupy in school—it took work, worry, and the kind of structural and familial support that not all girls can access. These hidden contexts suggest that the smart girl stereotype with which we are now so familiar in the West does a grave disservice to girls'—and boys'—struggles by obscuring how adults understand young people's experiences of school and social life and their concerns for the future.

While Wren's life may have the elements of that all-too-familiar tale—a girl with straight As who is involved in extra curricular activities, bound for college, and deeply committed to her future success—her story, along with the other stories in this book, offers a much broader understanding of what girls' experiences of academic success look like. For example, Wren admitted that maintaining her GPA was deeply stressful. "I do stay up very late every night, till 2 or 3 am," she told Shauna. "All my friends are in the same boat. We all have a lot of responsibility."

One of the self-imposed responsibilities on Wren's plate was worrying about the future. She described a main stressor in her life and the lives of her friends: how to merge work with having a family. "I think girls have the immanent, 'Am I going be a mom? Am I going to travel, be a mom, go to university? Am

I going to do *this?* Am I going to do all *that?*'" Wren mused. "Boys *never* think, 'Am I going to be a dad?'" She and her friends spent a lot of energy thinking and talking about the intricacies of timing: "How old is too old, and what age is right, and how much are you supposed to have done and fit all this stuff in and then still be a mom? Or are you even going to *be* a mom?!"

Wren's disclosure of stress and her concerns about combining work and family serve as a sharp reminder that many girls are not simply gliding through school, no matter what their report cards say. Rather, they must—to greater and lesser extents—engage in strategic negotiations to balance their academic success with other complex identity contexts. The goal of this book is thus to move beyond stereotypes and delve into the lives of smart girls by offering multilayered portrayals that help to contextualize simplistic headlines, magazine covers, and popular psychological accounts. Each chapter tackles a particular element of this negotiation, such as the stress of managing a supergirl persona, overt and covert strategies that go into simultaneously being an academically successful student *and* a successful girl, how girls deal with sexism in relation to academic success (including ambivalent feminist moments), and the intersectional challenges of negotiating academic success alongside entwined class-based and racialized backgrounds.

By contextualizing the lives of smart girls, we hope to offer a window into girls' academic success that moves away from the idea that they are "taking over the world"[20]—a common story that has led to both excitement and panic—and swings back to a narrative from a previous era, which views girls as worthy of support, resources, and political interventions. In short, we hope to put girls back on the agenda.[21]

GIRLS AGAINST BOYS:
THE NEW DOMINANT SEX?

The smart girl stereotype can only be understood in conjunction with another homogenizing story that has also captured attention in the West for over twenty years: the failing boy. Garnering considerable press in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States,[22] the failing boy has become one of the most gripping—and debated—narratives in Western education. While girls such as Wren are held up as exemplars of academic success, boys are routinely framed as struggling and lost.[23] In fact, girls' success has been repeatedly blamed for boys' failure, as if only one gender can or should do well at a time. One is contingent on the other: as girls are seen to ascend like stars, they are routinely held responsible for the perception that boys are plummeting like stones.[24]

It is widely reported that girls are now outperforming boys in high school tests, SATs, college acceptances, and undergraduate grades,[25] which would seem to set girls up for better lives by giving them, among other things, higher self-esteem, greater happiness, and improved financial security.[26] But many have asked: What about the boys?[27] The purported displacement of boys by girls has elicited outcries that the playing field is now tilted in girls' favor, as evidenced by these headlines: "Why Boys Are Failing in an Educational System Stacked against Them"; "Why Our Schools Are Failing Boys"; "The Boys at the Back"; and "How to Make School Better for Boys: Start by Acknowledging That Boys Are Languishing While Girls Are Succeeding."[28] A well-referenced *Business Week* cover story describes girls as building "a kind of scholastic Roman Empire alongside boys' languishing Greece."[29] The metaphor of transitioning empires is

fitting given the refrain of attack: framed as hardworking, multi-tasking, and self-inventing, girls are represented as ready and able to take down the existing gender regime. Girls' success is thus viewed as a hostile coup—a dangerous and tumultuous changing of the guard that must be kept under watch. While individual girls like Wren are congratulated for their hard work and high achievement, there is a deeply rooted anxiety in the West surrounding the notion that girls, as a social group, are now poised to vanquish boys as the "natural" heirs to the throne.[30]

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However, it was not so long ago that girls were the underdogs in education. In the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, liberal second-wave feminists set their sights on schooling as a form of gender-based oppression.[31] They demanded that schools become more hospitable, less toxic environments for girls that would not shortchange their futures by channeling them into dead-end and feminized courses.[32] Emphasizing women's ability to rise up in a meritocracy, liberal feminist strategies entailed balancing gender representations in textbooks, encouraging girls to participate in mathematics and sciences, and engaging girls as self-reliant and independent learners who could achieve if they applied themselves.[33]

In the mid-1990s, as a result of liberal feminist lobbying to bring gender balance to schools, as well as the newly instituted neoliberal imperative to reward American schools that garnered higher standardized test scores,[34] statistics emerged that suggested a new gender gap: girls were doing better than boys on standardized tests and overall averages, outshining boys on literacy scores, and encroaching on traditionally male terrains, such as

mathematics and sciences. Feminist interventions to reform the gender imbalance in education had seemingly worked, but according to some critics, maybe a little too well.[35] Rather than being a cause for celebration, these highly publicized findings instigated panic. Condemned as the "feminization" of schooling, feminist interventions were blamed for the perceived failure of boys.[36]

In her book *The End of Men,* Hanna Rosin offers these well-circulated figures: in the United States, women now earn 60 percent of master's degrees, close to half of law and medicine degrees, and 42 percent of MBAs. Women now also earn close to 60 percent of all bachelor's degrees, meaning that, for the first time in history, women receive more education than men.[37] The *Washington Post* also notes that, in 2012, "nationally, girls had a higher [high school] graduation rate, at 84 percent, while boys had a rate of 77 percent."[38] And in the first of a six-part series on failing boys in the *Globe and Mail,* one of Canada's national newspapers, it was reported that boys "earn lower grades overall in elementary school and high school. They trail in reading and writing, and 30 per cent of them land in the bottom quarter of standardized tests, compared with 19 per cent of girls. Boys are also more likely to be picked out for behavioural problems, more likely to repeat a grade and to drop out of school altogether."[39]

These disparities have been explained through a combination of neuroscience and the feminization of schooling thesis, which suggests that schools have become unfairly tilted in girls' favor. According to some developmental psychologists, boys' and girls' brains are hardwired differently.[40] For example, boys are said to be better at spatial problems, physical activity, and problem-based thinking, while girls are said to be better at language, communication, and relational play.[41] It has been repeatedly argued that the curriculum has been modified to appeal to girls in order to address

liberal feminist complaints so that it now revolves around skills at which girls presumably excel, while the talents of boys are believed to be increasingly disparaged.[42] The feminization of schooling thesis is bolstered by critiques about the disproportionately high numbers of female teachers at the elementary school level, which, critics complain, gives girls unfair advantages:[43] the "female perspective" is favored, female teachers do not understand boys' "natural" kinesthetic abilities, and boys are punished for being rowdy, needing to move around, and doing the things that boys do.[44]

As these arguments have gathered speed,[45] an imagined future of smart girls growing up to be excessively powerful women has instigated fear, not only over boys' educations but over the crisis of masculinity this gender reversal would seemingly cause. There is talk of the "end of men,"[46] "the rise of women,"[47] "the new sexism,"[48] and "the war against boys."[49] Girls, once the underdogs in education, are now being criticized for having too much power.[50] But are girls really taking over the world? Do statistics on educational success tell the whole story? Or is there more to this simplistic narrative that has dominated educational debates for the past twenty years? Amidst the feverish pitting of "successful girls" against "failing boys," the day-to-day struggles of smart girls have been ignored, as have the political, social, and economic contexts that enable the stereotype of the smart girl to flourish.

WHAT SEXISM? POST-FEMINISM AND GIRL POWER

The positioning of girls as the new dominant sex in the classroom is part of a broader social trend known as post-feminism.[51] Post-feminism suggests that girls in the West are beyond the need for

feminism because they now live in a world where sexism no longer exists. After all, if girls are outdoing boys in school, how can they possibly be experiencing gender inequality? Following this logic, American psychologist Dan Kindlon writes about the emergence of "alpha girls"—girls who have attained the highest level of success of any generation of girls in American history. These girls are smart, confident, and self-reliant.[52] They neither ask for any special treatment nor complain. These girls feel that the world is their oyster and are comfortable with their newfound power.

Kindlon argues that what makes this all-encompassing success possible is the fact that today's North American girls are 100 percent unhampered by their gender, enabling a feeling of limitless possibility: "They think of themselves as a post-feminist generation. They are the living, breathing embodiments of the inner revolution that women in the last generations so ardently desired and fought for."[53] According to Kindlon, the alpha girl has been liberated by the success of feminism; she no longer needs to rely on a so-called victim mentality to help her get a leg up. He concludes that the "alpha is a leader in a generation of girls on the rise. She is deployed in large numbers at the borders of adulthood—ready to make her mark on our world."[54] In such a world, there is no room for gender inequality; it has been expunged, and, along with it, the need for feminist politics.[55]

Kindlon's argument rests on the post-feminist assumption that feminism has won and that girls are now reaping all the benefits of living in a golden era where gender no longer matters. With the playing field presumably leveled, complaints of sexism now sound antiquated, whiny, and wounded. Instead, post-feminism relies on a narrative of individualism, which suggests that girls are in charge of their own fate: success is up to them, and as such, failure can no longer be attributed to larger

structural issues that once held girls back. With gender inequality considered a thing of the past, girls are now seen to have unlimited access to success. But the flip side to this belief is that girls can no longer cry foul when they experience gender inequality: sexism is thus framed as a personal, rather than social, defect. But what cost does this have?[56]

The girls in this book grew up in a culture defined by and infused with girl power.[57] As the popular incarnation of postfeminism, girl power has helped to reinforce the myth of gender equality at the everyday level. From sexual agency to lavish consumerism to assertive individualism, girl power has aided in the belief that girls today can do, be, and have anything they want without fear of sexism or other inequalities in school or beyond to slow them down.[58]

Originating as a rallying cry for young women trying to make space for themselves in the male-dominated punk scene of the early 1990s,[59] girl power was initially invested with collective political action and critiques of the sexism, racism, and homophobia that governed both mainstream and underground music industries.[60] As a call to arms, girl power was all about the DIY punk code of anticonsumerism and anticorporatism—*grrrl* power! But by the mid-1990s, it had become a catchphrase for the mega pop band the Spice Girls.[61] According to the official Spice Girls book, girl power is about believing in yourself, having control over your own life, staying true to your friends, and demanding equality in your relationships.[62] Friendship, fun, female empowerment, and loyalty pervaded girl power, which conveyed the unequivocal message that girls could do anything they wanted as long as they stood by each other—and looked good doing it.

This post-feminist ethos has shaped not only the way girls understand themselves but also the political climate in which

adults interpret and judge the actions of girls. Girls are now seen to embody individualized freedom, which often includes the "choice" to consume, hook up, ace school, find a job, and upset the traditional gender order in education and beyond.[63] In fact, when the term "girl power" was introduced into the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2001, it included the idea of self-invention as part of its definition: "A self reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism."[64] It is this kind of girl power—celebrating the newfound autonomy of girls and young women through consumer, sexual, and educational freedom—that has become central to girls' understanding of themselves and adults' understanding of girls.

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Returning to Wren's story, it is hard to argue that she is a victim of gender inequality. The president of her school, a straight-A student, happy, and well adjusted, Wren is the spitting image of Kindlon's alpha girl, and she also reflects the media construction of what "real" girl power looks like: she seems to have the world at her fingertips, to have it all. But when Shauna asked Wren if she had experienced sexism, she only paused momentarily before launching into a string of stories. She recounted her annoyance when, on an exchange trip to Italy, she was stared at and harassed for being a "larger girl," which she felt was an example of gender discrimination. She also explained that she was not yet on the dating scene and wondered if it was because the boys at her school were intimidated by her academic and administrative success: "Girls are supposed to swoon over men with power, but if a guy can't swoon over a girl with power, then that's inequality!" And with prom on the horizon, she also lamented the still-pervasive custom of boys asking girls out.

After listing these disappointments, Wren thoughtfully concluded that such gender disparities "just weren't fair" and were definitely examples of sexism.

As a product of post-feminism and its popular incarnation of girl power, the smart girl stereotype obscures sexism by representing girls as doing, being, and having it all while failing to acknowledge the kind of struggle or stress that might be associated with gender inequality. But there is more to the story than either post-feminism or the smart girl stereotype demonstrates. Although post-feminism erases the possibility of sexism by insisting that girls are living in a gender-neutral world, sexism still abounds in all areas of social life and at all levels of power. To look at just a few examples in the workplace, women hold less than 17 percent of corporate board seats in[65] and make up only 5.2 percent of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.[66] Women hold only 19 percent of the seats in the U.S. Congress.[67] Female lawyers earn 83 percent of what their male counterparts earn and make up only 20.2 percent of all partners in U.S. legal firms.[68] In powerful and lucrative STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—the gender disparities are even more glaring. Only one in seven engineers is female; women hold only 27 percent of computer science jobs; and even though women are touted as earning more bachelor's degrees than men, they receive less than 20 percent of computer science degrees.[69] Overall, women still earn only seventy-eight cents to every dollar that men earn.[70] In fact, across all university degrees, women earn less than men, with the gap widening as the level of education increases.[71]

When gender intersects with "race," the pay gap becomes even more pronounced. For example, in the United States, Hispanic and Latina women earn 54 percent and African American women earn 64 percent of what white men earn.[72] Hispanic,

Latina, and African American women are also less likely to graduate high school than white women or men, and they face discrimination in the workplace, further heightening the pay gap. When educational backgrounds are equal, women of color are still paid less than their white counterparts.[73]

What these figures make startlingly clear is that, while some girls excel in school, this success does not translate into a transformation of power at the highest levels, and economic inequality stubbornly endures.[74] It is still very much a man's world. So why does the stereotype of the flourishing smart girl set to take over the world persist?[75]

DESPERATELY SEEKING IDEAL NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTS

Post-feminism and its popular incarnation, girl power, are situated within the broader social, political, and economic trend known as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism was a powerful undercurrent in 1980s politics during the Reagan years in the United States, the Thatcher years in the United Kingdom, and the Mulroney years in Canada, and it continues its ascendancy in the twenty-first century. It entails the valorization of competition, an entrepreneurial spirit, the steady extraction of the state from economic and social matters, and the belief that we are able to make ourselves into what we want.[76] Neoliberalism incudes the seductive notion that we are in charge of our own fate no matter what circumstances we have been dealt.[77] But the flip side to this seemingly empowering ethos is that we must fend for ourselves and not expect any sort of social or economic support from our governments.[78] Under neoliberalism, we are cut off from state involvement and expected to not just survive but thrive.[79]

In this era of personal accountability and shrinking social safety nets,[80] neoliberalism demands citizens who are flexible in education, work, and social life—citizens who are willing to pull their weight and work hard without complaint. Post-feminism is a part of this neoliberal ethos because it applies all of these characteristics to girls and young women, who are now told they are living a life without the constraints of gender and other kinds of inequality, leaving them free to explore any opportunities, ascend to any heights, and make any choices.[81] But again, the drawback to this ethos is that girls and young women can no longer expect any political or social support in relation to gender injustice, making claims of sexism difficult and the need for feminist politics a hard sell.[82]

It is this kind of logic that has contributed to the construction of what Australian youth studies scholar Anita Harris terms "future girls"—girls who are ideal global citizens.[83] Future girls, Harris suggests, are girls and young women capable of weathering the changes afoot in our new economic and social order without complaint. They soldier on, working as hard as possible, without whinging or whining. Their future-oriented approach not only serves them well but also serves the needs of global capitalism, which requires particular kinds of students and workers if it is to continue its political and economic dominance. And it is the academically successful girl who is the best example of this kind of ideal neoliberal subject, able to remake herself with ease by relying on a wide skill set, shine as a decision-maker in the face of multiple choices and options, and excel in a variety of capacities through perseverance and a plucky can-do attitude.[84] But what becomes abundantly clear in the construction of smart girls as ideal neoliberal subjects who work hard and get the job done is that many impossible demands and responsibilities are

placed on their shoulders.[85] This kind of pressure has created contradictory conditions for girls, who are told they can succeed at anything they choose, although only a few actually do. And for those who do not succeed? They are left to wonder what they did wrong at a time in Western history when girls are supposed to be able to accomplish anything they set their minds to.[86]

This is the backdrop against which our study is set: the widespread belief that we are living in a post-feminist era, where girls are seen as having achieved not just gender equality but gender superiority, even though sexism remains pervasive; and the broader political, economic, and social trend of neoliberalism, within which girls are constructed as ideal global citizens because they are seen as compliant and adaptable and, therefore, as assets to global capitalism. Yet when faced with everyday experiences of gender inequality alongside narratives of empowering and competitive individualism, many girls in our study struggled to make sense of their academic identities as girls who are supposed to have it all. These are the stories that help to counterbalance the stark juxtaposition of successful girls and failing boys.

THE SMART GIRLS STUDY

The stories in this book were collected during a research project conducted in Southern Ontario, Canada, between 2008 and 2013.[87] Including the subjects in our pilot study, we interviewed fifty-seven self-described smart girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen in order to learn how they negotiated being smart in school.[88] After much discussion about what we meant by "smart," we decided to focus on academic achievement determined by criteria like grades, but left some room for disruption of this narrow

measure. Our recruitment materials asked for participants who were "doing very well in school (or could if you tried)." We also asked, "Do you tend to receive As in your courses?" and, "Do you think of yourself as smart?" During our interviews, we asked participants how they defined the word "smart." Many girls emphasized grades or being book smart, but some also discussed the relevance of being street-smart, by which they often meant being socially savvy. Both of these definitions align with neoliberal objectives, as we discuss in the next chapter.

Though we privileged academic success in our recruitment materials, some girls who did not receive particularly high grades or who only received high grades in certain subjects still volunteered. In our discussions with these girls, the nuances of academic success were evident: the relevance of school subjects and their varying academic statuses, the financial resources that can facilitate high grades, how some students are disinterested in the structures of schooling, and the complexity of the category "smart girl," which certain girls occupied more comfortably than others. The less obviously academic girls in our study continued to complicate and challenge the smart girl stereotype for us and helped us rethink and redefine our own constrained notions of what it means to be "smart."[89] For these reasons, those girls who did not fit the traditional smart girl mold were extremely important to our study. Yet as we dug deeper into the stories of the girls we interviewed, even those that initially seemed to uphold the smart girl stereotype (i.e., white, middle-class overachievers), we found that *all* of the girls frequently scuttled the commonsense links between gender and success that permeate everyday perceptions.

We asked the girls what it was like to be smart, how they perceived their academic identities, and how being academically successful overlapped with being (or not being) a successful girl. This

examination included how being smart affected girls' experiences of popularity, femininity, and sexism. It also included an exploration of how academic success was entwined with other identity contexts, such as class and "race." About half of the girls chose to be interviewed together with a smart friend, which likely enabled them to feel more comfortable in the presence of an adult researcher, and most were interviewed a second time about six months later.[90] Frequently, participants chose to be interviewed in nonacademic settings, such as local coffee shops, their homes, public libraries, and food courts in malls.[91] They chose their own, sometimes quite creative, pseudonyms.

We also interviewed a subset of seventeen boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen who, like the girls, self-identified as smart. They were similarly given the option of an individual interview or an interview with a smart friend and were able to choose the interview location. We were committed to including boys in this book, which is focused on girls, for a number of reasons. First, in order to deeply contextualize girls' experiences, we felt it was necessary to hear from boys and engage with their understandings of academic success. We did not want to presume to know what boys thought, nor did we want to leave them out of a project that, in many ways, is contingent on boys' experiences of academic success, too. Moreover, in order to offer rich and meaningful stories, we felt we needed multiple perspectives on particular issues relating to gender, such as classroom and social world dynamics. For example, while girls are often cast in the role of teacher's pet, boys are granted access to the more affable role of class clown. When we asked boys about these gendered categories, many had different viewpoints than the girls did, and this contributed fresh perspectives on the meaning of academic success within a school setting. The stories we col-

lected from boys are thus relayed in relation to the stories from girls, and they offer an important—and mostly unheard—position that deepens our understanding of gender, schooling, and academic success. While this is a book about girls, our discussion of boys' academic success and their understandings of gender in the context of school highlights the importance of hearing from boys on this topic.

Our participants came from a total of fifteen schools across Southern Ontario, including high schools, middle schools, and upper-level elementary schools. The schools were nondenominational public schools, Catholic public schools, and private schools.[92] The majority of our participants came from the small city of Secord, a blue-collar, deindustrializing border town hit by the kind of economic restructuring brought about by manufacturing closures that have similarly disadvantaged other North American cities over the past thirty years.[93] While our interviewees came from a wide range of economic backgrounds, most had at least somewhat financially stable families, which reinforces the association between economic security and academic success.[94] Of the fifty-seven girls we interviewed, forty-five were white, ten were East, South, or Southeast Asian, one was Arabic, and one was black. Of the seventeen boys, fifteen were white, one was South Asian, and one was Southeast Asian (see appendix).[95]

READING SMART GIRLS

This book is organized around topics that help contextualize the lives of smart girls and negate the simplistic story that is overrepresented in media and popular psychological accounts. In chapter 2, we begin this contextualization by exploring the media construction of the supergirl—the girl who is not only

academically successful but also skilled at sports, extracurricular activities, and social life. No other example seems to offer better proof that girls today have it all. Yet the stories relayed to us by girls who might be deemed supergirls suggest that this kind of intensive success comes at a price. The stress and anxiety associated with maintaining perfection is daunting and potentially damaging to girls, who push themselves beyond reasonable limits to stay on top. Such consequences are further compounded by the invisible privilege of class-based and family advantages, which very few girls can access. While the supergirl makes über achievement look highly attainable and readily available, the economic and social support needed to sustain this identity means that it is hardly generalizable to all girls.

In chapter 3, we explore tensions in smart girls' lives by focusing on how girls and boys negotiate gender and peer culture. We focus on the collisions and overlaps between the most culturally valued forms of femininity and masculinity as they intersect with academic success. While girls are deemed to be the new dominant sex in education and beyond, we offer stories in this chapter that illustrate the strategies the girls in our study used to negotiate their smart identities within their school's social world.[96] We explore the challenges of a smart girl identity in relation to popularity, sexual desirability, fitting in, and standing out. In some instances, girls played down their academic success for fear of becoming loners with no friends. In other instances, girls dumbed down because they believed it would make them more popular and attractive to boys. There were also girls who played up their academic success to garner accolades, awards, and respect, although sometimes at the expense of popularity and sexual desirability.

In this chapter, we also explore the strategic negotiations of girls in contrast to those of boys, who used different tactics to

manage their academic success. In some instances, boys were able to navigate the complexity of being smart in school more easily than girls, particularly if they offset this potentially damaging social position with other skills, such as sports or humor. The boys did not feel they had to hide being smart, but they did hide doing work in order to get high grades; they did not want to be seen as caring too much, because it suggested that they were unathletic, antisocial bookworms. Both girls and boys worried about how they were perceived in relation to their academic success, but girls were more careful about being seen as too smart, while boys were more careful about being seen as too studious.[97]

Chapter 4 offers another context for girls' academic success by focusing specifically on sexism in the classroom and on how girls imagine their futures. While many of the girls in our study drew on a post-feminist outlook that emphasized individualized success or failure and denied the existence of sexism, they sometimes recognized, and then lamented, the sexist contexts that shaped their lives. In this chapter, we explore the tension between girls' common assumptions of gender equality and the sexism they (or we) identified. While most of our participants maintained that the genders were equal, contradictions and epiphanies arose in our interviews. For example, a participant might deny sexism one moment and then provide a concrete example of it the next without noticing that she had done so; or a participant might first deny the existence of inequality but realize later in the interview that it was present in her life and then provide an example of how it angered her or affected her in some specific way. When girls did not see sexism in their lives, it sometimes created tensions, which they interpreted as personal problems that they needed to solve alone.

In this chapter, we also juxtapose the stories girls told about their perceptions of gender dynamics in school to those of boys, who offered a very different perspective. While girls often felt that boys were favored by teachers—allowed to joke around, play the class clown, and derail lessons on a dime—many boys expressed feelings of gender discrimination around assumptions that they were automatic troublemakers. In these cases, some boys felt that teachers favored girls, who were seen as quiet, studious, and well behaved, and that, as a result, girls did not receive the same level of surveillance as boys did. These contradictory layers interject points of complexity and contradiction into the typical stories of academically successful girls and academically challenged boys. They also highlight how pervasive gender assumptions can be difficult for both girls and boys to negotiate.

In chapter 5, we focus on other contextualizing features of smart girls' lives: intersections of class and "race." These interwoven complexities are crucial to countering the typical story of smart girls as homogeneous winners in education. In our interviews, class emerged as a powerful force in the lives of smart girls. On the one hand, it was a source of judgment between students and thus a tool that some girls used to bolster their privilege and exclude others. Many of the participants in our study made comments evaluating schools based on the class make-up of the neighborhoods the student populations came from, noting the importance of wearing expensive brand-name clothing and making broad generalizations about wealthy and poor families. There were also moments when girls recognized the parental support they received, noted the value of a private school education, or lamented the challenges they faced because their families were less well-off than others. But on the other hand, class was also something that was hidden and simplified. Many girls

failed to recognize their own privilege, for instance, or said that everyone at school gets along, although it was clear that it helped a girl's social status to wear popular styles. Class inequality was also viewed as an individual issue that arose from the personal skills of the wealthy and the personal deficits of the poor rather than from structural dimensions, such as high unemployment. Many feminist researchers have pointed out that working-class girls face specific challenges in school that go largely unseen.[98] Broader issues, such as structural factors and the middle-class assumptions of the school, were unacknowledged by even the most politically astute girls that we interviewed. Similarly, "race" emerged as a central feature in definitions of academic success, particularly in relation to the stereotype of the "smart Asian." The girls in our study with Asian backgrounds lamented that they were often pigeonholed as being automatically good at school but laughed off these racist stereotypes as "just joking around," yet such assumptions reproduce a narrow idea that being "too smart" is not only antisocial but also the mark of a cultural outsider.

In the concluding chapter, we focus on two themes that offer glimpses into places in smart girls' lives where possibilities for social transformation might be fostered. First, we explore ways that some of the girls in our study were contesting popular femininity through microresistances. These small yet potentially influential challenges to popular femininity help shift the landscape of girlhood by subtly expanding who and what a (smart) girl can be. Second, we focus on the importance of school culture in fostering girls' comfort with academic success. If the culture of the school was open to less traditional forms of gender and sexuality, it seemed that smart girls had a much better chance of thriving rather than hiding. Negotiations and complications

were minimized where it was cool—or at least not socially disastrous—for girls to openly engage their academic identities with pride and visible satisfaction. While there was certainly no perfect refuge for smart girls—who all had to contend in some way or another with the complexities and constraints that being smart entailed—some schools clearly presented this kind of support more than others. Both of these themes offer a glimpse into ways that girls, boys, teachers, administrators, parents, and media commentators might support smart girls, making space for them to pursue academic success without apprehension.

Lastly, the final chapter makes a renewed call for greater care in making broad statements—in media outlets and academic research—about girls and boys in school. Greater attention must be given to intersections of identity, such as gender, "race," class, sexuality, age, and nationhood, including privileges and disadvantages that cut across these categories. We offer one such example in the next chapter. While the celebrated supergirl of the twenty-first century may seem to be an identity that is attainable for girls who try hard enough, we explore the class-based and family supports that it takes to succeed at absolutely *everything* and offer a critique of the possibility of actually being a supergirl without succumbing to the stress and sleeplessness of striving so high.