



You Play the Girl: And Other Vexing Stories That Tell Women Who They Are

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In this zippy, intelligent call to arms, a film and TV critic merges memoir and cultural commentary to break down how women have been watching, making, and playing in the all-media funhouse.

Who is “The Girl”? Look to Hollywood and find the usual answer, one projected on millions of screens every day: she holds The Hero’s hand as he runs through the Pyramids, chasing robots; she nags him, or foils him, or plays the uptight straight man to his charming loser. But this “Girl” isn’t really a person. She’s often barely a part. And given such a dehumanized ideal, how are women shaped in its presence? How does it form their sense of who they are and what they can become? From Bugs Bunny to Playboy Bunnies, from *Frozen* to *Flashdance*, from the progressive ’70s through the backlash ’80s, the triumphalist ’90s, and the pornified, “bro culture” aughts—and at stops in between—Chocano blends formative personal stories with insightful and emotionally powerful analysis. She shows how growing up in the shadow of “The Girl” taught her to think about herself and the world and what it means to raise a daughter in the face of these contorted reflections. In the tradition of Roxane Gay, Rebecca Solnit, and Susan Sontag, Chocano brilliantly shows that our identities are more fluid than we think, and certainly more complex than anything we see on any kind of screen.

You Play the Girl: And Other Vexing Stories That Tell Women Who They Are Details

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From Reader Review *You Play the Girl: And Other Vexing Stories That Tell Women Who They Are* for online ebook

Jason Diamond says

This has been a great year for essay collections and this one is at the top of the heap. "Celebrity Gossip" is easy one of the best pieces of cultural criticism I've read this year.

Chris says

August 2017 My Book Box Non-Fiction Selection

Recently, I watched part of *Keeping Up with the Joneses*. It's a movie about a suburban couple whose new neighbors turn out to be spies/special agents/CIA something or other. It has a good cast, and there were parts that were quite funny. I didn't watch all of it, however, because it soured. The two men become buds, in fact the movie is really a bromance despite the couples, but the two women nope. In fact, the suburban wife dislikes the spy woman even before the truth comes out. Because, as you know, women can never be friends with prettier women.

It was like, really? The wife is right, there is something sneaky going on, but her belief comes from jealousy more than anything else. Additionally, proving her right also indicates that the female spy is not as good her husband, but it was really the whole friendship thing – men are friends, and that is emotionally important – while women can never be friends with other women. Not really.

I'm tired of that shit.

I think Chocano would agree with me.

Chocano's book details the messages that pop culture seems to be giving women and girls, whether it is intentionally or unintentionally. Honestly, I want to kiss her because I thought I was the only one who was disturbed by Elsa's change of dress in the movie. Her writing about Cinderella will ensure that you will never look at a Cinderella movie the same way. Her comments about being trained in English Literature are tattooed on everyone who has a literature degree.

The book is actually quite good because she focuses on things that are seen or meant to be "women's" stories – like *Sex in the City*. It isn't just the primary focus of the book – it is on pop culture and women, so shows like *Mad Men* are also discussed. She also addresses the desire to like something while realizing that it is problematic.

Chocano's tone is conversational, and the book is an easy and engrossing read.

Michelle says

"*You Play the Girl: On Playboy Bunnies, Stepford Wives, Train Wrecks and Other Mixed Messages*" is a four part book of well written and analytical essays of various cultural themes. Popular films, books, articles and famous people and events are added and highlight author Carina Chocano's stories and observations. Chocano, a journalist and storyteller takes pride in the creative thinking process, her short stories and articles have been featured in several notable publications including the NYT, Texas Monthly, Elle, and others.

In the first essay, Chocano revealed she learned about sex through Playboy Magazines and Bugs Bunny in

Drag (no relation to the sexy human toon Jessica Rabbit). As children, many of us knew about the forbidden nature of the carefully hidden adult magazines. Playboy reached its peak of readership between 1966-1976. Heffner called his beautiful hostesses and models “Playboy Bunnies” featured by the Bunny logo. Heffner influenced American culture in numerous ways, more notably the unrealistic beauty standards and behavior for American women. Chocano explored this theme further with the emergence of “The Feminine Mystique” (1963). This was at a time when there were few single parent households, and women typically worked outside the home for extra spending money, not because they needed a double income. “The Stepford Wives” (1972) existed only to please, nurture, and reflect a positive manner on their husbands social and economic status.

If a marriage failed in the 1950’s-1970’s— it didn’t matter that the husband was a womanizer, had a gambling, drinking, or domestic violence problem, the broken marriage was typically blamed on the “regrettable lack of wifely effort”. The popular Ladies Home Journal “Can This Marriage Be Saved” column (1953-2014) totally advised women on the strategies of keeping their marriages intact.

The wedding has always been another way for a woman of lesser means to snag a gazillionaire, and live a life of luxury and prestige. So goes the story when Chocano worked in the Silicon Valley in 1992, going into debt buying overpriced sandwiches in the company lobby. The wages were low/pitiful, and the rumor was that a \$3,000 Christmas bonus was to materialize, so she remained on the job... was it a good decision? It was too easy to fantasize about a fairy tale wedding-- Cosmopolitan Magazine reminded women: “It was just as easy to date a rich man as a poor one.” The drawback was that these wealthy men had unrealistic standards (a lot of them, in fact) as to what their princess bride should look like.

The Bachelor transports viewers to a “fantasy world” of Grand Canyon romance. Helicopters whirl over the grand mansion setting, long walks, sincere talks and sweet picnics with food and flowers—a girl can be seen winning her bachelor, she is lovely and admired by all. Will the implied wedding date follow? The bachelor and his bride may date briefly, and likely break it off. In any event, the show is romantic and fun to watch.

In her 40th year, Chocano was not feeling as brave or courageous as Elizabeth Gilbert in her book “Eat, Pray, Love” (2006). Following the birth of her daughter Kira, Chocano took her time reading Gilbert’s book. In fact, she was overeating Cheetos and googling “how to put a hex on someone’s balls” while reading it. Traveling to exotic locations as “Liz” had done after shedding her annoying husband was out of the question for Chocano, she certainly would never find “balance and spirituality in the pursuit of pleasure” in India or in an Ashram. With Oprah Winfrey’s promotion of the book, and 9 million copies sold, Gilbert was a wealthy woman. However, at the start of her memoir, Liz presented herself in an entirely different manner. Are the elements of romance, escapism, exotic getaways combined with self-help advice that connect readers with the author’s life experience for real? There were some pointed questions to consider.

In “Girls Love Math” we realize that women have an expiration date, this date arrives long before a man’s. Older men are distinguished as they age,(George Clooney, Richard Gere). Chocano has laid awake mentally calculating how much time she would have before reaching the age when women were expected (at age 39 or 40) to simply go away. Even talking Barbie dolls have said: “Math is hard” (I agree). The films Chocano chose to write about were overly long and less interesting. However, Chocano makes up for it in a big way: by the topics she writes about from “Gothic Celebrity” (which was excellent)- to “Train Wreck”-- to writing about Kira's pre-school (Mom jeans and all). The stories shared about Kira were alright. Despite the topic of Virginia Woolf being overly written about, (the closing essay) there was really a good spin on this presentation, which matched the overall style of the book.

*With thanks and appreciation to Mariner Books- (Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt) via NetGalley for the direct e-copy for the purpose of review.

Spencer Tierney says

Chocano takes the reader through a fast-paced yet precise history of roles women have played over time in real life and on screen & in texts, seamlessly showing the parallels between the literal and the symbolic worlds. There's even a brief history of the waves of feminism told through movies. She's a brilliant essayist and cultural critic, with strong one-liners, poignant questions, and a masterful way of weaving personal anecdotes, literary analysis, groundbreaking legislation, film reviews, and feminist critiques all in one. By the end, she touches on over 70 works, including novels, movies, media articles, and academic studies, in a way that's so organized and captivating that you forget how much you're learning. It's an essay collection that's unforgettable and important.

AJ says

You can also find this review at <https://booksbestfriendblog.wordpress...>

Note: I received this book from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review

Similar to *Bad Feminist*, I often found myself nodding in agreement as I read *You Play the Girl*. For example, I also felt the same way as Chocano after watching *Trainwreck*. Why did Amy's character think there was something wrong with her? Why did she have to use her father's mistakes to justify her own life? Couldn't she have both enjoyed having fun with no strings and then settle down when she wanted to? Couldn't she just enjoy her life without defining it by both the absence, and then presence, of a relationship?

I also had the same issues with *Frozen*, and I can't stand how it overshadows *Mulan* as Disney's most feminist movie. I'm for anything that makes girls feel like they can be the leads in their own stories, but let's not forget that *Mulan* took on the Huns.

Reading about Chocano's experience with *Playboy* magazines just reinforces how damaging sexualized media images can be for young girls, and the Hefner interview she references reminded me of the definition of a slut: a woman with the morals of a man. Hefner has several relationships at once but expects his girlfriends to only sleep with him. I doubt any women who admitted to being in relationships with several men at once would be the exalted head of a magazine.

Chocano's essays covered a lot of topics, and I mean A LOT. She moves from Amy Schumer's *Trainwreck* to *Alice in Wonderland* to *Playboy* to *Frozen* with wit and ease. While I loved her insights, she didn't really go as in depth on several topics as I would have liked. However, what she did cover was insightful and relevant, and I definitely recommend this book for those looking for a feminist take on pop culture.

Laura says

Very nearly a 5 so I rounded up for how much reassurance and joy this book brought me. I will expand on this soon.

Becky says

An analysis of feminism in pop culture.

Have you ever watched a movie that made you feel icky for some reason that you can't precisely identify? This author can describe the reason, clearly and articulately. And spoiler alert, it's usually because the movie sends a pretty messed up message about women.

Movies discussed include Flashdance, Pretty Woman, Desperately Seeking Susan, Stepford Wives, Fatal Attraction, Knocked Up, Lars & the Real Girl, Frozen, and others. Don't get me wrong, I like some of these movies. I didn't stop to think about the message they were sending. For example, have you ever noticed how many movies suggest women can be easily replaced by robots (Her, Stepford Wives, Ex Machina, Lars, etc.)? Or how so many female protagonists are portrayed as likable for the sole reason that they are anomalies, somehow exceptional, and therefore worthy of our admiration? WTF Hollywood?!?!

Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says

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This author's name sounded familiar to me, which was odd - because as far as I knew, I hadn't read any of her works. Netgalley strikes again! As it turns out, Carina Chocano had published an essay in *another* feminist book I read recently, called NASTY WOMEN. The essay, titled "We Have a Heroine Problem" was about the Madonna/whore lens with which we view women in the public eye, except it's more like the paragon/demon complex (my name, BTW). *Basically*, women in the public eye are either put on pedestals or villainized depending on how well (or how poorly) they conform to society's gender norms.

YOU PLAY THE GIRL is a collection of essays about women in pop culture, and some of the confusing or even downright negative messages that these female representatives send to the populace. Chocano spans an impressive range of material. Just a few of the topics she hits on: Playboy Bunnies, sex dolls, Stepford Wives, Amy Schumer's *Trainwreck*, the Ghostbusters reboot, Flashdance, Pretty Woman, Katharine Hepburn, Mad Men, Maleficent, and the Desperate Housewives, just to name a few.

Sometimes these pop-cultural essays make me side-eye the author a little because two bad things can happen (apart from the book just being generically bad for purely technical reasons): 1) the essays are tone-deaf and either miss the point, or spend far too much time circling around it, or 2) the essays are unoriginal and make points that you could find on any blogspot or wordpress-type blog *cough*.

NOT SO, HERE!

In *YOU PLAY THE GIRL*, Chocano writes with vivid freshness, delivering new insights to books and movies you may have seen or watched dozens of times and never really thought deeply about. She talks about feminism, she talks about sexism, she talks about motherhood, adolescence, sexuality. There is so much ground covered in here, and I spent several nights last week getting only about 4 hours of sleep, tops, due in part to my inability to put this book down.

I really recommend this if you're a feminist or a pop culture enthusiastic. This author is just fantastic and has such an amazing way of writing in clear and concise terms. If she published another collection of essays like this, I think I'd buy it in a heartbeat.

Thanks to Netgalley/the publisher for the review copy!

5 stars!

Thomas says

4.5 stars

A whip-smart essay collection about how we portray women in movies, TV shows, magazines, and more, as well as how women learn to internalize and emulate these portrayals. Carina Chocano does an amazing job discussing the problematic ways women's stories get told, ranging from how women face objectification and sexualization, to how women always end up in marriages no matter how fierce or strong they seem, to how we glorify youth and innocence and slight playfulness in women and devalue all other attributes. She discusses an impressive array of pop culture, including in-depth analyses of *Playboy* magazine, *Flashdance*, *Trainwreck*, *Mad Men*, *Sex and the City*, and so much more. A solid quote about ageism that highlights her conversational yet compelling tone:

"When I first moved to Los Angeles, in my late twenties, I remember being shocked by how readily women my own age accepted the 'fact' that they had aged out of desirability; how resigned they were to their own irrelevance; how uncritically so many accepted this ideology propping up privilege and power inequality as being synonymous with reality rather than helping produce and maintain reality; how readily they mistook culture for nature. 'It's like when a female reaches the age of 39 or 40 she simply needs to go away,' Lauzen says. 'When any group is not featured in the media they have to wonder, 'Well, what part do I play in the culture?' There's actually an academic term for that. It's called symbolic annihilation.'"

I appreciate how Chocano integrates critical analysis and memoir in these essays. She combines pop culture analysis with stories about how she learned about girlhood growing up, as well as how her daughter has

interacted with portrayals of women in the media. Reading this book reinforced for me the difficulty of raising a daughter in our society in such a way that would reject the plethora of sexist, dehumanizing portrayals of women that we see everywhere. We see women suffer. We see women objectified. We see women's ambitions tamed for the sake of marriage. Chocano points out these patterns with great skill and I hope we can learn to create better representations of women in film and television, as well as a less patriarchal world for women - and everyone - to inhabit. Another quote, this one about *Frozen*, that shows how Chocano refuses to take things deemed "feminist" at face value:

"Frozen was sometimes talked about as a feminist princess movie because it did not end with a wedding. But, if anything, it was a feminist movie in that its heroine is being gaslit and put into one impossible double bind after another. It was not so feminist in the way independence is conflated with solitude and loneliness, and creativity and power with madness. Despite her rehabilitation, Elsa still bears all the vestiges of the Disney villainess, but she isn't bad. She just does bad things. She can't help it. She can't control her powers, because she can't control her terrifying feelings. It's her feelings that are dangerous... Ultimately, Elsa does manage to break free, sort of. But the forces that hold her back are diffuse and insidious, and she never really embraces her desire."

Overall, a solid essay collection I would recommend to anyone interested in feminism or film and media. I deduct half a star just because I feel that some essays did not go as deep as they could have; their analysis felt curtailed, like more could have been said or a stronger conclusion could have been reached. Still, an amazing book that appeals to my love of dissecting pop culture.

Cynthia says

Chicano's focus on women's issues fills me with hope, and some anger. She explores the state of our lives through popular books, movies, and happenings and she does it with literary skill and always a sense of humor and fun which helps when the reader's gut reaction is likely anger or even helplessness. I last had the sense of being in the presence of someone who's wise years ago, when I read Faludi's *Backlash* and Wolf's *Beauty Myth* though neither of those women had the same joie de vivre that Chicano brings.

It's difficult to look at these issues no matter how important they are but the medicine went down more easily because of her humor. The only place I felt lost is when she wrote about the possible meaning behind the movie *Frozen*. She falters on this topic but to be fair she's up front about being in the deep end of the pool or I think more likely we're all floundering in the shallows when dealing with Disney's popularity. The messages in these movies are so mixed it's hard to nail down why we can feel such an upswell of emotion. I also think the *Frozen* topic stands out so starkly because of the clarity Chicano brings in other topics. *You Play the Girl* is well worth your time.

Thank you to the publisher for providing an advance reader's copy.

Paul says

A brilliantly written series of essays that made me glad I don't participate in popular culture and wonder why the author does.

Lisa Mcbroom says

Chocano writes a memoir of her puberty and how events in pop culture shaped her as a person.

Lexi Goyette says

Overall, this was a fast read for anyone looking to think critically about the media we consume on a daily basis. Movies like *Pretty Women*, *Knocked Up*, *Thelma and Louise*, *The Stepford Wives*... TV shows like *Mad Men*, *The Bachelor*, *Inside Amy Schumer*... All are dissected and analyzed critically. Carina Chocano had a career as a movie critic. Almost every essay uses TV/film examples to illuminate her thoughts.

Here's what I didn't like...

1. Chocano paints a vivid picture of the roles assigned to heterosexual, white women. No essay in this book includes examples of women of color or women in the LGBT+ community and how they are portrayed in films/television. Why did *The Princess and the Frog* perform poorly in the box office compared to *Frozen*, *Tangled*, and others? If white women are assigned roles in Hollywood and elsewhere, what roles are assigned to non-white women? She talks briefly about women in the sex industry -- particularly *Playboy* -- but how are lesbians portrayed in porn and male-consumed media? Chocano missed a huge opportunity here.
2. Most of her essays had excellent thesis statements. But most of them fell flat. I would come across the final few paragraphs of the piece, thinking, "She's going to end this with a bang!" And she wouldn't. Most of her essays involved facts, facts, facts, minor opinion, facts, end. I finished some of the essays like, "I genuinely don't know how Chocano feels about this." The Amy Schumer chapter, for instance. Halfway through the piece, she's criticizing *Trainwreck*, then she's praising *Inside Amy Schumer*, then she's praising *Trainwreck*. It brought up some great points that reaffirmed my love of *Inside Amy Schumer* but just didn't feel cohesive. Does Chocano think Amy is a feminist we should look up to or simply an unrelatable woman looking to cash in on being a hot mess? I genuinely don't know. (My personal thoughts are a combo of the two, leaning more toward the former, but I'm not the one who wrote a book here.)
3. The *Frozen* essay. This one got on my nerves.
 - In one chapter, Chocano is praising women for being openly sexual and themselves. In this one, she sees Elsa's transition into a "sexy" outfit during 'Let It Go' as out-of-touch. "[Highly stylized hotness] demonstrates how transforming yourself into a trophy is a good outlet for any strength of will or creativity you may have been cursed with at birth... It teaches girls that self-objectification is a great strategy for neutralizing the qualities others may find threatening, and deflects attention away from them." Or perhaps Elsa's stripping of her coats symbolizes her acceptance of her powers -- "The cold never bothered me anyway" -- and her attractive new getup displays her newfound confidence and empowerment, which is synonymous with her femininity rather than her masculine/gender-neutral attributes (as the empowered Mulan and Merida have displayed in their respective films). Plus, don't we want to empower our daughters that the most "beautiful" women are the ones that are empowered and truly themselves? Materializing this inner beauty into outer beauty gives our daughters multiple reasons to say, "I want to be like Elsa!"
 - As for the language of 'Let It Go,' Chocano says, "Is she submitting or rebelling? 'Let it go' isn't what anybody says when they want to encourage you to own your strength... It's what people say to other people

when they want them to get over themselves, to move on, give up. 'Let it go' is silencing." Actually, letting go can be quite empowering for some people. For people with anxiety, letting go means not sweating the small stuff, not allowing what people think to ruin their whole day. For others, letting go can be ignoring other people's thoughts and preconceptions about them, so they can be themselves. Elsa is telling herself to let it go. In fact, this is one of the first times in her life she isn't being told what to do. 'Let It Go' is the modern-day 'Hakuna Matata,' but with a powerhouse vocalist and catchier melody.

•Chocano considered it non-feminist of Elsa to return to her sister rather than living independently and creatively. This, to me, is interesting, as one of the essays in the book talks about how Disney princesses' villains are almost always female because, well, female rivalry. To me, *Frozen* is a breath of fresh air. The whole ending involves the mending of a relationship between two females. Sure, Kristof is there, but it's clear that Anna and Elsa's relationship trumps Anna's relationship with Kristof. Rather than pitting women against each other (Rapunzel vs. Mother Gothel, Cinderella vs. stepmother, Ariel vs. Ursula, Aurora vs. Malificent, etc.), Disney has finally pushed for female empowerment in the form of female bonding.

It's not that I disliked this book. I didn't. It's simply that I expected more.

Laurie says

Carina Chocano is the essay writer I wish I was. She examines how pop culture treats women and girls- and how it affects us. From Katherine Hepburn and how her image had to be toned down for people to accept her movies; 'I Dream of Jeannie' and 'Bewitched' (how two insanely powerful women constantly deferred to men); to the huge Disney princess phenomena wherein a princess is someone to be saved by a man or presented to a man. 'Desperate Housewives', 'Real Housewives', 'Desperately Seeking Susan', 'Flashdance', the misogyny in 'Can This Marriage Be Saved' - in a women's magazine, no less, 'Thelma and Louise', 'Pretty Woman', Disney, 'Mad Men' and a lot more all come under her feminist microscope. And while you can tell she's very frustrated by the way the media presents women, she is always entertaining and easy to read. I'd love to read what she thinks about 'Wonder Woman' and the new Dr. Who! Five stars out of five.

Julie says

This book started out strong. I was entranced and horrified by my own ignorance, and this book was going to help me see past the wool covering my eyes.

Then, it got...different. It stopped being an empowering look at how women are manipulated, or how many of us have forgotten our own history, and felt bitter and meandering.

Quite a few pieces of the essays read to me like they'd been shoved in sideways to bulk up the text rather than written because that was where they belonged. For instance, on page 73 she throws in someone named Craig. Who? There's been no reference to this person (who it turns out much later is her husband, but how would I know that?) and it's a transition from an eye-opening discussion (that I was seriously enjoying) about women in early film production to something about an artist named Peyton. I was so baffled I tried to use google to figure out who these people were and what they had to do with early film mavens. I had no luck, so just shrugged and kept going. This type of seeming non-sequitur happens a bit, and would work if it were a

consistent form of adding personal revelation/experience, but instead it left me feeling like the book needed better editing.

I felt like the essays were strongest and most interesting to read when they were dissecting pop culture or offering insights to historic women in the arts. I liked the author's insights, even when I didn't agree with them. The book's largest and most glaring weakness was the lack of any intersectionality. This book felt very white and very privileged, and that undercut much of the emotional message for me.
