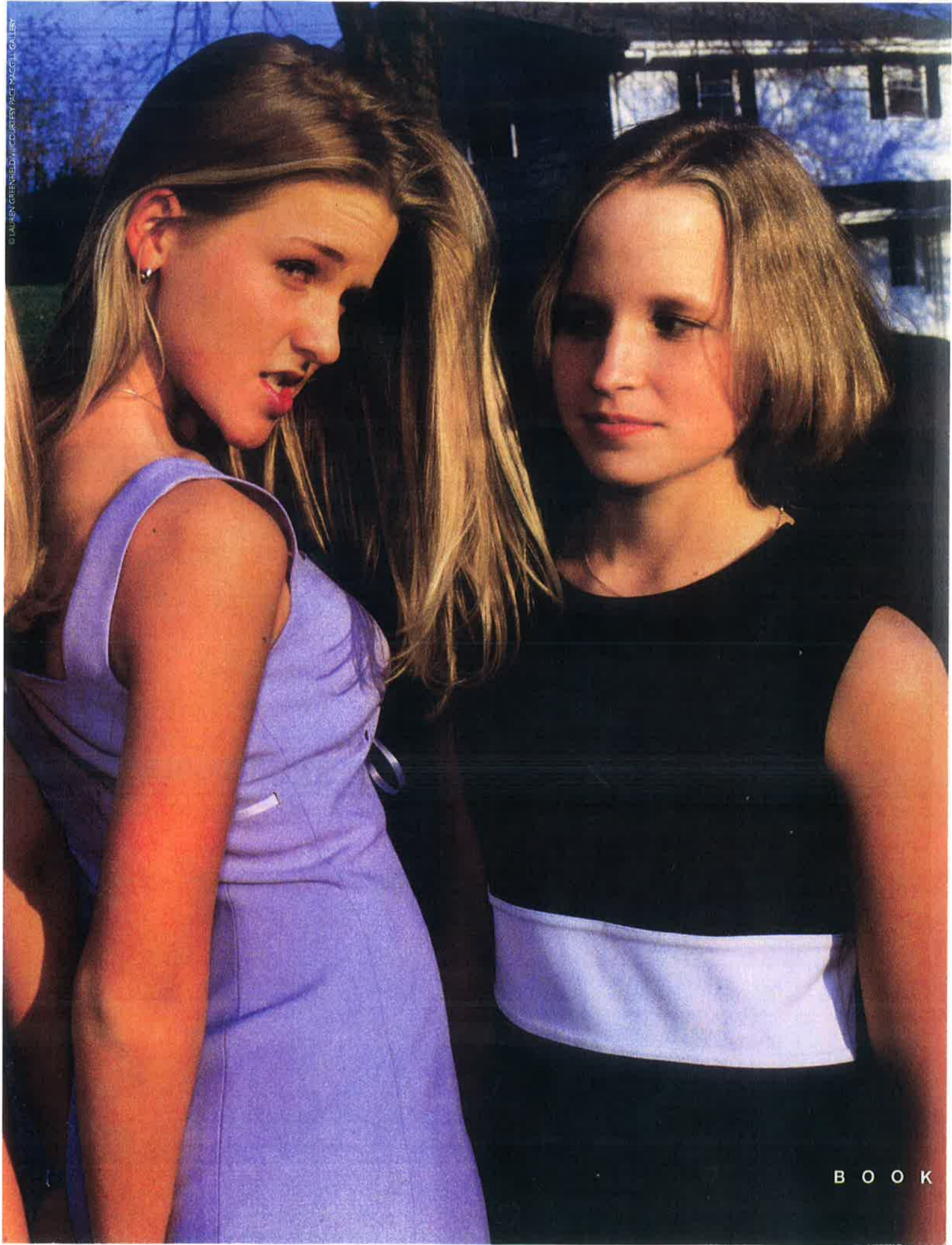




Alli, Annie,  
Hannah, and  
Berit, all 13,  
before the first  
big party of  
the seventh  
grade, Edina,  
Minnesota.

# Girl Culture

Lauren Greenfield's new book poignantly delves into the real lives of American girls.





## B O O K S

**T**hey are always blond, it seems, and always thin: the Popular Girls of every woman's haunted teenage memories. They are named Monique or Sandy or, of course, Heather, and their lithe legs stretch a mile from their fashionably rolled-up shorts to their totally cool sneakers—a degree of stylistic perfection unattainable by mere mortals. They seem so preternaturally gifted that you wonder whether such grace can persist into adulthood. (Maybe you hope it doesn't.) You also wonder whether these girls are happy.

Lauren Greenfield wondered just that when she traveled to Edina, Minnesota, in 1998 to photograph a story for *The New York Times Magazine* on the expansive topic of "being 13." Her pictures of the glorious blond Alpha Girls ruling over the seventh grade there began to provide an answer. The photos also began to convince Greenfield

that there was much to be revealed about the real lives of American girls. It all led to a new book, *Girl Culture* (Chronicle Books, \$40), an ambitious effort that blurs the distinction between photojournalism, art, and social science. (An accompanying exhibition of the images opened in October at the Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York and will be traveling to the Stephen Cohen Gallery in Los Angeles in December and the Robert Koch Gallery in San Francisco in January.)

"What I learned shooting the 'popular girls' in Edina was how hard it was to stay on top," says Greenfield, "and how insecure they felt about their social position. One said she was afraid she would come to school one day and suddenly find that she wasn't in the popular group anymore. Another girl said that if she could do it over again, she'd rather have real friends who liked her for who she was." Instead, she was rewarded for who she appeared to be. That raw truth—the tyranny of appearance in the lives of young girls and women—lies at the center of Greenfield's book. The girls in *Girl Culture* range from four-year-olds playing dress-up in spangly princess outfits to awkward teenagers arriving at a weight-loss summer camp to Lás Vegas showgirls

Playmate Stephanie Stokes, 2 at the Pla Mansion, Los Angel

“ I learned from the popular girls, ” says Greenfield, “how hard it is to stay on top.” **By Michelle Stacey**



Angie, 11, Chelsea, 12, and Melissa, 14, of the Little Indians softball team, Naples, Florida.

and strippers plying their trade. In one way or another, all of them are defined by how they look.

Like the photographs in Greenfield's first book, 1997's acclaimed *Fast Forward: Growing Up in the Shadow of Hollywood*, the images in *Girl Culture* are often weighty with unflinching detail. In one shot, a showgirl named Anne-Margaret is seen reflected in her dressing-room mirror at the Stardust Hotel in Las Vegas. Taped to the side of the mirror is a handwritten note that reads I APPROVE OF MYSELF, alongside pictures of models the dancer admires. That picture, shot on assignment for *Stern* magazine, got Greenfield thinking "about how girls construct their identities, how they use pieces of the outside world to express themselves."

Soon, Greenfield, who recently became a member of the VII photo agency, began seeing aspects of girl culture all around her: on an assignment in Florida shooting a story on spring break, with its "girls gone wild" partying; while photographing Chattanooga, Tennessee, debutantes who complained about being fat as a size four; and while shooting the Edina teenagers, whose unforgiving social structure was described by one of their mothers as consisting of "tier-one, tier-two, and tier-three girls."

Putting the book together, Greenfield says, was an intuitive process. "I made a lot of different pictures that seemed like pieces of the puzzle," she says, "but I didn't know until I was editing it whether they would all fit together." The puzzle included some surprising juxtapositions, tying together the worlds of girls and adult women. "When I looked at the exhibitionism of strippers, it reminded me of little girls and how they perform, how they look for approval," the photographer says. "In pictures, you can't help seeing the similarities in dress and body language."

The work was also cathartic. Greenfield was once, after all, a little girl who grew into a woman in the American body culture, and she recounts her own teenage years of chronic dieting, anxiety about her own popularity, and a conviction that her outer appearance reflected the imperfections that lurked on the inside.

In this Greenfield has plenty of company. One eating-disorder clinic estimates that 85 percent of adult females wake up each morning dissatisfied with their weight and appearance, determined to somehow replicate the ever-shrinking dimensions of "lollipop" actresses and models (so called because their heads look oversized atop their sticklike frames). (continued on page 89)

# Girl Culture

(continued from page 59) Joan Jacobs Brumberg, a historian at Cornell University, who wrote the introduction to Greenfield's book, feels that the current cultural environment, fueled by commercial forces outside the family and community, is actually toxic for adolescent girls "because of the anxieties it generates about the developing female body and sexuality."

One bright spot in this dispiriting landscape of insecurity and self-blame is the rise of girls' athletics, which is credited with giving at least some girls a body identity that arises from their abilities rather than their decorativeness. Greenfield says that the athletes she photographed—including tennis star Venus Williams, members of the Stanford University women's swim team, and players on the Little Indians softball team in Naples, Florida, where girls' softball is a local tradition—had a sense of a goal broader than themselves. "They have a larger and more important context in which to see themselves," she says, "that has to do with making a faster time, or coming through for their team, rather than simply looking good when they walk out the door."

The book also features Greenfield's bracingly honest interviews with some of the girls she photographed, such as Stephanie, 14, whom the photographer met at the weight-loss camp, and Sheena, a 15-year-old struggling with her body image (see page 56).

"I think it's a challenging culture for girls to grow up in," Greenfield admits. "My role isn't to condemn it, but to try to show the pieces, to put them together. This book is a subjective view of one aspect of the girl culture. It's not the whole story, but it's the part of the story that leaves no one untouched."

*Michelle Stacey's most recent book is The Fasting Girl: A True Victorian Medical Mystery, published last year by Tarcher/Putnam.*

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