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A Girl's Life: Horses Boys Weddings and Luck

Marianne Gingher
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If childhood memoirs praising the pleasures of family, security, and comfort are rare, then rarer still is the memoir that credits those tender memories with inspiring a creative life. With clear-eyed wonderment, Gingher revisits her girlhood in North Carolina during the 1950s and traces the delicate ties of love, friendship, and community that nurtured her. Attentive to the ethical concerns and personal dilemmas that mark a girl's passage into maturity, she illuminates the complex origins of a writer's artistic sensibility—affirming Eudora Welty's suggestion that "a sheltered life can be a daring life as well."

In seventeen short stories, Gingher captures the possibilities that rowdy brothers, attentive mothers, and wild horses presented to a thoughtful girl. Details, bound in nostalgic specificity, recall her Southern middle-class existence: the naughty thrill of riding the Tilt-a-Whirl at the county fair, the refreshing satisfaction of eating a Circle K Bar on a sweltering twilight, the wild unpredictability of riding a new horse, the sweet comfort stirred by the scent of L'Air du Temps lingering on her mother's dress. It was a time, Gingher muses, "still safe for children to take gifts from strangers and not yet unwise for them to leave the doors of their hearts unlocked."

A deeper level of introspection also weaves itself through Gingher's reminiscences, freeing the book from being merely a pleasant trip down memory lane. "White Girl's Burden" lingers on the troubling memory of a classmate's lies and the ethical conflict they engender in a community rift by race and class. In "Becky's Accident," Gingher confronts the painful death of her friend's mother, a loss that raises the possibility of her own family's fragility. Yet the anguish she chronicles is neither bitter nor rancorous, but part of the steps of a girl's awakening to the density and ambiguity of life.

Director of the Creative Writing Program and assistant professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gingher makes the unconventional case that a contented childhood can be rich with nuance, graced with pleasures, and blessed with valuable moments. "I was happy for triumphant reasons, not superficial ones," Gingher concludes. "I was free to range among a million second chances, my girlhood still intact, granted a reprieve from the sort of comeuppances of fate that transform and subdue."
VICKI HSUEH (July / August 2001)

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