

Foreword

Andi Zeisler

I'll be honest. I never felt cool enough for girl zines.

I was living in Chicago when I discovered them, interning as an editor/proofreader/general office gal at a tiny literary magazine run by a thirtysomething married couple out of their apartment. I knew only a little about the medium of zines: I'd read reviews of them in *Spin* and *Sassy* magazines. My kind-of boyfriend/devoted pen pal published a one-page, double-sided newsletter about punk rock and veganism decorated with Victorian-style clip-art filigrees. And I had made the pilgrimage to Quimby's, the Wicker Park store that brimmed with alternative-publishing products ranging from poetry chapbooks to minicomics to thick, single-spaced political screeds. And I knew that—well, I thought that—okay, I hoped that—someday I would make one myself. But it wasn't until I perused the copies of *Factsheet 5* that lay around the editors' apartment that I realized just how vast the world of zines was. It was overwhelming, daunting, and occasionally scary to read this directory of zines and see, in minuscule 8-point type, just how much was out there. (And to ponder the range of humanity producing it: the editors reviewed everything sent to them and withheld most judgment, even about truly fringe zines like the one comprised mostly of graphic color photos of murder and accident victims.)

There was a zine out there for every possible quirk, interest, occupation, obsession, and kink you could imagine. *Thrift Score* was one girl's regularly published account of thrift shopping. *Guinea Pig Zero* was written by a guy who made his living as the subject of drug trials and other medical experiments. There were dozens of zines devoted to the childhood pop culture of their creators—both *The Brady Bunch*

and *The Partridge Family* seemed to preoccupy many a zine maker. There were zines about sock monkeys, zines about junk food, zines like *Hate Those Jays* (“For those who can’t help but disapprove of Toronto’s baseball franchise”). And, of course, there were zines about being a girl: being happy to be a girl, being angry about being a girl, being anxious to be a girl. Some of them—the ones I’d heard the most about, the ones covered in *Sassy*—were Riot Grrrl zines. I wasn’t a Riot Grrrl. I was shy and sheltered and about as punk rock as a dust ruffle. I wasn’t going to meet the girls who did these zines at a show and bond with them over how we had to reject the patriarchal forces that made us feel bad about our bodies or our desires. But I wanted to be part of their world.

In junior high, high school, and what college I had thus far attended, it was clear that females got the shit end of the stick when it came to representation. The classics, the canon, the “universal” stories, biographies, and books were by and about men and boys. Was your name Anne Frank? If not, you weren’t showing up on too many classroom syllabi. I made up the deficit on my own time, zipping through every Judy Blume, Norma Klein, Toni Morrison, Lois Duncan, and Paula Danziger book in the public library. I wrote, but I didn’t think I would be a writer until someone else said I was. The girls behind these zines had probably noticed the same things I did (Hey, why are stories about boys and men universal, but stories about girls and women relegated to English-class electives?)—but, unlike me, they’d actually decided to do something about it. They weren’t waiting out their awkwardness and pain so they could write about it with ironic distance in a future memoir. *I don’t care if you want to hear from me, I’m saying it anyway.*

Over lunches of fish fingers and tater tots with Ed and Kim’s two toddlers, I scribbled down titles and addresses for zines called *Girl Cola* and *Pasty and Muffin Bones* and sent off scads of envelopes, each containing \$1 or \$2 bills. And then came the anticipation, as I checked the mailbox every afternoon. I felt a yearning, a hopefulness, and a fear. I wouldn’t have identified it this way then, but now I realize I was hoping for a kind of validation and reassurance. *You can do this, too. You don’t have to wait.*

It will probably surprise no one familiar with zines to hear that I received only a handful of the ones I sent away for. The ones that did come, though, arrived like tiny presents, fancied up with glittery star stickers

and hand-lettered envelopes festooned with Sharpie flourishes and, in one case, a big old lipstick kiss print. I actually remember the zines themselves far less at this point than I remember the packaging. The external trappings of zine exchanges seemed like they were the logical and only slightly more grown-up extension of the sticker trading, fortune-teller-making, bus-note-trading giddiness that had been a crucial part of my elementary school years. I may not have had everything in common with the authors of the zines that were sent to me, but the medium itself was instantly familiar.

I read and reread the zines; I bought zines reviewed in the first zines. I saw the way common threads emerged in the writing: struggles with body image, with sexuality, with anger, with feeling important in the lives of other girls, with wanting to be free in a way that wasn't tidily summed up. I didn't feel any cooler, but I didn't care. I had located the place my feminism would reside.

Not all young feminists find their ideological home in zines, of course, just as not all young feminists phone bank for NARAL Pro-Choice America, boycott sweatshop-produced clothing, take back the night, or march on Washington. But it was in zines that I and many women I came to know found a way to link the dense texts from our classes in feminist theory to the weird, should-I-say-something? moments of sexism that pock-marked our lives. *That's what I'll say next time*, I vowed, reading one girl's story of bitching out catcallers on the street. *Ugh, that's so true*, I thought as I read another's essay on how badly women can treat each other in the hopes of being one of the boys. To someone whose feminism was centered on securing reproductive rights or combating sex discrimination in the corporate realm, girl zines likely seemed too lightweight to qualify as "real" feminism. But for a lot of us, such projects reflected and underscored the way feminism was expressed in our young lives: inconsistently (the patriarchy sucks! but I really want to make out with that cute guy!), with periodic bravado (fuck corporate America! I'll never work in an office!), and as a work in progress.

Not to mention as just plain fun. *Pagan's Head*, a zine created in the late 1980s by the now-acclaimed writer Pagan Kennedy, wasn't a girl zine per se, but in remembering its genesis in her 1995 memoir *Zine*, Kennedy hits on the importance of zine-making as a process: "How had I forgotten that this—this absorbed, tongue-between-the-teeth, little-girl feeling—was the essence of art?"

Though new zines come across my desk almost every week now, it can be difficult to talk today about the impact of the medium without giving off a whiff of the Luddite—or, worse, of the wistful old-timer who would prefer to dwell in the rosy glow of the past rather than sharpen up and get with the program. In the past few years, as I've spoken to high school and college students around the country about feminism and popular culture, I've found myself explaining zines by saying things like, "Well, zines would be like, if you wrote a blog on paper, and you photocopied it and mailed it to people." I've worried that zines just wouldn't make sense to them—so sloppy and chaotic with their clip-art non sequiters and off-center layouts and crawls that revealed the use of at least three different pens of varying width and ink supply. No links. No enabled comments. *What's the point?*, I imagined them asking.

I have only my own answer to that imagined question. And it's that even in a medium as ephemeral as this one—where a creator might do one zine about her abortion and then decide that she's bored with that subject and move on to a minicomic about, I don't know, Rainbow Brite, where your \$2 in well-concealed cash disappears in a wisp of anticipation never to be satisfied—the product itself remains as a marker of its time. The writing within remains as proof that those thoughts, that anger, that hope were once urgent and alive, expressed as fast as the pen would allow, stapled and mailed off to join a conversation that began long ago, that continues today. Part of what makes girl zines remain so vital as a feminist project is that they are an ongoing conversation, a way to be achingly immediate yet also provide a link to the printed matter that came before. And the book you hold in your hands is a crucial way to understand—and to appreciate—the many different ways girl zines have and continue to effect the ongoing work of feminist thought and activism. For both readers and creators, they are education and revelation, empowerment and healing, giddy secret and proud f-you, and with this book they are given a well-deserved place of prominence in the history, and the future, of feminism.