



Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls

Mary Pipher

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#1 New York Times Bestseller

The groundbreaking work that poses one of the most provocative questions of a generation: what is happening to the selves of adolescent girls?

As a therapist, Mary Pipher was becoming frustrated with the growing problems among adolescent girls. Why were so many of them turning to therapy in the first place? Why had these lovely and promising human beings fallen prey to depression, eating disorders, suicide attempts, and crushingly low self-esteem? The answer hit a nerve with Pipher, with parents, and with the girls themselves. Crashing and burning in a “developmental Bermuda Triangle,” they were coming of age in a media-saturated culture preoccupied with unrealistic ideals of beauty and images of dehumanized sex, a culture rife with addictions and sexually transmitted diseases. They were losing their resiliency and optimism in a “girl-poisoning” culture that propagated values at odds with those necessary to survive.

Told in the brave, fearless, and honest voices of the girls themselves who are emerging from the chaos of adolescence, *Reviving Ophelia* is a call to arms, offering important tactics, empathy, and strength, and urging a change where young hearts can flourish again, and rediscover and reengage their sense of self.

Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls Details

Date : Published August 1st 2005 by Riverhead Books (first published 1994)

ISBN : 9781594481888

Author : Mary Pipher

Format : Paperback 293 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Psychology, Feminism, Parenting, Education

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From Reader Review Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls for online ebook

Devon says

It took me months to read this because it's so dense and so hard to read about all the ways a young girl can totally go off the rails--girls who are whip-smart, athletic, funny, loving and fearless at the age of ten can turn a corner and become withdrawn, silenced by many forces and self-destruct.

In developmental psychology, Erikson theorizes that adolescence is a time of resolving the conflict "identity vs. role confusion". I don't know how anyone survives this after reading Pipher's accounts of her patients. How on earth can girls sort through this when they are suddenly young women and thus objectified and silenced and belittled by the attitudes of media and society, by the habits and patterns of their families of origin? One out of four is raped and our solution to this is to restrict their freedom? I have to explain to my own daughters that awful things happen to girls and women--increasingly so. How do I bring this up with my ten-year old who wants to be on her own more?

I digress. Angry yet?

It's interesting to have to reflect on how I navigated the rough cold waters of adolescence, myself in a male-centric family. I dressed like a boy, hid my body, became a bookish smart-ass so that no one could humiliate me or make fun of my body. I look at my oldest daughter and wonder how soon that full-volume, uninhibited laugh of hers will be silenced and by what forces? How on earth we will be able to hold onto her? Going off the rails can happen to any daughter, despite my smug denial that kids from good families stay on the straight and narrow, hunker down and get into good colleges and become well-rounded productive, solid citizens. This book shows me something else--something scarier. Thankfully, at the end, it offers some guidelines for how to get there, as well as a great recommended reading list.

Hear this, parents and teachers and friends of young girls: watch your behaviors, your modeling, your words: it ALL sinks in, and no matter what the seeds, they can all germinate, for better or worse.

"All geniuses born women are lost to the public good," Pipher quotes at the beginning and the end. Definitely something to think about for all girls and women everywhere.

Becca says

me:single handedly tries to fight the mass media while protecting every young girl in america

Julie says

Review on Reading Lark: <http://readinglark.blogspot.com/2013/...>

How do you begin to critique a book that changed your entire life? It might sound like hyperbole to some, but that's what Reviving Ophelia did; it changed my life. And based on the feedback I get every time I

mention the book, it's subtitle of *Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* is somewhat misleading, because it has "saved the selves" of many an adult as well. The book is equal parts fascinating and eye opening, and, in this reviewer's opinion, required reading for every woman (especially mothers of young girls). And I promise, after you read it you will never look at our media-saturated, "girl-poisoning culture" the same way again.

Reviving Ophelia is a revealing and insightful look into the lives of adolescent girls in the early 1990's, illustrated brilliantly with case studies of the girls that author Dr. Mary Pipher counsels in her therapy practice. The book focuses it's chapters on specific issues that impact adolescent development, like sex and violence; depression; eating disorders; divorce; families; drugs and alcohol; with separate chapters devoted to mothers and fathers. And I feel like I should be clear about this, it is a nonfiction text (I added it to my 10th grade English curriculum this year when we needed "more nonfiction"). It can lean toward the dry and informational when discussing population samples and psychological terms, but each chapter includes multiple case studies of girls from ages 13 to 23, which I find to be the most traditionally "entertaining" aspect of the book.

I wish I could say this was the most well written book I've ever read (because I love it so, SO much), but the "fascinating, eye opening" aspect of this book is contained in its subject matter, not the author's writing style. Pipher tends to repeat herself, especially when dissecting technical information. This repetition, I'm certain, is designed to present difficult-to-understand information in multiple ways in order to reach a mass audience, but comes across as a lack of confidence in her readers. One aspect of her writing that I thoroughly enjoy is her use of allusions to classical literature and popular culture that her adult readers will likely recognize, even if they are not intimately familiar with the text. In a single page of the first chapter she references Pippi Longstocking, Caddie Woodlawn, Heidi, Anne of Green Gables, and finally Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher.

Final Word: Read this book, and read it now. If you don't typically enjoy nonfiction texts, skim the technical stuff. It's worth it. Trust me. And then give it to any teenagers you know. You'll be surprised at the conversations it will spark with even the most resistant, uncommunicative teenage girl.

Natalie says

I thought this book was really really interesting. It is about the negative effects our culture has on teenage girls (too much emphasis on beauty, too much encouragement to be passive in order to please others, etc.). One of my favorite points she made is that our society spends tons of time and money educating women on self-defense, but wouldn't it make much more sense to educate young men on how to be respectful and non-violent towards women?

I do have some reservations about the book, though:

- 1) The author is a bit of a man-hater. Sometimes I think she blames all the world's problems on men.
- 2) She uses case studies to make her points. In her case studies, the women who stay at home with their kids and take on traditional female roles are all weak/don't have a clue who they are/depressed. The women who completely abandon the traditional roles, however, are her strong examples of women who have overcome our poisonous society and saved their "selves." I think she is pretty biased in her writing on these points.

Those things aside, I enjoyed this book and think it had some pretty good/valid points.

Scott says

When I first read this, I was very convinced of the premise--that girls do great as they move forward in elementary school, but sometime between 4th and 8th grade the harsh reality hits them that they are going to be objectified and relegated to second-class status in this male-oriented world. As a result, you see a drop-off in vivacity, creativity, and individuality. Instead of the former spunk and enthusiasm of girlhood, you see young women who shrink from the public eye, who retreat into depression and other mood disorders, and who give up on their dreams and possibilities.

It sounds convincing because we can all think of examples that would illustrate the narrative. The trouble with it isn't that it isn't true--it is. The problem is that it is portrayed as something that happens in contrast to what happens to boys--that they are supposedly buoyed up and promoted in our society. The problem is that often the emphasis and attention given to the pitfalls of girlhood comes with a parallel criticism of the favoritism given to boys in academics. And the problem with *that* is that statistically speaking, it just isn't so.

On average, boys do worse in school than girls do today, especially when you look at outcomes like high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation.

Although I think Pipher's work is important for the attention it has given to those girls who are falling through the cracks, I think we have already restructured our academic system in favor of femininity, and we do not need to delude ourselves into thinking that we need to go further in the direction of alienating masculinity in academics, in order to reach the girls who we're losing. We're losing more boys than girls, and in both cases, individual help is needed, not restructuring the entire system to favor one gender over another.

Susan says

I have three daughters, ages 11, 13, and 15. So when a teacher friend recommended, "Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls," who was I to say no?

It was a good read. The title is based on Ophelia, from Shakespeare's Hamlet. Happy as a young girl, Ophelia loses herself in adolescence and lives only for the approval of Hamlet and her father. She goes mad with grief when her authority figures spurn her, and finally drowns herself in a stream. Author Mary Pipher wrote this book hoping to help parents prevent Ophelia-like experiences with their own daughters.

Pipher describes how most girls begin life happy and independent, knowing themselves and their own strengths and wishes. But that tends to change in adolescence. Because of physical changes, our society, and the cruelty of other adolescents, many girls at this stage become confused. They don't know who they are anymore, or maybe they just don't like themselves. They begin to doubt their abilities. They look around them and see the roles women play, and many of them don't like those roles. They feel trapped and hopeless.

Girls this age are very idealistic. They may become advocates for the poor, or for animals. This may be because they identify with the powerlessness of these groups, and in wishing to help them, they subconsciously wish to save and help themselves.

At this time when girls are going through so much turmoil, they tend to turn away from their families. It's a natural move toward independence, but it's sad as well because they are cutting off the support of those most interested in their welfare. They have loved and been loved by people whom they now must betray to fit into peer culture. Furthermore, they are discouraged by peers from expressing sadness at the loss of family relationships -- even to say they are sad is to admit weakness and dependency.

Pipher is a counselor who shared many of her experiences in working with girls in this stage. I liked her philosophy of trying to find the positives at work within each family and capitalize on those things, rather than trying to "pathologize" families. She encouraged her teen clients to tolerate frustrations and control their impulses -- to develop a "hate it but do it center" that's almost nonexistent in many teens. This step, she felt, was necessary for them to meet most of their long-term goals. Often what hurts in the short term is ultimately rewarding, while what feels good in the short term is ultimately punishing. So true -- I will be eternally grateful that, for reasons beyond my understanding, I've always seemed to have this center in my brain. Thank you, God, for that.

In describing many of her clients, Pipher describes some teens who grow up with very open parents who encourage them to follow their interests. Those parents allow their kids to do a lot more than I would in the way of drinking, dating, etc. Often, those kids ended up with addictions and in some bad situations. However, Pipher saw the positive side that those kids had freedom and learned to make decisions, even if many of those decisions were poor. She also told of several girls with very strict families. While these girls largely stayed out of traditional "trouble," Pipher saw the downside that often they had a hard time making decisions and knowing who they truly were. In looking back at her own small-town past, Pipher writes, "I'm confused about whether I was more repressed or just happier. Sometimes I think all this expression of emotion is good, and sometimes, particularly when I see beleaguered mothers, I wonder if we have made progress." Amen to that.

I agreed with parts of this book, felt grateful for my own kids as I read about some of the messes described, and overall was glad I read it. It helps me empathize with the huge transition girls have to go through in our society (I know, I know: first-world problems!). I do think that the book would greatly benefit from an updated edition, as this one referred repeatedly to the '90s. There was almost no mention of computers, and no mention of many things that rule teen lives today: cell phones, texting, etc.

Melinda says

This book is highly recommended in "How to Talk to your Child about Sex" by the Eyre's, which I have read and reviewed (<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>), so I have queued it up for reading.

This book is a good companion book to read with "Packaging Girlhood", see <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...> for my goodreads review.

"Packaging Girlhood" shows you what goes on behind the media and marketing that pushes girls (from toddler to college age) unwittingly towards stereotypical diva / boy crazy / shopper personnas. "Reviving Ophelia" puts real faces on the girls who have been objectified and demeaned into these stereotypes, and who live with the pain and horror that it can involve. The author provides case study after case study from her own patients who have dealt with issues ranging from eating disorders to rape. It is again not a happy book to read, but I feel a very worthwhile book to read.

Girls are growing up in an increasingly toxic environment. The pressures of perfect body image and "fitting in" socially turn fairly well adjusted elementary school girls into depressed and withdrawn middle schoolers and then bitter suicidal high schoolers. Just as girls are going through puberty and significant body changes, the schools become torture chambers of taunting and humiliation. Mary Pipher provides an interesting "this is the way it was" snapshot of life when she was growing up and contrasts it very effectively with the life of girls she counsels now. It isn't the way it used to be, and it is getting worse. To provide solid evidence of what she discusses, the author provides case studies from her practice as well as interviews with various girls who did not need counseling. She deals extensively with body image and how young girls, without the maturity or support to know what to do, turn to bulimia (binge / purge eating), anorexia (extreme weight loss through dieting and/ or excessive physical activity), drugs, or alcohol for solutions.

Interestingly enough, some of the solutions the author has to help young girls through their growing up years include:

- 1) Parents, DON'T DIVORCE, stay married if you can because an intact family is better for children of all ages. In the chapter on divorce, the author says that in the beginning of her practice in the 1970's she believed that children were better off with a happy single parent rather than unhappy married parents. However after 20 years of practice as a therapist, she has changed her mind. She realized that in many families the children may not notice if their parents are unhappy or happy. Yet a divorce shatters children, and very often does not make parents any happier and frequently makes women poorer and children more vulnerable.
- 2) Be present and part of your daughter's life. Parents need to be parents and not abdicate decision making to their daughter. One interview the author had with a well adjusted teen girl showed that the mother was not working outside the home, but was present and engaged in all aspects of her daughter's life.
- 3) Establish structure in your home, establish rules and limits, follow through with consequences when rules are broken. Girls make wiser decisions and are more stable when their home life has these elements in them. Learn when to be flexible and when to stand firm. Too much firmness is actually better for the girls than too much leniency. One case study the author references was a situation where parents chose to let their daughter decide very early on what she wanted to do without much interference or guidance from them. They wanted her to be free to make decisions. What they did not realize was that being overly permissive did not help their daughter make GOOD decisions. She needed more guidance and firmer boundaries. In trying to teach her to be free and independent, they had actually contributed to her being overwhelmed and depressed. She needed for them to be the responsible adults and guide her, so she could grow up into a responsible adult.

The 2001 edition of the book I read had a reader's guide at the end with some good questions to think about and answer. There was also an interview with Mary Pipher 10 years after the book had been published. One question in the interview that I thought was particularly good was "If you could offer one or two pieces of advice to girls, their parents and teachers, what are the best things they can do to weather the storm of adolescence?" Mary Pipher's answer is revealing and I quote it completely. She answers,

"First of all, be very intentional about media. Don't watch a lot of TV, be cautious about the kind of music and movies you consume, read good books as opposed to teen magazines. Be careful about your intellectual diet. If you have an intellectual diet of junk food, you have a brain full of junk. I would advise people that this is a serious life decision -- deciding what to consume, in terms of information and culture.

Another thing that's very important is that teenagers not be isolated from other age groups. The biggest and best change we could make in America overnight would be to have a whole bunch of seventy-year-olds rehearsing with middle school bands, helping kids learn to read, teaching children how to garden and fish,

and so on. Likewise, it's important for teenagers to be involved with little kids, and with people in their twenties, who can look back on when they were that age and offer them some decent advice on how to make choices. I really argue for a lot more mixing of the generations than we have now.

Finally, I think it's really important for parents to insist that their kids be plugged into family. Adolescents should go to family reunions, eat at family meals, and have regular contact with grandparents and cousins and extended family members. Parents shouldn't let kids make all of their own choices about how they spend their time. Essentially, kids are told three thousand times a day by advertisements to spend their time shopping and consuming. Unless parents teach kids that there are other ways to spend their time, how will children even know that they have other interests?"

In reading these suggestions, I was happy to see that families who homeschool are taking her advice to heart. Homeschoolers I know evaluate TV, music, and movies that come into their homes and strive to teach discernment over blind consumption. They as a rule read more books, and place a high value on a vigorous intellectual diet. Homeschoolers I know also mix multiple generations together. Seventy-year-olds ARE teaching middle schoolers. Teens ARE around little kids. Homeschoolers I know ARE teaching their kids other ways to spend their time and learning other interests.

So while the overall book is very sober, I think there is great reason to be encouraged. Mary Pipher insists that the only way to change the toxic culture young girls are facing is to change the culture. I think homeschooling parents are hearing what she has said, and are responding.

Sherri says

An important book for the parents of adolescent girls. In her practice as a therapist, Pipher became concerned about the number of adolescent girls she was seeing with severe depression, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, and crippling low self-esteem. As she worked with them, she came to believe that many of these problems stemmed from the tremendous pressure society puts on girls to be physically beautiful and sexually appealing from a very young age and from sexism and sexual violence. Pipher writes about her work with these girls and what she learned in her attempts to help them find their way back to emotional health and well being.

I liked this book so much because it wasn't just fear mongering and society condemning like so many parenting books and articles. I don't want to parent from a place of fear where my actions are dictated by my fear of the things my three girls might be or experience. I want to parent from a place of hope and love for my girls and the beautiful parts of the world we live in. Though Pipher identifies the problems and is realistic about how bad it is, she spends a lot of time talking about how to help girls through difficult teenage years and how to help counteract the negative messages that are all around them about who they are and what they should be. Pipher talks about the fact that the best kind of homes for teenage girls are those that offer affection and structure where parents set firm guidelines and communicate high hopes. To build and strengthen emotional health she talks about the importance of journaling and writing, teaching them to make and hold boundaries, learning to separate thinking from feeling and recognizing them as two different processes both of which should be respected, helping them find opportunities to give service to others, listening to them, encouraging them to participate in sports (so girls see their bodies as functional not decorative), helping them to identify the influences in our culture that are hurtful and damaging so they can

recognize them, and encouraging them in the pursuit of natural interests and talents.

Alarming, Pipher's book was published in 1994, before social media and smart phones.

Laura says

This book is targeted at parents of girls in the 90's. While I think it had many good things to say, it was also very repetitive and could have been edited into a much tighter and more to the point read. Also, a little updating is in order. When Pipher wrote this book, things like "myspace" and "facebook" weren't even in existence. I imagine that many parents in the 00's and beyond would probably appreciate some tools for dealing with these new intrusions into family life.

Some parents might take issue with some of Pipher's sentiments. This book is not written from any particular religious standpoint and thus some pluralistic views are in place. She does also take the stance that some experimentation with "chemicals" in adolescence is normal and to be expected. As a mother of a soon to be teenaged stepson...I don't agree with this view!

All in all though, this book does drive home the amount of influence the culture at hand can have upon a child. Pipher deals with the cultural impact on girls' psyches in the main, but even parents of boys should take note of the negative impact that their son's can experience as well.

Suzanne Evans says

My mom gave me this book when I was like 12 or 13... this was only the beginning of the self help slurry of books, clippings, etc that my mom would throw my way. As an adolescent girl (who this book is geared towards) I hid the book under my bed and read other bull shit things like the other books you will see on my list (read in the early to mid 90s). Thinking I knew what was best for me, as girls do at that age, I continued to resist my mother's consistent pushing me to read this book. She eventually gave up, and I found the book something like 10 years later and figured why not, I am already an adult, lets see how off I was in growing up. WOW... I feel like if I just listened to my mother at 13 I could have avoided A LOT of the most annoying parts of growing up.

Carrie says

There were some good things I took away from this book. Oddly enough the most important things I learned is to keep my daughters room filled with journals and writing tools. :) Wow, I wish I would have used (or would use now) writing as a tool to stay mentally healthy. The other is to keep her busy in things that make her strong in, body, mind, and spirit.

Another thing I walked away with is that there are strengths and weaknesses in every form of parenting. It made me want to hug the stuffing out of my parents for loving me so much to try to keep me grounded and busy. They gave me a moral basis to work from and allowed me to explore who I am with a lot of support. Man, if I can be half the parents they were....but I digress...

I think it is a very good read for parents with daughters. After reading it I came away with a sincere worry about my daughter losing her power. She is amazing, and somehow I hope that we can get through the teen years leaving that power in place for adulthood. I have to add at least one more step to the two in the first paragraph. Not everyone will agree but prayer and meditation are essential to knowing what our daughters need from us. Go team.

K says

Hmmmm....very mixed feelings about this one.

Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls covers a lot of the same ground as Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals How Political Correctness in Her Profession Endangers Every Student. We read about adolescent girls struggling with depression, eating disorders, self-mutilation, premature sexual involvement, etc. Both Mary Pipher and Miriam Grossman are mental health practitioners who treat these girls and view their difficulties less as individual issues than as an indictment of the high-pressure, overly sexualized, hedonistic, materialistic, narcissistic society in which they live. For all their overlap, I couldn't decide why Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls irritated me so much more than Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals How Political Correctness in Her Profession Endangers Every Student did.

I hate to think that my own biases played a role here, though I have to admit they probably did. Miriam Grossman is, I believe, an Orthodox Jew like myself who shares a lot of my beliefs about traditional values and the benefits of a religious lifestyle which may be why I felt more open to her perspective. Mary Pipher, in contrast, appears to be a staunch feminist who attributes the problems she sees to a misogynistic society with unrealistic ideals for women. While I'm sure she's not entirely wrong, I found her views at times overstated and alarmist.

"Girls have four general ways in which they can react to the cultural pressures to abandon the self," says Pipher on page 43, "They can conform, withdraw, be depressed, or get angry." Um, how about simply resisting the pressure in a positive way? Doesn't anyone do that any more? Is the world really so awful? What about all the people who come out "normal," whatever that means? Surely some girls make it through adolescence without needing therapy for an eating disorder or self-mutilation, don't they? Is that just my background talking (sheltered, religious, single sex schools, little contact with the opposite sex before college)? In fact, I'm aware that girls from my background can also struggle with serious issues like the ones Pipher describes but I meet a lot more girls who don't.

In a similarly monolithic statement, Mary says on page 150: "If we picture depression on a continuum, at one extreme would be severe depression with some biochemical basis and disturbed family functioning. AT the other end of the continuum would be ordinary adolescent misery [how about happiness, Mary? Why wouldn't that be the other end of the continuum?]....Most girls suffer depression somewhere between these two extremes."

Really? Most? Well, probably most girls in therapy which is where her information comes from. But actually, I believe there are some reasonably happy, or at least relatively contented, adolescent girls out there.

Mary also claims on page 158 that "Girls are under more stress in the 1990s." Actually, this is debatable. In

“Spin Sisters,” the author posits that women’s magazines sell the impression that women are more stressed out today when in fact, women have never had it so good. Does that apply to girls? I’m not sure, but I certainly think that a blanket statement like “Girls are under more stress in the 1990s” without research to support it should not be made in this unqualified way.

Can we examine this a little? Why are girls under more stress now than when they had to help out on the farm and couldn’t go to school? I agree that there are new, unprecedented stresses today on girls that didn’t use to exist. But is there *more* stress? I’m not sure. Mary herself acknowledges in a later chapter that, while many things have become more difficult for adolescent girls than they once were, other things about the world they live in are actually more flexible and positive.

Here's where the feminist agenda irritated to me and felt like a misattribution. On page 175 Mary asserts that, “They [anorexic girls] epitomize our cultural definitions of feminine: thin, passive, weak, and easy to please.” Um, isn’t this a little outdated? Is this still our cultural definition of feminine? I mean, yeah, this ideal certainly isn’t dead but I wouldn’t go so far as to make the blanket statement that it, and only it, is our cultural definition of feminine. Although Piper complains, legitimately, about many movies’ sexist portrayal of women, I can also point to popular films where women are strong and tough and get for what they want by working for it, not by looking pretty.

Which brings me to another point. My husband has a great-aunt who, obviously, comes from an older generation with more old-fashioned ideals for women. So she never particularly progressed in a career; she raised four children, did a lot of volunteer work, and may have had some pink-collar job or another at some point. This woman, now in her late 80s, is lovely. She’s charming and sociable, always put together – a real lady in the true sense of the word. She’s also a happy person who doesn’t appear to feel particularly deprived or disappointed that she never became a fast-track career woman; she enjoys many satisfying memories of family and positive experiences.

I think feminism gave us many things, and like anything else, it’s not all-bad or all-good. But here is one of my problems with feminism. I think it rejected the idea of being like my husband's great-aunt. Being a lady is no longer something to aspire to; it’s considered outdated at best and repressive at worst.

Maybe we need to take a look at this. Was every woman who stayed home unhappy? Was every woman who expressed her femininity by looking good and having a social persona that put everyone around her at ease depriving herself and inevitably disappointed in her life? Why aren’t there more women like my husband's great-aunt today? Is there something wrong with aspiring to be a lady like her? Can a woman admit it if she feels this is something she would like to be? If not, isn’t feminism in its own way just as repressive as the alleged misogyny of earlier days was?

Okay, so my husband's great-aunt was pretty and spent time putting herself together in the morning. So her idea of enjoying herself included taking care of her kids, mah jongg and swimming with the girls, volunteer work, etc. So sue her. I wouldn’t describe her as thin, passive, weak, and easy to please. Easy to get along with, yes. But passive isn’t the word I would use, and neither is weak. These are pejorative, loaded terms when something more positive (diplomatic, tactful, socially adept, engaging) can be substituted. Thin enough, certainly not anorexic. Mary Pipher appears to be echoing feminist rhetoric when she claims that anorexia is an attempt to conform to feminine ideals. In fact, the ideals she describes date back to the days before anorexia. Anorexia actually became more of an issue once these ideals of femininity were challenged and, to some extent, rejected by many.

And yet, for all my gripes, I found myself agreeing with many things Pipher said. For example, her views of

divorce (pp. 133-4):

“In the late 1970s I believed that children were better off with happy single parents rather than unhappy married parents. I thought divorce was a better option than struggling with a bad marriage. Now I realize that, in many families, children may not notice if their parents are unhappy or happy. On the other hand, divorce shatters many children...Of course, some marriages are unworkable. Especially if there is abuse or addiction involved, sometimes the best way out of an impossible situation is the door. Adults have rights, and sometimes they must take care of themselves, even when it hurts their children...But divorce often doesn't make parents happier. Certainly it overwhelms mothers and fathers, and it cuts many parents off from relationships with their children. Many times marriages don't work because people lack relationship skills. Partners need lessons in negotiating, communicating, expressing affection, and doing their share. With these lessons many marriages can be saved...So in the 1990s I try harder than I did in the 1970s to keep couples together and to teach them what they need to know to live a lifetime with another human being.”

I've seen friends and relatives struggle with difficult marriages, and I readily acknowledge that sometimes divorce is the only answer. I respect Pipher, though, for viewing it as a last resort. In fact, most of the struggling teens she describes have divorced parents, a fact which is mentioned peripherally and then discarded in favor of further diatribes about society's misogyny and impossible feminine ideals.

Pipher also echoed my ambivalence about the Haim Ginott school of parenting (p. 242):

“...parents tolerate...open anger much more readily than earlier generations would have. I'm confused about whether I was more repressed as a child or just happier. Sometimes I think all this expression of emotion is good, and sometimes, particularly when I see beleaguered mothers, I wonder if we have made progress.”

She agreed with my feelings about psychology's overemphasis on family dysfunction (p. 251):

“While Miranda [a bulimic teen] was in this program [a treatment center for eating disorders], her parents secured a second mortgage on their home to pay for her treatment. They called her daily and drove to the faraway center every weekend for family therapy...

“My first question to Miranda was, ‘What did you learn in your stay at the hospital?’

“She answered proudly, ‘That I come from a dysfunctional family.’

“I thought of her parents...They weren't alcoholics or abusive. They took family vacations every summer and put money into a college fund. They played board games, read Miranda bedtime stories...And now, with Miranda in trouble, they had incurred enormous debts to pay for her treatment. For all their efforts and money, they had been labeled pathological.

“...Psychology has much to answer for in its treatment of families. We have offered parents conflicting and ever-changing advice. We have issued dire warnings of the harm they will do if they make mistakes in parenting, and we have assured them that they are inadequate to the task. Our tendency to blame parents, especially mothers, for their children's problems has paralyzed many parents. They are so afraid of traumatizing their children that they cannot set clear and firm limits. They are so afraid of being dysfunctional that they stop functioning.”

And I loved some of the things she had to say about therapy and the way she works with people.

So where does that leave me? Did I hate this? Did I like it? I think if I ever had the opportunity to meet Mary Pipher, we would have a long talk and many heated arguments. But we would also agree about a lot of things. And the book was certainly readable, and though not based on empirical research, offered a large quantity of case studies to support its points and was clearly more than speculative.

So I guess I'm giving this a conflicted three stars -- one of those times when my feelings weren't neutral but rather, all over the map.

Holly Bond says

The most important thing about this book, that I will never forget, is how well it illustrates the shift from a bubbly little girl to a depressed/angry teen and how the world just does everything it can to rob a little girl of her self esteem. That's not a blaming statement, but just an observation, that girls today are taking an emotional beating at almost every turn, and this book is a call to action. I recommend that you follow it up with Ophelia Speaks. If you have a daughter, please read this so that maybe she will have a better time of it through your preparedness.

Jessica says

I read this book when it first came out in 1994, when I was 13. I had just been busted by my parents for stealing prescription drugs from their medicine cabinet (I think the plan was to kill myself...hazy), and this book appeared on my mother's nightstand soon after. I remember approaching the book like an army general who has gotten his hands on the enemy's battle plans, only interested in it as far as it could reveal to me what plan the adults were hatching this time so I could fortify my defenses and plan a counterstrike. The book also appealed to me because there was a thin, attractive white girl of about my age on the cover who, I assumed, wanted to commit suicide like Ophelia in a pool full of flowers. This encapsulated my two main desires at 13: To be thin and attractive, and to commit suicide. I failed at both.

Alas, "Reviving Ophelia" didn't quite keep my attention at 13. If it had, I think it would have helped me understand that the intense pain I was suffering was not just my own hell but a part of a nationwide epidemic. I don't know if this would have helped me, but it might have. Instead, all I remember thinking was that Pipher, like many adults, seemed disproportionately concerned by body-piercings.

Revisiting the book now, 16 years and a few million miles later, I still don't think nose rings are as big of a deal as Pipher makes out. I am struck, however, by her prescience at identifying a trend which no one else up to that point had made much of: Girls in the early 1990s were literally losing themselves. Young girls have always had a rough time of it in American society, but suddenly the troubles hit the white middle class like a tidal wave. At 13, I didn't have the maturity to connect Pipher's thesis with what I indeed experienced regularly: Friends in the last phases of anorexia having heart attacks in the shower, almost everyone else an anorexic wanna-be, relationship abuse, drug abuse, suicides, crippling depression and self-hatred. Now, as an adult, I can appreciate Pipher's commitment to showing the world that these were not isolated problems, problems that happened only to girls from fucked-up families, or just weird girls. This was a catastrophe that struck almost every girl I knew growing up. It has still not been fully examined, although many of the problems that blighted my generation are starting to wane (and new ones are rising - try buying your female toddler something that does not resemble a porn star costume at Target). While I think that Pipher oversimplifies too much, and that she is ill-equipped to make sense of many of the cultural changes of the

early 1990s, her thesis generally stands today: Our culture poisons adolescent girls, transforming them from children to sex objects, from active participants in their own lives to passive spectators. And most bizarrely, these problems are distinctly post-women's liberation/post-feminism. I don't think it's entirely ridiculous to wonder if the daughters of the women who won liberation in the 1960s paid for their mother's gains via some sort of cultural backlash.

Myria says

The author has good intentions and I agree with her on some things but.... This was horrible. I don't even know where to begin! I really don't. I understand parents wanting to protect their kids from these kinds of things but I hope any parent does not live by this book. Please do more research. A LOT!

I don't know if it was just me but the way Mary worded some things, it came off as she blamed men for this problem. **WHATEVER**. This just reminds me of a joke that Katt Williams said about woman blaming their self esteem on men. As he said "It is called SELF esteem! It is the esteem of your M***** F***** self!"

If it wasn't that then it's all about the media or peer pressure. Maybe I just don't get this whole peer pressure and media thing bc growing up, I was too hard headed to be fooled by any of that. Everyone goes through peer pressure through all stages of life but there is a thing called personal responsibility. Being a girl does not give you a free pass at it. She also acts like girls can't protect themselves or don't have any inner strength or common sense. And as a parent, you don't need a book like this to tell you that you should teach your child that. You don't just pop out a kid and then that's it. That is the role of being a parent! Giving them a safe, happy home to live in, helping them, guiding them and teaching them. That right there helps tremendously with giving your child good roots, confidence and a good head on their shoulders. And if you need ANY book to tell you that, then maybe you shouldn't be a parent.

NO parent is perfect and we all make mistakes, of course, and your child will deal with challenges through life (you can't keep them safe forever) but that's life! Blaming this kind of stuff on social trends, does not cut it. At all!!!! Parents need to *pay attention* and do some homework on this subject. **And by SUBJECT, I mean=**

- *raising a bright kid

- *how to be there for them

- *not raising an air head

- *and understanding that self-esteem issues stem from MUCH MORE than just what the author liked to point her fingers at.

What I DON'T mean= is finding ways to blame everything else but your parenting skills and/or lack of self responsibility.

A.K. says

Makes a valid point or two but I remember being insulted by this as an adolescent girl. Specifically at the point when Pipher holds up a daddy-knows-best fundie family as raising a totally well-adjusted teenager. I'd rather be a maladjusted junkie slut than live in the midwest with my nice, cool, cryptofascist hard-on for jeezy parents, thanks. This should be on the "feminism, question mark" shelf.

Shelly says

It's been a while since I read this and was reminded about it via a thread on this very website about how women feel about barbie dolls and the like. The author is a psychologist who works with adolescent girls and suggests that there is a window (somewhere between 9 and 13 if I remember correctly) where young girls will either choose academic, athletic, or artistic endeavors--or boys. Girls learn to like boys early on (way before they learn to like girls) and an unfortunate consequence of this is that they will often do whatever it takes to get the young boys attention. So little girls who had no problem playing in the mud, or climbing trees, or whatever--become more self-conscious about their appearance and will start to wear make-up, "sexy" clothes(i know that sounds gross in this context but), and alter their daily activities so that they become someone a boy would notice more. As they get older, maybe they put out, or smoke pot...whatever they feel might attract a particular boy to them. The key here is to keep young girls occupied with other activities like sports and music so that you delay that window and the girl has time to build her self-esteem/identity before she becomes interested in boys. Girls who have their own interest are less likely to alter their life to conform to something a teenage boy may be interested in.

Andrea says

This book was published the year after I graduated high school and it would have been helpful to read it at that time. I remember the feeling of knowing something was wrong with our society but not being able to put my finger on it. Oh, how many ways our culture has failed the humans and other beings who live on Mother Earth together! My adolescent self was just beginning to realize that in 1994.

This book addresses one of the ways in which our culture has failed: our misogyny. This is wounding to every female who is raised in this culture. I hope my 13 year old daughter will read this book. I hope I can help her to navigate growing up with her unique and powerful self intact.

Laura says

While this book had a whole bunch of interesting anecdotes, there were nothing more than anecdotes. The fact that a bunch of her patients manifested particular characteristics doesn't lead to the ability to generalize about adolescent trends in general, as Pipher does here. On the contrary, it's just as reasonable to believe that her patients, many of whom presumably came to her through referrals from other patients, were a self-selecting group, each of whom referred people to Pipher because she had proven talented in dealing with particular adolescent issues.

If Pipher had written a book about the traits of her individual patients, most of whom were adolescent girls, that would have been one thing, and probably would have been a pretty good book. But when you're trying to make broad pronouncements about social trends, as Pipher is, anecdotes about your group of patients won't cut it. At all.

Jessica says

This is a biased and thoughtless review, based on vague memories of a cranky adolescent's insensitive snap judgment, so you shouldn't pay any attention to it. It's definitely more of a statement about me than it is about the book, which I don't really remember anyway.

I read this in the mid-nineties when it came out, and I remember feeling, as a teenage girl, annoyed and offended. I felt at the time that it was making too much of girls' helplessness and sort of encouraging us to feel sorry for ourselves and to wallow in a sense of victimization, blaming our parents and "the media" for everything. Honestly, though, I'm sure this is a gross mischaracterization of everything in this book, which I honestly don't remember one bit. Raising girls -- raising anyone! -- not to be all screwed-up around here -- around anywhere! -- is hard work, and parents deserve all the help they can get. At the same time, I do have some basic belief that adolescence is supposed to be kind of miserable: that's called "growing up," and it hurts. I mean, obviously girls shouldn't be cutting themselves or trying to commit suicide, but adolescents feeling bad a lot of the time seems normal to me. I engaged in a lot of behavior as a teenager that on paper sounds pretty pathological or at least disturbing, and I'm not saying that's ideal or that I want my kids doing all of it, but I did make it out the other end, you know? As did a lot of other girls I know who had much more extreme problems. Now we're grownups, and we've got the stories.

Again, I don't remember what this book said, but I do remember my basic reaction. I felt like someone was characterizing me as being way more screwed-up than I felt I was, and I was annoyed by some of the case examples, especially where they reminded me of troubled friends of mine who, I felt, were not well-served by a therapeutic culture that I saw at the time as potentially iatrogenic (though I hadn't learned that fancy word yet!).

It might be interesting to revisit *Ophelia* now, since I always have infinitely more sympathy for groups of which I am not a member. If this book enlightened parents about issues relevant to raising girls in a materialistic and misogynistic culture, then the more sensitive, kinder adult me is all for it. I do not envy the parents today, as I think popular culture has gotten exponentially more threatening to girls' developing a healthy sense of self.

Of course, if I were fifteen today I'd probably say that was crap. I would sneer at any suggestion that Paris Hilton or reality plastic surgery shows had any effect whatsoever on my development, and then I'd run off to drink beer in a bush with my similarly indignant peers.
