Introduction

"A good babysitter is hard come by," explained a reporter on *CBS News* during the summer of 2007.[1] A year earlier, a mother blogged that "babysitters seem to care nothing about kids and charge $16 an hour to watch TV and text message their boyfriends."[2] And then, of course, reported *Living Safely* magazine in the 1990s, there were the "horror stories: parents arriving home to find their sitter has thrown a party, or gone to one. . . ."[3] Intrinsic to such typical complaints is a longing for the golden age of babysitting when teenage girls were both pleasant and plentiful. Yet the view that babysitters today are hard to take and even harder to find is not new. In a letter to "Dear Abby" in 1969, one woman described the batch of hungry sitters "who ate the fridge to the bare walls" and disparaged the one with "the gall" to raid the "deep freeze."[4] What is unknown to these recent observers is that a prior idyllic age of babysitting is more apparent than real: distressed parent-employers have suspected their sitters of doing wrong ever since the beginning of babysitting nearly one hundred years ago. In fact, parent-employers have been complaining about babysitters since the advent of the "modern" American teenage girl, a debut that coincided with the creation of babysitting, the job that defaulted to white, middle-class, female adolescents by virtue of their sex, race, class, and age.

Though researchers have dated anxieties about babysitters to the expansion of babysitting after World War II, babysitters had already earned considerable notoriety by then.[5] It was during the 1920s—when babysitting was just in its infancy—that one parenting guide first urged mothers not to hire "high school girls" who trundled "babies about to hockey games, basketball practice, and [engaged in] street-corner flirtation."[6] As the "babysitter" gained ground during the Great Depression (when the word was originated though rarely used), advisers focused on the unkempt clothing and garish cosmetics of female adolescents suspected of preferring their "crowd" of friends to the kids in their care. Then, despite attempts to make scandalous V-girls into patriotic babysitters during World War II, *Newsweek* reported that a veteran and his wife arrived home

after an evening out only to find their "bobby-soxer" babysitter dancing with friends and their toddler teething on marbles.[7] Represented as villains who have caused danger, and as victims who have courted it, in the innumerable stories adults have been telling for almost a century, babysitters have ostensibly damaged property, ruined marriages, and destroyed families.

Though most often babysitting proceeds without a serious hitch, the problems associated with it have been widely and sometimes wantonly exaggerated on many levels, from the conversational to the cultural. In movies (popular, pornographic, made-for-TV, and horror), newspapers, magazines, music, television, cartoons, teen fiction, sit-coms, comics, manuals, urban legends, toys, and other sources upon which this study draws, babysitters have been deemed harmful rather than helpful. The omnipresent babysitter has been notorious for sneaking her boyfriend in the back door, talking on the telephone, sitting glued to the TV, eating her employers out of house and home, and neglecting the children while paying too much attention to the man of the house.[8] This deceptively simple stereotype of the unruly babysitter expresses the anxieties of parents as well as the concerns of the culture about teenage girls. Left to do as they please, girls will recklessly transgress the essential boundaries between private and public, family and community, labor and leisure, childhood and adulthood, girlhood and womanhood, love and lust, reality and fantasy, culture and chaos, yours and theirs.

But are teenage girls who babysit really mischief makers, home wreckers, husband stealers, child abusers, kidnappers, thieves, and whores, as they have been variously imagined? What accounts for the deeply ingrained sitter stereotype encoded in the many anecdotes and parables that parents routinely hear from one another and see in the mass media? Why hasn't the babysitter earned distinction instead of eliciting dread? What has she meant to adults and, just as importantly, to the generations of girls who babysat? The first aim of this book is to interrogate adults' assumptions about teenage girls they suspect of jeopardizing the safety of their children, the security of their homes, and even the sanctity of their marriages.

In this social and cultural history I argue that what adults' enduring anxieties about babysitters reveal is unease about the far-reaching gender and generational changes that gave rise to the "modern" American teenage girl, whose emergence coincided with the creation of the babysitter in

the 1920s. Thereafter, the babysitter's highly charged position as a youthful stranger overseeing children within the privacy of the American home made the babysitter a lightning rod for the expression of adults' profound uncertainties about the unprecedented possibilities of teenage girls. For nearly one hundred years the babysitter has stood at the indeterminate boundary between adults' unresolved dilemma over the benefits of female adolescent empowerment and the threat of girls' independence. I also argue that in an ongoing attempt to resolve conflicts over the nature of girlhood, babysitting has functioned as a primary site for girls' social rehabilitation. Since the emergence of babysitting early in the twentieth century, the acculturation of girls in the utilitarian aspects of babysitting has furthered an essential and enduring ideological endeavor: to allow girls a modicum of independence while reinforcing the domestic and maternal imperative.

While no American worker has been more consistently disparaged than the iconic self-absorbed babysitter who studies her fingernails instead of cuddling the kids, this book also aims to document babysitters' subjectivity as well as their subjection by making historically visible the job that served as the ambiguous gateway to female employment and young womanhood throughout the twentieth century. Though overlooked as historically significant for most of the century, babysitters appear as helpful, contented, and grateful workers in recent syntheses on the history of children and youth.[9] In truth, since the beginnings of babysitting, girls have expressed more ambivalence than enthusiasm about their designated social role. This history sheds light on the perspectives of girls whose lives were shaped by the reality that, throughout most of the century, babysitting was the only job available to girls. The less often heard stories about babysitting that have been a part of girls' everyday lives include persuasive complaints about impetuous, irresponsible, insensitive, and unappreciative employers. Girls' stories—which go back to the earliest days of babysitting—go far toward explaining why teenage girls have been leaving the field of babysitting ever since it first emerged.

While babysitting has served as the main port of entry for female employment, it has always been much more than just a casual part-time job for girls or a solution to the everyday needs of ordinary parents. On a social and cultural level, babysitting has aimed to reconcile a dichotomy that grew more conspicuous over the course of the twentieth century. Girls increasingly negotiated between adolescent self-assertiveness, rebelliousness, sexual experimentation, and autonomy on one side, and feminine

self-sacrifice, compliance, sexual restraint, subordination, and dependence on the other. By providing girls with a part-time job that enabled them to attain semiautonomous status—outside of their own family but within the bosom of another—experts, educators, and other adults hoped to regulate girls' behavior and neutralize the threat they posed. Applying Michel Foucault's theory of discourse to the history of babysitting enables us to discern the larger systems of ideas, attitudes, institutions, and practices of experts, educators, and employers who produced knowledge, constructed truths, defined social relations, constituted subjectivities, and established social power over teenage girls.[10] These adults together made babysitting into a discursive field.

The central perspective of this study is that babysitting is a cultural battleground where conflicts over girlhood—especially regarding sexual, social, cultural, and economic autonomy and empowerment—are regularly played out. Whether real or imaginary, the babysitter has long been a figure fraught with contested meanings about girlhood that have both distorted adults' perceptions of female adolescents and vitiated girls' expectations of babysitting. Embodying adults' expectations and reservations about female adolescents, the babysitter has served as the quintessential symbol of the girl adults desire but have widely represented in American mass culture as dangerously disruptive.[11] Consequently, American parents who hired babysitters opened the door both to preconceived fantasies of daughterly devotion and to prepackaged fears of teenage transgression.

The ordinary and extraordinary problems associated with babysitting stem from elemental struggles over contending notions of girlhood first set into motion during the 1920s by changing ideals and conventions. Tracing the history of babysitters over the course of the twentieth century reveals that generations of parent-employers unknowingly drew upon a succession of historically constituted stereotypes of female adolescents that typically framed their conceptions of the girls they employed. As the archetypal teenage girl, the babysitter embodied the full range of a long-standing and wide-ranging critique of female adolescents as self-absorbed, unpredictable, irrational, irresponsible, unreliable, inscrutable, disorderly, unstable, irresistible, uncontrollable, consumeristic, pleasure seeking, and money hungry. Not wholly aware of the disparaging stereotype of teenage girls that gave form to their fears, generations of parent-employers consecutively cast babysitters as pleasure seeking in the 1920s; frivolous shoppers in the 1930s; street-walking Victory Girls during World War II, and rabble

rousers after the war. As the expansion of girls' youth culture accelerated over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the babysitter continued to serve as an object of adults' fears and fantasies about female adolescents run amok. Babysitters were culturally typecast as irreverent "bobby-soxers" in the 1950s; energetic and arousing in the sixties; in dire need of violent restraint during the 1970s, and double-crossing teenage villains and plucky preadolescent "Super Sitters" during the 1980s. By the end of the century, girls were seen as "Quitter Sitters."

Whatever form teen transgressors have been made to assume in the cultural imagination, girls' own notions of girlhood have vied with adults' for dominance since the birth of modern American female adolescence in the 1920s. Laying the basis of what would follow, the quest for social, cultural, and economic autonomy and empowerment—hallmark of adolescence— found repeated expression in girls' culture, the ongoing and variously shifting principles and practices that generations of teenage girls created and inadvertently carried with them to the neighbors. While babysitting brought adolescents and adults into closer proximity, however, antithetical beliefs about girlhood set them further apart. As a result, played out in the embattled field of babysitting and embodied in the contested representations of babysitters have been intergenerational conflicts over what it means to be a teenage girl.

While the babysitter has provided a way to talk about what girls should be and should not do, this study of babysitting provides a unique historical lens through which we can more clearly discern the history of adults' attitudes about girls, as well as the methods devised for dealing with teenagers. In order to correct girls and contain the influence of their youth culture, generations of adults utilized a wide variety of sources and devised a diversity of strategies. Embedding a shifting rationale for babysitting in everything from textbooks to toys, adults tapped girls' desire for independence, which they also defused and reused for their own child-care needs. Or so adults thought. Though babysitting served as a method of socialization, adults proved to be as ineffective at stemming the tide of girls' culture as they were in halting the decline of babysitting. Legions of experts who consistently packaged babysitting as an opportunity for female self-sufficiency sought to make selfish girls selfless. Yet babysitters, frustrated by the limitations of the unregulated job that made them vulnerable to economic exploitation and sexual abuse, eventually left babysitting and parent-employers in the lurch.

Major Themes in the History of Babysitting

Typecast as a home wrecker and trivialized as a caretaker, the babysitter is more complex and consequential than one might initially suppose. In fact, her history is rife with conflicted expectations and complicated interactions between generations who vied for the cultural dominance of girlhood. This study amplifies the underlying issues that have long dominated and distorted our perceptions of the babysitter; it is no coincidence that these also shaped American life in the twentieth century. Discernible in assorted variations of the babysitter that emerged, developed, and recurred are such major themes as (1) the anxieties of adults roused by changing notions of gender and sexuality; (2) the rise of the teenage girl, the expansion of youth culture, and the concerns these provoked about girlhood; (3) the social meanings of vocational education and mass culture entertainment; and (4) the consistently ambivalent standpoint of generations of babysitters upon whom parents have all depended.

The Power of Parental Anxieties

Long before middle-class teenage babysitters became the object of parental scrutiny and criticism, "common servants" who managed the home and minded the children for middle-class parents had been widely regarded as "a little better than idiots."[12] Victorian ideals about family life, gender roles, childhood, labor, leisure, and sexuality shaped the perspective of middle-class employers who looked down on the working-class women they regarded as cultural inferiors. While advisers had little to say that was not disparaging about servant girls between the Civil War and World War I, the hope that "ignorant" domestics could be trained to be better ones had led the American Medical Association to publish *The Systematic Training of Nursery-Maids* (1887).[13] Another late-nineteenth-century guide, published the same year that saw the establishment of the American Pediatric Society, informed mothers to carefully choose a nursemaid who "should enjoy good health; her skin should be clean, and she should be full of animal spirit, not languid and moping."[14] The low regard that employers had for their working-class servants also found expression in the popular culture of the time. J. M. Barrie, who cast the nanny as a dog in *Peter Pan* (1911), consigned Nana to the doghouse for her dereliction of child-care duties.[15]

The study of the medical, psychological, educational, and social aspects of children's lives by late-nineteenth-century pediatricians, psychologists,

mothers, and teachers led reformers to place children at the center of their concerns by the turn of the century. The establishment of the new fields of pediatrics and child psychology were followed by the formulation of the National Congress of Mothers (soon to be renamed the PTA) and the U.S. Children's Bureau. The centrality of children that increased the focus on caretakers led the Children's Bureau "to speak a word of warning as to nursemaids" in *Infant Care*, the pioneering pamphlet published in 1914. "One has only to visit the parks of any city on a pleasant day to note the instances of carelessness on the part of nursemaids toward the babies in their charge."[16] In the decade before middle-class girls challenged bourgeois codes, conventions, and customs, working-class girls who sought out casual yet intimate acquaintances with young men were the first generation of American girls to openly defy the gendered ideals of the declining Victorian order.[17]

Rising expectations about motherhood—which accelerated during the 1920s, intensified after World War II, and soared beyond the grasp of women during the 1980s—further drove mothers to scrutinize those hired to take their place. With mothers believing—at some level—in dominant ideals of motherhood, babysitting became a magnet for anxieties about maternal adequacy that spurred exaggerated fears about teenage girls' expanding social, cultural, and sexual independence and authority.[18] Reflecting the angst-ridden flux in gender roles for females, different representations of babysitters arose in which the babysitter cunningly shifted between wage earner and dutiful daughter, child-care provider and housekeeper, maternal surrogate and stand-in wife, submissive lover and destructive bitch.

Though it was chiefly men who created the babysitter characters who appeared in novels, short stories, movie scripts, and other works, few, if any, ever explained the desire or hostility that fueled their depictions. Changing notions of masculinity during specific historical moments provide windows into the frustrations, fascinations, and fears of men about adolescent babysitters. Beginning during the Depression and emerging with full force in the years after World War II, for example, was a masculinity crisis that stemmed from the convergence of changing ideals about womanhood and adolescence. Sardonic portrayals of women generally, and satirical characterizations of babysitters specifically, conveyed male anxieties about all females pushing their claims for independence. In popular magazines men ridiculed both babysitter unions brought into being by a residual wartime gender ideology that valorized women wage earners

and the developing teen culture that empowered adolescents. American men cultivated a perception of teenage babysitters as militants during the late 1940s and as miscreants during the 1950s,[19] thus expressing their fears about the decline of paternal authority and aiming to reassert patriarchal power as the country edged into the age of domesticity.

During the 1960s female adolescents' claims to sexual independence led babysitters to become objects of masculine desire in often leering fantasies in magazines and movies. The pleasures and perils of the sexual revolution and the counterculture were manifested in babysitters who were widely and blatantly eroticized in everything from pornography to high culture. The rising female authority and declining male dominance led to raw depictions of teenage babysitters subdued by their horny employers. Acting out the ambivalences of men who were both stimulated and scared by the sweeping social changes that accelerated during the 1970s, mainstream culture conscripted the services of male maniacs who sought to contain girlhood autonomy, sexual and otherwise. Babysitting became a particularly violent site of struggle between mad men and independent girls during the 1970s, when maniacs in urban legends and horror movies set their sights on babysitters.

Anxieties about the changing role of men as heads of the American household—a persistent motif in the history of babysitting—had first emerged during the Great Depression. Adults during the 1930s felt uneasy about family disruption and the altered patterns of power caused by men who lost their jobs and women and girls who held down the fort. During World War II, working women and their employed teenage daughters ignited a wartime panic about the family, fatherless for the duration. Years of deprivation, compounded by Cold War anxieties, caused marriage and family to be seen as the most important source of self-fulfillment and security.[20] But rising rates of working mothers reignited fears about the impact that their absence from the home might have on the well-being of the postwar family. Experts who promoted the "togetherness" ethos pointed to men's declining authority, wives' abdication of motherhood, and the shift of child-rearing duties onto others as major causes of family decline.

At this time, the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead observed that "the self-contained little family is only made possible by the sitter— an outsider paid to come into the home and maintain it as a going concern."[21] But instead of earning recognition for the role she played in sustaining families, the babysitter, who was only a bystander witnessing the long-term changes that had been reshaping American family life since the

1920s, became scapegoated in discourses about its destruction. "To many," reported the *Journal of the National Education Association* in 1951, "baby-sitting heralded the breakdown of the American family."[22] Converging on the babysitter were the worries of parents about rising rates of working mothers and a changing social and sexual system. From the 1960s onward, anxieties about motherhood, fatherhood, and girlhood were projected onto the sexualized sitter who seduced male employers and imperiled their families in popular and pornographic narratives.

The Rise of Girls' Teen Culture

Situating babysitters within broader social and cultural contexts reveals how the emergence of the teenage girl in the 1920s set into motion a col-lision of ideas about girlhood. Yet failing to resolve the contradiction be-tween teenage girls' desire for personal freedom and adults' expectations that they stay close to home, the compromise to babysit set the stage for enduring conflicts between girls and grownups. Through a process of ongoing negotiation with dominant ideals, generations of girls defined their own notions of girlhood within the self-styled subcultures they cre-ated, with their own distinct beliefs, meanings, behaviors, and rituals.[23] Though socializing institutions reinforced the gender order, high schools also played a principal role in the incubation of girls' youth culture, which flouted prevailing social conventions and furthered generational estrange-ment.[24] Drawing girls into the labor market as workers and into the mar-ketplace as consumers, the teen culture that emerged during the interwar years accelerated during the war and expanded in the postwar period. By the 1950s, suburbanites who looked to babysitters to uphold their values looked down on girls' culture. While youth culture drew—not unusu-ally—upon African American and lower-class cultural performances, up-wardly mobile working-class adult suburbanites aiming to be (but were not yet securely) middle class perceived teen culture as a threat to their as-pirations.[25] Nor were they unusual. Youth cultures typically strike grown-ups as offensive, inferior, and threatening to middle-class ideals, especially regarding gender.

What triggered adults' apprehensions about babysitters in particular was their perception of the youthful social practices that girls brought with them when they babysat.[26] For instance, sitters made unauthorized use of record players and telephones and conducted "raids" on refrigerators, ac-cording to their suburban bosses during the fifties. What gave meanings to adults' personal experiences were "public perceptions and understandings

of teen girlhood," explains Lorraine Kenny in *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female* (2000), a study about teenage troublemakers.[27] The sitter certainly reinforced dominant perceptions, confirmed cultural prejudices, and reinforced fears by committing misdeeds in anecdotes, parables, legends, movies, novels, cartoons, sit-coms, and news stories. Assuming such occurrences to be both excessive and pervasive, parent-employers sought out boys, venerated as babysitters in the popular culture despite broader fears about antisocial behavior and homosexuality. In fact, from the Great Depression to the new millennium, male sitters were consistently portrayed as models of masculine identity for impressionable little boys threatened by feminized suburbs and female-headed households.

Presuming that as "females" girls naturally possessed innate abilities and desires to mother, what adults found troubling was the unpredictable, irresponsible, irrational, and independent behavior of teenage girls and their oppositional cultural styles. Not only did they ostensibly fail to meet the needs of parent-employers for child care, but girls also seemed to buck the cultural imperative to socially reproduce "good" gender, class, and racial values. Instead of maintaining social order, seemingly unruly middle-class girls threatened the future of motherhood, the family, and middle-class culture. That it was white girls especially who inspired fear is made clear by the overwhelming abundance of Caucasian, middle-class, female adolescents who cornered the babysitting market in the popular culture. The iconic sitter's "whiteness" mirrored the reality of the historical labor force where, other than caring for kin for no pay, babysitting among Hispanic, African American, and Asian girls was limited.[28] Yet critiques at the core of popular and pornographic narratives about rotten babysitters exposed a particular discomfort with the archetypal "girl next door."[29] As the quintessence of female adolescence, the babysitter acted out the struggle between normalizing American girlhood as white, middle-class, and suburban and pathologizing it.

Babysitter Training and Girlhood Socialization

Attempting to transform the widely imagined disruptive teen into a disciplined sitter has been the underlying (albeit unstated) purpose of babysitter training, an acculturation that has taken place across a vast discursive domain that spans from classrooms to comic books. A major motif in the history of babysitting is the effort to limit girls' assertion for social equality. The constraints placed on girls have been obscured by experts'

and educators' apparently well-meaning intentions to help them. For instance, the seemingly sensible advice about clogging up the telephone with long "gab fests" that was included in manuals, pamphlets, and educational movies also served to modify the behavior that kept girls from satisfying the needs of parents and society.[30] Though experts in the 1920s dismissed girls as child-care providers, those thereafter sought to restrain, retrain, and redeem teenage girls by binding them to babies. Advisors and educators did so by earnestly constructing various versions of an ideal sitter who combined idealized feminine standards with girls' more independent goals: competent yet compliant, sensible and sensitive, responsible and responsive. Whether experts promoted babysitting as "patriotic" in the 1940s, as "professional" in the 1950s, or as a "business" since the 1980s, the construction of gender identities that diluted girls' opposition to restrictive ideals operated as a practical undertaking with a conservative goal: to combine female adolescent autonomy with feminine accountability.[31]

That experts and educators increased expectations but not social status or wages led generations of babysitters to feel discouraged and disgruntled. With the inexorable exodus of teenage girls from the field by the 1980s, preadolescent girls became the focus of educators who established national training courses, experts who published handbooks, and authors who wrote lots of preteen fiction about babysitters. One of the most influential was Ann M. Martin, whose enormously popular Baby-sitter's Club book series and its innumerable commercial spin-offs disseminated, popularized, commodified, and neutralized Girl Power ideals for preadolescents coming of age. Adults sought to acculturate young girls into superlative sitters by valorizing the "Super Sitter" ideal that stood in sharp contrast to the villainized teenage "Other" who appeared around the same time. Projecting intense antifeminist anxieties about the hazards of female empowerment, teenage babysitters were murderous in movies made for television. Yet the culturally constructed "Super Sitter" assuaged parent-employers' anxieties by harnessing the energy of preadolescents who replaced sexually centered teenage girls.

Little Lulu, the cartoon character in *Operation Babysitter* (1985), was one of many fictional representations of the newly exalted preadolescent girl who populated the imaginary suburban landscape in the 1980s.[32] The first time she had been hired to babysit was in another cartoon made forty years earlier when wartime teenagers had shown less interest in caretaking than in carousing.[33] But the postwar ethos that sheltered children within

the nuclear family had rendered preadolescent girls like Lulu economically useless. While child-care advisers in the 1950s warned parents not to hire a babysitter who was "younger than her midteens," those in the 1980s did an about-face and promoted the preteen instead.[34] At a time when women were bombarded with a newly formulated standard of unobtainable maternal perfection, preadolescent "Super Sitters" aided "Super Mothers" stressed by the conflicting demands of careers and kids.[35]

Recognizing that girls' desire for autonomy and empowerment could be managed toward productive ends, adults consistently sought out new methods to contain girls by using other controlling narratives. While a doll that could sing and tell stories was advertised as the "National Babysitter" in the late 1940s, this study shows that the making of real babysitters took a lot more than a little marketing.[36] Entertaining movies, sit-coms, toys, games, urban legends, and novels that featured babysitters also served didactic purposes. Though depictions shifted somewhat over time and across media, imagined sitters who threatened family stability, marital bonds, children's well-being, and community cohesion always did so in remarkably consistent ways. Numerous stories in magazines, movies, and fiction shared a cast of characters, dominant themes, and narrative structures that managed girls' femininity by mediating between embattled notions of girlhood.[37] Consequently, babysitting was represented as a formative coming-of-age ritual for girls faced with two paths: the conventional course deeply rooted in traditional gender customs and standards adults hoped they would follow and the illicit one they feared girls would pursue. The senseless girl transformed into a level-headed one over the course of a sitting stint modeled the version of girlhood adults applauded.

Utilizing many of the same tropes and probing similar themes, stories about babysitters contributed to a larger encompassing dialogue about how to harness the carefree teenage girl and prevent her from becoming a careless woman. Set in clear stories about the problem of the teenage girl, the babysitter was compelled to negotiate between self-indulgence and selflessness, defiance and deference. Made to play out the gendered conflicts between autonomy and accommodation, liberation and submission, the edifying babysitter aimed to teach real girls to recast themselves in better roles. While in young adult fiction, babysitters struggled between empowerment and acquiescence, in bare-boned pornographic narratives, sitters moved back and forth between extreme dominance and total submission. In addition to education and entertainment, other methods utilized to transform girls' behavior included coercion, condemnation, and

retribution. The maniac who first materialized in order to punish disobedient sitters in the 1960s proved to be an especially sinister and long-lived taskmaster. His favorite weapon to punish, intimidate, and victimize remained the telephone that is the classic marker of girls' liberation. In the end, however, all the babysitter stories that artfully informed imaginations and shaped impressions by educating and entertaining, terrifying and titillating, eliciting and expressing, failed to satisfy the needs of grownups or girls.

Sitters' Standpoint

Stories about babysitters are essentially conservative myths that reinforce gender and generational hierarchies by cementing dominant power relationships between males and females, adults and adolescents, and employers and employees. Yet compelling narratives about powerful babysitters did not always succeed in bringing about compliance. Girls' alternative readings were made possible by the ambiguities that often characterized portraits of babysitters in the mass-culture entertainments aimed to attract female consumers. A major theme in the history of babysitting is the way in which generations of babysitters used their social power as girls—and the girls' cultures they forged—in order to reconstitute the social meanings of babysitting and to contest it as a site of feminine socialization. The babysitters whose experiences are represented in this book demonstrate that despite the repressive potential of mass culture and feminized labor, girls often challenged the hardships posed by the unstructured and unregulated nature of the field. Though girls' culture has historically reinforced traditional feminine ideals, it also provided babysitters with the authority, resources, and opportunities to negotiate the demands of the job and optimally reap its benefits.

Eager to make money rather than to mommy, generations of girls who understood the stakes used this feminized form of labor for their own proto-feminist purposes. Babysitters formed unions, issued manifestos, wrote contracts, negotiated working conditions, lobbied for raises, and, very importantly, largely eliminated housework from babysitting. When employers stood in the way of their goals, girls' opposition was played out in the semiprivate space of neighbors' homes, where they put their own subcultural principles into practice.[38] Drawing upon the language and values of their subculture, girls expressed their disdain for "wadders" (of cash) and "hour splitters," those employers who underpaid sitters but overindulged their own "brats." In the 1950s, babysitters' desire for

social, economic, and cultural independence was incompatible with what they derisively called "bratting." Babysitters also resisted abuse by turning down job offers from employers who were "creeps" and fortified themselves against unknown crank callers, repulsing them with ear-shattering whistles and noise-blasting radios. For the vast majority of seemingly polite babysitters, their compliance masked underlying complaints about the job that has been at odds with girls' goals for themselves for generations.

Spotlighting the Sitter

While the teenage girl has been the focus of many books, especially of late, the babysitter has been the subject of none. That is surprising given the insights of observers who long ago recognized the long-term significance of babysitters to American society and culture. Though the word "babysitting" had yet to be included in dictionaries in 1948, *The Saturday Evening Post* already proclaimed babysitting to be a "key industry."[39] By 1949, the *New York Times* exclaimed that "[t]he person whom you employ to take care of Junior while you are out is important enough to rate a book!"[40] As the baby boom swelled and suburban developments sprouted, the newspaper further declared that the babysitter had become an "American institution."[41] Affirming that "the sitter is a prominent figure in our culture," the paper explained in 1960 that

> Should she vanish, millions of couples would prowl their apartments and ranch houses on Saturday nights like caged tigers. Movie houses and bowling alleys would close, Chinese restaurants and pizza parlors go bankrupt, gas consumption and toll collections plummet, and the crewneck sweater and Bermuda shorts industries decline for lack of solvent teen-age customers.[42]

Though it was not until 1980 that a team of psychiatrists launched the first academic study of babysitters, scholarly inquiry about "one of the most familiar figures in our culture" is still meager more than a quarter of a century later.[43] Despite her increased workplace surveillance and sensationalized appearances in the media, the babysitter has remained nearly invisible to scholars.[44]

Though ubiquitous in conversation, communities, and culture, the babysitter has eluded serious examination.[45] Caregivers, especially mothers, have captured the recent attention of historians, sociologists, economists,

psychologists, and others; these scholars have nevertheless overlooked babysitters in the invisible economy that meets critically important needs, especially mothers'. The noticeable absence of the babysitter in the historical scholarship is partly due to definitional, ideological, and methodological challenges. The term "babysitter" is a rather ambiguous term used to describe nonfamily as well as family members, those who are paid as well as those who are not, adults as well as youth, work that is institutionally based or takes place in the home. For the purposes of this study, "babysitter" refers to nonfamilial child-care providers who work on a temporary basis for pay, typically in the home of their employer. Because quantifying babysitters in the population presents another challenge—it is impossible to count them—I have, wherever possible, drawn upon statistics reported by newspapers and magazines and compiled by institutions and organizations. Yet due to the part-time nature of the work that is sometimes unpaid (as is often the case when older siblings are left in charge of younger ones), there is ultimately little empirical data on babysitters.

Babysitting also inimitably complicates such standard categories as production and consumption, labor and leisure, vocation and socialization, preadolescence and adolescence, and reality and fantasy. Because babysitting takes place in the informal economy and in the realm of the imagination, distinguishing fact from fiction poses particular challenges. In order to make sense of the babysitter's multidimensional meanings, this study by necessity has crossed disciplinary boundaries (history, literature, media), combined tools of analysis (age and gender), and overlapped the borders of historical fields (gender and youth).

Over the last fifteen years historians as well as scholars in other fields have skillfully mapped the changing worlds of female adolescents.[46] Thanks to their path-breaking work we now know a lot about the social and cultural dimensions of female adolescents' lives, especially as students and consumers. Yet what remains to be explored is the correlation between changing notions of girlhood and girls' possibilities for economic autonomy, as well as the impact that girls' income earnings had on notions of girlhood. To that end, this book focuses on the babysitter in order to examine the meanings that girls' cultural and economic production had on the adults who employed, educated, advised, acculturated, and imagined them. By illuminating the history of babysitters in fact and in fiction, this study sheds light on the interconnections between the representation and the reception of girls as workers, as consumers, and as producers of their own subculture.

This work is aimed at those interested in the history of teenagers and children, youth culture and popular culture, vocational training and labor history, parenthood and family life, women, gender and, especially, girls. In addition to academic readers, this book also aims to reach a broader audience, including the many who were cared for by babysitters, worked as babysitters, employed babysitters, and were parents of babysitters. It is my hope that parent-employers in particular might better understand what automatically stirs them to suspect the sitter when something—however small—goes awry. For nearly a century adults' fears and fantasies have distorted the lens through which they have perceived girls and have tried to make sense of them. The result has been a cultural figure more reviled than revered. Yet by foregrounding the babysitter in American culture and documenting the historical experiences of babysitters from their point of view in the chapters that follow, this work aims to provide a clearer vision of the cultural concerns and a more accurate accounting of the formative work experience of the majority of American girls who came of age in the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 of this study traces adults' emerging apprehensions about hiring female adolescents to "mind the children" from the beginnings of babysitting in the 1920s to the doorstep of its expansion in the mid-1940s. What fostered unease during this early period was the simultaneous development of both teenage girls' "modern" beliefs and the behaviors that openly challenged traditional ideals and gender norms. Those who wore makeup and donned teen fashions, talked on the telephone and entertained friends while babysitting during the Great Depression provoked female employers to complain and experts to constrain girls' cultural practices. As girls' new brassy behaviors further challenged standards of respectability during World War II, experts' moral panic led them to reassert order by reminding girls of their patriotic duty to the nation's children. Experts endorsed conservative notions of girlhood that satisfied the needs of parent-employers and the dominant social order, but minimally influenced teenage girls who—as would always be the case when opportunity knocked—left babysitting to others.

In the years after the war, the convergence of residual beliefs in female empowerment and youth culture's claims to autonomy gave rise to reformist babysitter unions. Chapter 2 examines the rise of unions from the perspective of the babysitters who established them, the women who supported them, and the men who perceived teenage babysitters as

insurgents. The social changes that diminished male authority, increased female autonomy, and expanded girls' culture, led men to satirize teenage babysitters in print, pictures, and movies.

Chapter 3 examines the widening cultural gap between adults and adolescents in the postwar suburbs where babysitting took root during the 1950s. Against the backdrop of restratifying gender ideals shaping the expectations of parent-employers, "bobby-soxer babysitters" were widely caricatured as irrepressible, irreverent, insatiable, incapable, and unreliable. Anxieties about the challenges girls posed to the ideology of domesticity and generational norms led employers to suspect babysitters of overstepping their bounds. While not as wild as adults believed, teenage girls in the process of challenging older notions, constructing new identities as teenagers, and creating an oppositional youth culture, widened the gap between themselves and adults. Colliding with adults' notions were girls' beliefs in gender fairness, which shaped their views about babysitting, their bosses, and the work culture rituals devised to both resist and adjust to the job they called "bratting."

Chapter 4 examines how parents caught between their growing fear of adolescent girls and their increasing need for them sought out the sitting services of other adults—grandmothers, neighbors, mature women—and of teenage boys, widely presented as upstanding, trustworthy, reliable, and responsible. In an effort to stop girls from raiding the fridge and jitterbugging in the living room, experts and educators employed a variety of educational methods aimed at making bad babysitters into better ones. At the same time that nation-wide programs sought to harness girls' autonomy, new legislation restricted babysitters' rights as employees in states like New York.

Chapter 5 explores how the profound social transformations of the 1960s that developed along lines of gender and age came together in the icon of the babysitter who spoke the language of resistance but discouraged girls' rebellion. Instead of popular magazines and training materials, commercialized girls' culture aimed to make unruly girls into obedient babysitters. Representations of boisterous babysitters in sit-coms and vocational movies reflected, reinforced, yet also retarded girls' growing social and cultural empowerment. So did cautionary urban legends about self-indulgent babysitters causing and encountering catastrophes. The most enduring of these allegedly "true" stories was the one about the babysitter victimized by a male murderer because she did not do as commanded and "check the children."

Chapter 6 examines how anxieties about the profound social changes of the 1960s that upended traditional ideals and customs found expression in the intense relationship between the male maniac and the sexy sitter. As a representation of "the sexually active girl" of the era, sitters eroticized in soft porn and popular culture exacerbated fears of teenage girls as dangerous. Escalating anxieties about gender disorder led to the victimization of babysitters by maniacs who migrated from cautionary tales to horror movies in the 1970s. Babysitting became a site of powerful conflict between the babysitter trying to achieve economic, social, sexual, and cultural autonomy and male monsters seeking retribution for the diminishing of male privilege. Soaring rates of female employment and divorce coupled with plummeting birth rates generated a mixture of fright and yearning in adult men who needed babysitters and felt unnerved by them.

Chapter 7 contrasts representations of teenage killer sitters in mostly made-for-television movies with, the preadolescent "Super Sitter" in handbooks and novels like the Baby-sitter's Club book series. Cultural anxieties about the impact of feminism, especially on teenage girls who increasingly abandoned babysitting for service-sector jobs during the 1980s, fueled fears about the autonomy and authority of teenage girls. To generate enthusiasm among preadolescent girls, manuals and magazines from *Women's World* to *Weekly Reader* promoted the "Super Sitter" ideal. In contrast to berserk babysitters who harmed families were representations of helpful preadolescents. The establishment of Safe Sitters, Inc., and other babysitting training programs taught girls vocational skills and nurtured domestic sensibilities by channeling some aspects of Girl Power and containing others. Unlike transgressive teenagers in movies, perky preadolescents ideally combined empowerment and accommodation into a social identity that was to be more endearing than dangerous.

Chapter 8 demonstrates that in contrast to fictionalized girls' unequivocal enthusiasm about babysitting in the hundreds of saccharine stories published since the 1980s, preadolescent and adolescent girls toward the end of the twentieth century voiced many of the same complaints as previous generations. Still committed to pursuing their personal independence, babysitters objected to the unregulated and unstructured working conditions that exposed them to out-of-control employers and children who acted out. By the end of the century, girls with greater self-esteem, growing individualism, higher aspirations, more extracurricular activities, and new job options abandoned the field of babysitting that had been the leading form of female adolescent employment for generations.

The final chapter reveals that the babysitter continues to serve as a vessel for anxieties about gender and generational changes still in the making. As adults project—rather than introspect—about the meanings of the stories they hear and pass along, babysitting continues as a site of conflict and control. While real babysitters are even harder to come by today than they were in the past, new ones have steadily appeared in the popular culture created by young women. Their creative reappropriations of the iconic babysitter in recent folk and rock music reveal that, while girls still routinely give up babysitting, the sitter remains a fertile symbol of the struggle over girlhood autonomy and empowerment.