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An interview with bell hooks

by Helen Cordes

AS A WHITE, MIDDLE-CLASS MOM of two daughters, my usual focus on girls' issues leans toward whatever issues my white, middle-class girls are encountering. For example, lately I've mulled over my mixed feelings about whether the 13-year-old should wear belly-baring shirts and whether the 8-year-old is inheriting my bad attitude toward math.

Reading and rereading author, lecturer, and educator bell hooks, as I recently have, was like leaving a wintry weather-bound valley cottage for a challenging and exhilarating mountain peak. It was a breath of fresh air, and a reminder, not that my family issues aren't legitimate, but rather that I, and many others, don't always incorporate the big picture of girls' issues.

hooks has offered her inspiring panoramic visions for nearly 20 years, incisively unfolding the causes and effects of sexism, racism, classism, and other cultural dysfunctions based on hierarchy and domination.

She has outlined the multiple factors that prevent girls and other humans from becoming empowered, and has insisted that we consider the experiences of all the oppressed. This is a theme she began with her first book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, and has continued writing about through 16 eclectic

volumes examining everything from pop cultural icons to groundbreaking political theory.

hooks has much to offer girls' advocates, particularly her whimsical picture book *Happy to be Nappy*, and her poetic autobiography of growing up in segregated rural Kentucky, *Bone Black* (a must-read for both girls and adults).

But her more recent books are just as compelling. *Feminism is For Everyone* provides both ready rebuttals to the feminism-wary and pointed challenges to veteran feminists on topics like abusive mothering and the rarity of egalitarian marriages. *All About Love*, on the other hand, is a treatise on incorporating that most empowering of emotions into our lives.

Recently, hooks spoke at Southwestern University, in my hometown of Georgetown, Texas, and I had a chance to talk with her about critical issues facing girls.

Q: Too often books and conversations about girls issues' reflect mostly on the experiences of white middle-class girls. As a result, some "conclusions" drawn by researchers and observers may be incorrect. For instance, you note in *Bone Black* that black girls are often considered more self-confident because they are more talkative or assertive; yet this does not



necessarily translate into higher self-esteem.

A: Different cultures register power and self-esteem differently. For instance, many Jewish females come from homes in which girls are socialized to be talkative, but that does not mean that they are empowered by language. Because so often the model for girls is the dutiful girl who is quiet and knows her place, when white researchers look at girls of color who are talkative and expressive, they see power when in fact self-esteem may be measured by different things. For example, by the color of your skin.

Recently I met with a group of 75 mostly black and Hispanic girls in Chicago, and they were very assertive, much more so than a group of white girls would have been. But the issue we were discussing was whether there should be violence in the family, whether children should be hit. And they were all very pro-hitting, unwilling to budge on their perception that you need to be

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My model daughters

by Anne Eggebroten

MARIE IS HYSTERICAL BECAUSE I won't let her be a model.

"Mom! She gave me the phone number and said I should make an appointment to have some pictures taken."

"Yeah—only \$600 for a portfolio."

"No, Mom! She said it would be free, just a few Polaroids that she would send to someone else...."

"No, Marie. They always want money, and then there's the driving time to and from West Hollywood, and it's not a good environment for you to be in. Besides, it's oppressive to every other 13-year-old to see magazine covers of skinny blondes like you and think they have to look like that."

"But Mom, it's my life!"

We have this argument every month, when Marie goes to the mall with her friends and an agent stops her and asks if she models. She's probably approached because she's tall but not yet filled out, and has long straight blonde hair.

Many mothers of girls have heard the plaintive wail, "I want to be a model!" Our three daughters began reading *Seventeen* at age 10. Packaged and marketed relentlessly, beauty has become an obsession for them. Makeup, name-brand clothes, and intense designing of hair are a big part of their lives

For me it began when my oldest daughter, Roz, was in fourth grade, and her friend Molly in fifth. They pleaded with me to let them become models, and at last I said, "Fine—but I don't have time to figure it out. You'll have to look it up in the phone book."

I thought that would stop them, but I was wrong. In a few days Roz announced that she and

Molly had an appointment at a modeling agency not far away. "Will you take us, Mommy? Please, please?"

Thus I found myself sitting in an office listening to the spiel of an agent. She was very sweet to Roz and Molly, telling them they were beautiful girls, but to come back in two years when they had their braces off. I was relieved to be off the hook.

As a college English teacher, I had heard tales from students about the sleazy world of modeling. One student, who financed her education by sauntering down the walkways of European fashion shows, told me about the sexual exploitation of young models, many of whom traveled with an agent rather than a parent.

A year later, Roz received a brochure in the mail inviting her to a modeling talent search at a downtown Los Angeles hotel. This time all three of my daughters teamed up to persuade me to take them.

When we arrived at the hotel, we joined thousands of 4- to 16-year-old girls in an enormous line, where I filled out one form per child and attached to them the school photos we'd brought. After snaking around the balconies, we finally arrived near the central stage, where the judges sat in front of a catwalk.

Though opposed to the whole thing, I found myself caught up in the glamorous dream. Like the other mothers there, I began hoping that my lovely children would indeed catch an agent's eye.

With the poise of a professional, Roz handed her form to an assistant, walked down the aisle, and turned and smiled as a camera flashed. Then she walked off the stage into oblivion. Next Ellen did the same, giggly and

breathless, and then Marie in her 5-year-old march.

Thirty seconds each in the limelight—and then it was over. I realized they were not going to be chosen out of these thousands. The whole thing was a charade.

Waiting for the winners to be announced, we toured the booths set up by photographers, modeling schools, makeup companies, and many others hoping to make money off the modeling dream. Hours later the closing ceremonies began, a kind of pep rally led by some faded sitcom star.

After music and exhortations—"Hold onto your dream!"—the winners were announced and ran tearfully up to the stage to receive their awards: a free portfolio and six months of modeling school. The remaining thousands were told their photos would be "reviewed by agents who might call." I vowed to never again waste a Saturday doing this.

What did I learn? We have to stand up to our daughters, for our daughters, no matter how much they fuss and sulk. We have to say no to fashion magazines, Hollywood culture, and the billion-dollar beauty industry. And we have to help our daughters become whole persons, not just faces and bodies in a culture intent on marketing sex and beauty. ☺

Anne Eggebroten writes from Santa Monica, California. This piece is from her forthcoming book. She has also edited a book of personal stories on abortion.



Anne Eggebroten and her youngest daughter Marie, now 14.

Motherings