

When girls aren't sugar and spice

GIRL LAND, by Caitlin Flanagan. Reagan Arthur / Little, Brown, 224 pp., \$25.99.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

Caitlin Flanagan's essays in *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* in the early 2000s made people furious. Her attacks on women working outside the home got her labeled a "strident anti-feminist" and a "snobbish hypocrite" in *Slate*, a "provocatrice" in *The New York Observer*, and worse on blogs and listservs.

Well, everyone can calm down now. When it comes to the topic of girls' adolescence, the focus of her new essay collection, "Girl Land," Flanagan is not anti-feminist, or controversial. In fact, her methods and attitudes come straight out of the women's studies classes I took at college in the late '70s, and her outrage on behalf of girls coming of age in the "Brush Your Teeth With a Bottle of



Jack" era will feel just right to most women in our age group.

The first chapters of her book decode the messages of various primary sources in familiar feminist style. She works out the semiotics of the board game *Mystery Date*, analyzes 1920s advertisements for tween clothing, compares Clara Bow to Lady Gaga.

In the final essays, Flanagan gets back on her more familiar soapbox. "Nothing says 'your very special night' like a \$1,500 Jessica McClintock gown, a Hummer limo, alcohol poisoning, and a 'Pimps and Ho's' after-party," she writes of proms. "I believe that we are raising children in a kind of postapocalyptic landscape in which no forces beyond individual households — individual mothers and fathers — are protecting children from pornography and violent entertainment," she rails about rap and the Internet.

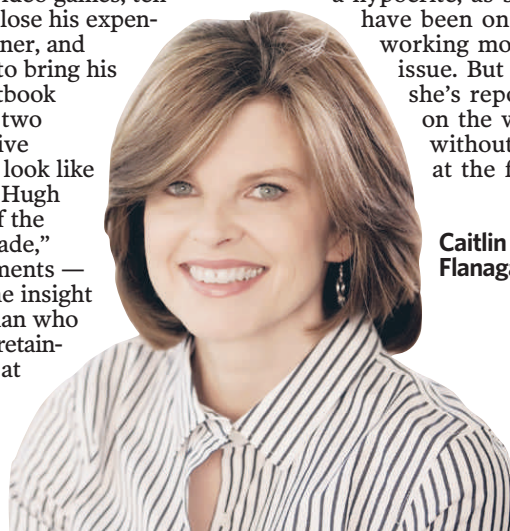
But these right-wing-sounding views will likely get no argument from most liberal

moms. The unparalleled academic and career opportunities for young women today combined with wildly misogynist, exhibitionist and retro-sexual cultural influences are enough to make any mother's eyes cross.

Flanagan herself is raising boys, as she mentions in the chapter where she writes scathingly of the middle-school oral sex scare that swept the country in the mid-2000s. "These stories made the average American middle school dude — a kid formerly known for his enthusiasm for video games, tendency to lose his expensive retainer, and inability to bring his math textbook home on two consecutive nights — look like a kind of Hugh Hefner of the eighth grade," she comments — clearly the insight of a woman who has such retainer-losers at home.

Ultimately, howev-

er, she acknowledges statistics that show this panic was not all urban legend, and admits that if she were to learn that her sons had such experiences, it would be less of a big deal than if her child were a girl. Indeed, the fact that Flanagan is not raising girls might be the source of the less-than-fresh anecdotes and arguments in this book, and the uselessness of the advice she doles out in its final chapter. (Believe me, I don't need a "15-minute tour" of the cultural influences on my daughter!) Flanagan's not a hypocrite, as she may have been on the working mom issue. But now she's reporting on the war without being at the front.



Caitlin Flanagan

PHOTO BY ANDREW ZINN

this week

Readings and book signings on Long Island

Tuesday

Plainview author **Mark Ribowsky** reads from his new biography, "Howard Cosell: The Man, the Myth and the Transformation of American Sports" (Norton). At 7 p.m., *Book Revue*, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com



Thursday



Self-published authors **Linda Maria Frank** of Massapequa, above left, and **Karen Bonnet** of Oceanside lead a workshop for aspiring writers, "So You Want to Write a Story?" At 7 p.m., *Barnes & Noble*, 1542 Northern Blvd., Manhasset; 516-365-6723

Friday

Self-published authors **Ron Piana** and **Randi Londer Gould** of Huntington read from their novel, "Dreamland." At 7 p.m., *Book Revue*, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com

Saturday

Stony Brook University writing professor **Roger Rosenblatt** reads from his new book, "Kayak Morning: Reflections on Love, Grief, and Small Boats" (Ecco). At 7 p.m., *Book Revue*, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com



It's a delight learning to be polite

WOULD IT KILL YOU TO STOP DOING THAT?: A Modern Guide to Manners, by Henry Alford. Twelve, 242 pp., \$24.99.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

There are times in life when you notice the world's ills, and sigh in contemplative resignation; and there are times when you notice the world's ills, and grab a pair of rubber gloves and a bottle of Windex." So Henry Alford, the one-time *Spy* magazine writer, now a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair* and *The New York Times*, announces his mission in "Would It Kill You to Stop Doing That?: A Modern Guide to Manners." While Alford's Windex job on modern manners is not systematic or thorough, the chitchat he makes while he scrubs is entertaining.

Alford defines manners as a matter of treating one another well, and distinguishes it from its more serious colleague, ethics, and its subgenres, etiquette and protocol. He describes life as a cosmic Wikipedia, where each of us through our actions is redefining and expanding the categories to which we belong. Unfortunately, I must reveal that Alford is redefining the term "etiquette writer" as a "person who really enjoys a weird restaurant game called 'Touch the Waiter.'" Yes, he does, and rules and scoring are described in detail.

The book alternates between these idiosyncratic digressions — there are chapters on visiting Japan, trading seedlings on veggietrader.com, giving free tours of New York to foreign visitors — and actual commentary on modern

manners. One of the more efficacious sections offers a list of the responses Alford received when he asked friends for their pet peeves. When someone replies to your phone call with an email or a text message, when someone hits "reply to all" on a group email to say something unnecessary, when someone you see all the time fails to offer "PGR" (Perfunctory Gestural Recognition) with at least a pucker of the lips — these I could relate to. And I know I will make use of his pointers on approaching others at parties without seeming to be making a pass at them.

While the book's flow is a little bumpy, the reader's way is smoothed throughout by consistently fun writing. Alford on the morning bowing ritual in Japanese department

stores: "Seldom have I felt more honored. As you walk down a couple hundred feet of cosmetics counters at an old-guard store like Mitsukoshi, your movement sets off a ripple of appreciation that starts directly in front of you, then shimmers briefly over the Lancôme counter prior to wafting up to the ceiling and bursting in a cirrocumulus pillow of good tidings." Alford on why you should steer clear of someone you know when you see him in a drugstore: "He may be buying condoms or hemorrhoidal salves, or any of a host of unguents meant to bring relief or pleasure to the body's carapaces and by-ways."

Returning later in the book to the question of what manners truly are, Alford uses child-development theory to come to a revised conclusion. "Maybe good manners are imagination." No wonder he turned out to be such an expert.

