



Elsie's Womanhood

Martha Finley

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It is a time for celebration as Elsie prepares to marry her beloved Edward. Following their wedding, the happy couple honeymoon at Viamede, childhood home of Elsie's mother in the Bayou region of Louisiana. Here Elsie's faith matures, and she learns to share her beliefs with others in a meaningful way.

Four children--Elsie, Edward, Violet, and Harold--are born to Elsie and Edward, who experience the joys and heart-aches of parenthood. Meanwhile, the country teeters on the brink of civil war. Mindful of the tragedies unfolding around her, Elsie is touched by the painful divisions brought on by the War Between the States and the devastating loss of family and friends that accompanies it.

Elsie's Womanhood Details

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From Reader Review Elsie's Womanhood for online ebook

Holly says

ELSIE'S WOMANHOOD is #4 in the series and I must admit that Elsie, despite all her dreadfulness, has become my favorite heroine. She's all grown up now, at least physically, and of course she's still beautiful and pious and sweet. She's married too, to the adoring Mr. Travilla who treats her like the emotional child she is. Once wed, she becomes the perfect Victorian wife. She also begins having babies, one child every two years by my reckoning. How this happens seems a matter of some question, since Elsie's union is "disturbed by no feverish heat of passion." Notwithstanding the beautiful, dimpled babies keep on appearing. The real question is, how will Elsie's Papa deal with losing his beloved daughter to another? And the melodrama continues, with an armed gunman threatening Elsie's very life in a scene that's worthy of any Penny Dreadful...

This book moves us into the Civil War era, with the Southern states seceding from the Union. Elsie shows a certain naivete about the pending conflict, not quite understanding what the politics are all about. She sees nothing wrong with slavery and considers the Abolitionists to be "overly judgmental." In one passage she praises nineteenth-century America, denying that there's any oppression whatsoever in her glorious land. Statements like this betray her own ignorance as to the realities of life. She should certainly know better, having seen enough cases of racism and inhumanity in this book alone. Author Martha Finley describes such things as slaves being whipped and black families torn apart on the auction block. Yet Elsie continues to wear rose-colored glasses and to think that everything's just hunky-dory. Her world view is soon to change dramatically with the outbreak of war...and not all of her family and friends will survive!

Ariel says

This series was amazing and a great story! to me it had a good end with Elsie's Womanhood. I loved the way the author describes things in the story. And even though this one was especially sad it was beautiful and well written!

Caitlin says

Why did I pick up this book again?

I think I'm officially done reading any more Elsie books. I'm tired of hearing that she's perfect and her faultless character is really starting to get on my nerves!

Elisabeth Gimenez says

I just finished reading this one. It was good, but also sad reading about the civil war how that brothers fought against each other. The book might not be true but its sad knowing that things like that really did happen.

Jenna says

All the Elsie books are fantastic, especially the first ten!

Amy Rae says

I picked up *Elsie's Womanhood* because I'd never read an Elsie Dinsmore book and felt like I should--and specifically because the summary for this book said she had babies in it, and I'm always here for marriage and babies. I figured this would be a duller Anne's House of Dreams, because what popular culture tells you about Elsie Dinsmore is this: Elsie Dinsmore is a goody-two-shoes Christian who always does the right thing and has very boring adventures. If you check out Wikipedia's Elsie Dinsmore in popular culture, you'll notice that she was shorthand in old Hollywood for naive young ladies. I thought this meant I was getting into something didactic but ultimately bland.

I was wrong. And the reason I was wrong is because of everything popular culture doesn't tell you about Elsie Dinsmore, starting with issue number one: she's a fucking slave owner.

Lucky me, I landed on the book in which the Civil War happens and Martha Finley's Reconstruction-era romanticism is in full flower. Elsie Dinsmore, as mentioned, is a good young lady who always does the right thing--the problem being that *the right thing* is defined by a horrifyingly outdated set of morals that's presented as unimpeachable in its goodness.

You would be forgiven for being uncertain at first whether Elsie's family owns slaves or not, because they're consistently referenced in euphemism.

"They had come to spend the day, and bonnets and shawls had already been carried away by **the servants** in attendance."

and

"She was full of plans for the comfort and profit of **her people**, but all to be subject to his approval."

are the two phrases used most commonly in the book. Your confusion will probably be cleared up when she buys two more slaves over the course of the novel, and not a word goes to manumission. The fact that she's purchased them, by the way, is proof of her righteousness in this book, because she's buying the husband and grandchild of her "mammy." By owning these human beings, Elsie's actually doing them a favour, in the eyes of the narrative, because she's reuniting a family broken apart by greedier masters.

- ""Well yes; my daughter is fond of her old mammy, and for her sake would be willing to give

a reasonable sum [for Joe, a slave on the ship they're riding]. What do you ask?""

- "Mr. Dinsmore's man John, Aunt Chloe, and Uncle Joe, went with them; and it was a continual feast for master and mistress to see the happiness of the poor old couple, especially when their grandchild Dinah, their only living descendant so far as they could learn, was added to the party; Elsie purchasing her, according to promise, as they passed through New Orleans on their return trip."

Needless to say, Elsie is only righteous when she can afford to be. When she arrives at the Louisiana sugar plantation she owns and sees the overseer whipping a female slave, she's ready to fire him. Her father steps in with what's presented as good common sense, however:

"Mr. Dinsmore shook his head gravely. "It would not do, my child. The sugar-making season will shortly begin; he understands the business thoroughly; we could not supply his place at a moment's notice, or probably in a number of months, and the whole crop would be lost. We must not be hasty or rash, but remember the Bible command, 'Let your moderation be known unto all men.' Nor should we allow ourselves to judge the man too hardly.'""

So instead she undertakes to reform him instead. Every scene at the sugar plantation is painful to sit through; it's full of dialogue straight out of a minstrel show and discussions of slaves as childlike "creatures" in desperate need of a white owner to guide them in all things:

"In the six weeks of their stay, "Massa" an' "Missus" had become very dear to those warm, childlike hearts."

None of this is surprising when you actually know when these books are set, but coming from the perspective of wanting something nice to follow up Daddy-Long-Legs, it was cold water to the face. I turned it on 1.2x speed in hopes of getting through the fucking thing, however, because I wanted to see how Finley handled the Civil War. The answer is "badly," obviously, but I needed the deets. She leans on the idea that the South probably would have gotten rid of slavery eventually, because as good Christians, they understood that their actions and godly consciences didn't align. However, because the North was pushy about it, the South dug its heels in as a natural, understandable consequence.

It's typical "the South will rise again" claptrap, essentially, but you'd honestly be better off reading *Gone with the Wind*, because at least people tell Scarlett O'Hara off once in a while. People who disagree with Elsie Dinsmore are straight-up villains; there's a dude in this book who keeps trying to kill her (admittedly, that's not a great thing to do, but the way it's written is so dumb) and ends up starving to death in Andersonville and presumably going to Hell as his ultimate punishment. But I'm getting off-track.

So anyway, the Dinsmore family is over in Italy during the war, and when the Emancipation Proclamation is issued, they do at least tell the slaves they have there. The slaves then beg for reassurance that they'll still be able to stay with the Dinsmores, with one going so far as to weep over that hateful freedom Lincoln declared:

""Dis chile don't want no freedom," sobbed the poor old creature at length, "she lubs to b'long to her darlin' young missis: Uncle Joe he sing an' jump an' praise de Lord, 'cause freedom come, but your ole mammy don't want no freedom; she can't go for to leave you, Miss Elsie, her bressed darlin' chile dat she been done take care ob ever since she born.""

Based on the race issues alone, I think this book is a nightmare. But even if you set aside the race issues, Elsie is terrifyingly submissive towards her father.

- "But, dear papa, please remember I am still your own child, and ready to submit to your authority, whenever you see fit to exert it."
 - ""Dear, dear papa," was all she said in response, but her eyes spoke volumes. "I am yours still, your very own, and glad it is so," they said."
 - ""Forgive me, dear papa," she said, laying her head on his shoulder, and fondly stroking his face with her pretty white hand. "Please consider yourself master there as truly as at the Oaks, and as you have been for years; and understand that your daughter means to take no important step without your entire approval.""
 - "Come to grandpa," he said, holding out his hands to the little one; then as he took her in his arms, "My dear daughter, if I had any authority over you now——"
- "Papa," she interrupted, blushing deeply, while the quick tears sprang to her eyes, "you hurt me! Please don't speak so. I am as ready now as ever to obey your slightest behest."

Moreover, while the way Finley writes Elsie and her father showing affection might not be completely out there for the times, to say it's aged badly is an understatement. The undertones are creepy and incestuous, and they're Elsie-specific in a way that's never demonstrated towards Elsie's younger siblings.

- "[S]he did not hear a step approaching from behind; but an arm encircled her waist, and a low-breathed "My darling" woke her from her reverie."

- ""I know it, my darling," he said, passing an arm about her waist, as they stood together in front of the fire, and gazing fondly down into the sweet fair face."
- ""My darling!" murmured the father, in low, half tremulous accents, putting his arm about the slender waist, "my beautiful darling! how can I give you to another?" and again and again his lips were pressed to hers in long, passionate kisses."
- "Her father passed his arm about her waist and made her rest her head upon his shoulder."
- ""Save one," he answered half-playfully, passing his hand caressingly over her hair, and bending down to press his lips on brow, and cheeks, and mouth. "
- ""And my father knows I will obey him," she said, tremulously lifting his hand to her lips."
- ""My good-night kiss, papa," she whispered, putting her arms about his neck.

"My dear darling! my precious, precious child! how glad I am to be able to give it to you once more, and to take my own from your own sweet lips," he said, clasping her closer. "God bless you and keep you, and ever cause His face to shine upon you.""

Adding to this creepiness is the fact that this book was written pre-good and bad secrets. A major lesson in this book is that you should never break an oath, even when you were forced to swear it:

"Not yet," he answered, tightening his grasp, and at the same time taking a pistol from his pocket. "I swear you shall never marry that man: promise me on your oath that you'll not, or—I'll shoot you through the heart; the heart that's turned false to me. D'ye hear," and he held the muzzle of his piece within a foot of her breast.

Every trace of color fled from her face, but she stood like a marble statue, without speech or motion of a muscle, her eyes looking straight into his with firm defiance.

"Do you hear?" he repeated, in a tone of exasperation, "speak! promise that you'll never marry Travilla, or I'll shoot you in three minutes—shoot you down dead on the spot, if I swing for it before night."

"That will be as God pleases," she answered low and reverently; "you can have no power at all against me except it be given you from above."

"I can't, hey? looks like it; I've only to touch the trigger here, and your soul's out o' your body. Better promise than die."

Still she stood looking him unflinchingly in the eye; not a muscle moving, no sign of fear except that deadly pallor.

"Well," lowering his piece, "you're a brave girl, and I haven't the heart to do it," he exclaimed in admiration. "I'll give up that promise; on condition that you make another—that you'll keep all this a secret for twenty-four hours, so I can make my escape from the neighborhood before

they get after me with their bloodhounds."

"That I promise, if you will be gone at once."

"You'll not say a word to any one of having seen me, or suspecting I'm about here?"

"Not a word until the twenty-four hours are over."

[SO HE LEAVES AND EVENTUALLY SHE GOES HOME AND HER FATHER FINDS HER]

"And you are trembling like an aspen leaf," he said, bending over her in serious alarm. "My child, when did this come on? and what has caused it?"

"Papa, I cannot tell you now, or till to-morrow, at this hour; I will then. But oh, papa dear, dear papa!" she cried, putting her arm about his neck and bursting into hysterical weeping, "promise me, if you love me promise me, that you will not leave the house till I have told you. I am sick, I am suffering; you will stay by me? you will not leave me?"

"My darling, I will do anything I can to relieve you, mentally or physically," he answered in tones of tenderest love and concern. "I shall not stir from the house, while to do so would increase your suffering. I perceive there has been some villainy practised upon you, and a promise extorted, which I shall not ask you to break; but rest assured, I shall keep guard over my precious one."

Elsie keeps her promise not to tell anyone about the man's whereabouts (he's the one who starves to death, BTW), and by doing so shows that she's a true Christian--because, of course, true Christians should never break promises they made at gunpoint.

This is resoundingly disturbing in context of Elsie's general submission to her father. I hate to pearl-clutch, but I genuinely find this sentiment dangerous to young girls potentially reading this. These books could easily be used to reinforce grooming and normalize inappropriate relationships between adults and children; the man she marries in this book tells her, "Ah! I wish you were ten years older," in the first Elsie Dinsmore book, *when she's eight years old*. Even without active grooming, they reinforce a worldview in which girls should keep every promise they're forced to make and do whatever men in authority say. That's still an equation that provides ample opportunity for predators to take advantage of the morality on display in Finley's writing.

As recently as nine years ago, there was an effort to repackage Elsie Dinsmore and various other characters into what was essentially a conservative American Girl line called A Life of Faith, featuring dolls, clothing, and somewhat updated books. This series might not be mainstream anymore, but they're still considered classics in many conservative Christian homes. While A Life of Faith's publisher is out of business, the original books aren't out of print.

And that's why this review is enormous. Because it's not enough to tell you that this book is racist, sexist, creepy, and--frankly--poorly written. (We haven't even touched on how glurgy the death scenes are.) I want to show everyone I know in hopes of keeping the Elsie Dinsmore books off of a few more little girls'

bookshelves. Frankly, I think the books ought to be categorized as adult fiction in libraries these days; they're as worthy of study as any book that romanticizes the antebellum South, but I don't think they belong anywhere near their original target age group.

If you want a book full of real virtue and heart, please consider *Sugar* by Jewell Parker Rhodes instead. *Sugar* is also set on a sugar plantation in the deep South, but it provides a far less "Old Folks at Home" view of slavery and features a main character who's full of courage, compassion, curiosity, and determination. I'd much rather people read about her than Elsie any day.

And since I'm now morbidly obsessed with Elsie freaking Dinsmore, please enjoy some other articles and blog posts on how unsettling these books are:

- An Era That Needed to End
 - Vision Distortion: Elsie Dinsmore
 - What Not to Read: Elsie Dinsmore
-

R.F. Gammon says

I think this is the one where the series started to go downhill for me.

Esther Filbrun says

As with the other books in this series, *Elsie's Womanhood* picks up where *Elsie's Girlhood* left off—at the scene where Elsie is finally engaged. This story continues the tale, and while it's fairly slow at times, there are several interesting diversions with Tom Jackson trying to kill Mr. Travilla—or Elsie, if he can—in order to get revenge for not being able to marry Elsie himself. Then Elsie's family starts to grow, and the Civil War begins, with friends fighting on both sides. After five long years, the war is over—with many family members dead or permanently changed. This was another great book in the series—I'm looking forward to reading *Elsie's Motherhood*!

Rob says

Another excellent book for character-building. The same problems as my reviews of earlier books with writing style but mostly explained by the era in which it was written. A general look at the the cause of the Civil War and a more emotional display of the "brother against brother" nature of the war that tore families and devoured the youth.

Bkwyrm says

Yep. Still reading them. Don't ask me why.

Mecque says

What can I say? I'm just very fond of Edward Travilla. I appreciated the increased action/adventure scenes in this volume. I think I might actually keep reading these books. I had trouble keeping track of the female characters changing names at the end because of marriages, and the Civil War aftermath scenes were pretty brutal. Overall, my favorite book in the series so far.

That is, it's my favorite if I forget about the incredibly uncomfortable portrayal of African Americans throughout the book. They don't completely ruin it, but I would never ever give this book to an impressionable reader (aka the young girls these books are aimed at). I don't blame the author (it was a different time period) , but that aspect of the book was horrifying and made me feel sick as I was reading it.

Lana Del Slay says

["Travilla; after years of patient waiting he has won her at last—our darling—and—and I've given her to him."]

Travilla is Elsie's father's friend. They're roughly the same age. This would explain

Shari Klase says

Delightfully old fashioned

I love these Elsie books both for their good values and charm. Yes, they are a bit out dated but still very entertaining to read. It's a great pleasure to watch Elsie grow from child to mother in these books and to see her faith grow as well. I highly recommend them.

Javaladybuggmil.com says

So interesting the look from outside the civil war..

Familial love vs national honor and loss of the places once cherished and loved.. Hope stolen and then restored.. Amazing

Tara Lynn says

I find that as I read or re-read classic literature from every age, my patience for certain topics or pieces has definitely increased with age. While I would never say I was a devout fan of any "ism", I would think that

feminists, as well as people who believe in equality would have had a great deal of trouble reading this series. I can understand the period in which the pieces were written; and that the limited experience of the author would have made its mark on the novels. While I can find each story to be a sweet simple piece, perfectly suited to little girls, the constant references to "gentle and obedient darkies," and the long suffering piety of Elsie herself drive me to give it only three stars. She seems so much less than what a normal girl of her age would have been, even given the constraints of upbringing and the period itself. Having read the earlier novels and seen the near-martyrdom she experienced at the hands of a self-absorbed and utterly fastidious father, I would almost say that I find her obedience to be less natural in form, and more acutely a symptom of PTSD.

Rather like Melanie Wilkes, the unsung heroine of *Gone With the Wind*, the overwhelming gentle piety and good humor without any rancor in the face of all events is trying to tell the reader. However, unlike Elsie, Melanie presents a great counterpoint to the other more volatile characters around her, allowing them to use her as a living conscience. Elsie's stories are often too flat, and the characters two-dimensional to give them as much emotional value as those in *GWtW*.

I think I'll continue on with the series, if only to have something to do at work, and to marvel at the notion that these books were considered "classic" reading for children.
