

GENDER ISSUES IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by Kathryn Jacobs



Whether we are expanding our lives through knowledge or imagination, there is no doubt that reading plays a crucial role in this process. Largely because of this, reading continues to be one of the most highly debated components in the education of our children. When they are young we argue the best way to teach children to read. Once we've taught them *how*, the arguments turn to the best way to actually get them do it. Any educator or librarian knows you can lead teens to a book but you can't make them read it. So we do everything from forcing them to read (mandatory school reading times) to bribery (reading incentive programs). Yet, in our quest to persuade young adults to read, we may sometimes forget that it is also important what they read and *what* they take away from the experience.

Like all other media bombarding us with images and information at every turn, books play a significant role in transmitting society's culture to our youth. Gender roles are an important part of this culture. Whether it is the topic of one's own sexuality or the ongoing struggle for equality among the sexes, gender issues factor into most every part of our society. How the genders are portrayed in young adult literature contributes to the image young adults develop of their gender roles and the role of gender in the social order. This issue is made more complex by the fact that gender plays an important role in the reading choices of young men and women.

While the study of gender issues has become a legitimate and growing field, almost all attention is focused on issues surrounding women and homosexuals. What follows is a discussion on the issue of gender in young adult literature as it pertains to both girls *and* boys. Educators and librarians must educate themselves on this critical subject. Moreover, we must pass on that knowledge to young adults, teaching them to read critically so that our youth will become skilled at forming their own opinions and not unquestioningly incorporate all messages they receive.

THE VALUE OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

For many years a bias has existed against young adult literature. The writing was considered simple and the plots of little real substance. As with any genre of literature, some young adult novels could still be described as such. Today, however, this is not the norm. Presently there are many books written by talented authors that explore a variety of important issues. Unfortunately, these works are still looked over by educators in favor of the "classics." High school teachers continue to try to teach works by Steinbeck, Hemingway and the Bronte sisters and continue to be frustrated when many of the students simply refuse to read the books. Young adult literature has a readability and high interest level that appeals to every adolescent, especially males who are notorious for being reluctant readers. Research has shown that introducing young adult literature to males improves their reading ability (Ballash 1994). That is not to say that boys are drawn to these books solely because they are easy to read. Young men also relate to books with adolescent male characters whose social and emotional conflicts mirror their own. Because of this mirroring of true life, research has suggested that reading adolescent literature can play a significant role in the emotional and mental health of an adolescent (Gill 1999). Our responsibility as librarians and educators is to find books that help our young males become more literate. But what books will draw in adolescent males?

GENDER BOUNDARIES IN YOUNG ADULT READ PRACTICES

Research has confirmed what we all have witnessed in practice; girls are far more likely than boys to read a variety of books, crossing perceived gender boundaries (Dutro 2001). This is encouraged in our culture. We support girls when they wish to read about romance and mysteries. We applaud them when they read a book about sports or science fiction. But does this same support exist for boys in their reading practices?

Recent research has found that, when it comes to recommending books to boys, teachers tend to use conventional understanding to reinforce traditional

ideas of gender and gender preferences, thus denying boys wider reading choices and chances to expand their tastes (Millard 1997; Telford, 1999). This behavior can be seen in other areas as well, including the library and library literature. There are many articles in journals with suggested reading for the reluctant reader we call the teenage boy. The vast majority of books on these lists are about an adolescent male character participating in sports or honing his survival skills while on some distant, dangerous adventure. These books are what the librarians are told to recommend, so it is no surprise to see this occurring regularly in practice in youth services departments all over the country. So what about the young man browsing the shelves for something new and different? Perhaps he was just about to pick up a book on a teenage girl who cuts herself compulsively when the librarian walks up and offers him a book about a teenage boy who got kicked off the football team. If we constantly push books about sports because we think it is the only thing we could possibly get a boy interested in, then we are perpetuating stereotypes and perhaps making it uncomfortable for young men to expand their horizons and read about new ideas.

Rather than suggest books by subject, consider recommending books with certain characteristics that appeal to boys. In 2001 researcher and educator Jeff Wilhelm published the results of an extensive and unique study focusing on the reading practices and preferences of boys. Wilhelm discovered certain common features of texts that adolescent males found especially appealing. The boys in this study preferred short books or books written in shorter sections, giving them a more immediate sense of accomplishment that longer books did not. They also favored highly visual texts. It should be noted that these works can either contain actual visuals or simply be written in a way that evokes strong visual imagery. Works containing humor, new perspectives and interesting facts were valued. These elements were sought after and often shared later in social situations, proving boys could be interested in book discussion groups given the right circumstances. Finally, although interested in factual information, the boys in this study preferred facts be presented in a storied way, bringing the information to life and putting it in a context that was meaningful to them.

It should be noted that like adults, adolescents are individuals and their reading preferences will thus be individualized. Both boys and girls are interested in new and different reading opportunities. Librarians and educators must work to consciously recognize stereotypes and avoid them.

SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER REPRESENTATION IN YA LITERATURE

The manner in which genders are represented in adolescent literature has the capability to impact young

adults' attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society. As author Mem Fox (1993) states, "Everything we read...constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men." Young adults may be particularly susceptible to gender portrayals in literature as they work through a stage in life in which they are searching to define themselves. Gender stereotypes in literature can prevent young adults from reaching their full potential as human beings by depriving them of suitable role models and reinforcing age-old gender constraints in society. These stereotypes exist for both genders and are equally dangerous. While girls are portrayed as passive and weak, boys and men are rarely presented as feeling and vulnerable human beings. These typecasts limit the adolescent's freedom to express him/herself and pressure the young person to behave in ways that may not be best suited to his or her personality (Fox 1993, Rudman 1995).

FEMALE GENDER REPRESENTATION ISSUES

Teenage girls spend a great deal of time trying on new roles and searching for examples by which to define themselves. It has often been suggested that the media play a significant role in the development of the female gendered identity. Every form of media from film to advertising to popular music has been criticized for presenting insidious messages about femininity to society. Not only do these messages shape and sometimes distort the way males view females in our society, but also they can shape the way females define themselves. Magazines targeted at teenage girls are overflowing with fashion advice, beauty secrets and tips on how to attract that perfect boyfriend. These publications do little to show girls that they have anything to offer society other than to be attractive to men. Popular icons such as Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera enthusiastically promote sexuality and little else, leaving their young fans obsessed with trying to appear sexy. But what messages is young adult literature sending to our young girls?

As Finders (1996) explains, "Literacy events in and out of school provide an area in which the individual girl learns to read and write her roles and relationships." If books are helping to teach girls how to be girls, then what exactly are they teaching? A study of popular young adult literature by Julia Motes (1998) suggests that books targeted at the female reading population are "dominated by an obsession with appearance as well as a linkage of appearance to success with males and/or positions of prestige."

In these popular titles, initial descriptions of characters are wrought with detailed narrative of the girls' physical features, loaded with adjectives and

sometimes filling a full page of text. While this study focused on series fiction for girls, this same detail can be found in other critically acclaimed novels. Ann Brashares, in her 2001 novel *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, introduces the four main characters early on in the novel as all meet one last time before parting ways for the summer. Each of the characters is described in glowing detail as they take turns trying on a pair of pants. One character's description begins:

They were used to Lena, but Carmen knew that to the rest of the world she was fairly stunning. She had Mediterranean skin that tanned well, straight, shiny dark hair, and wide eyes roughly the color of celery. Her face was so lovely, so delicately structured, it kind of gave Carmen a stomachache. Carmen once confessed her worry to Tibby that some movie director was going to spot Lena and take her away, and Tibby admitted she had worried the exact same thing (p. 14-15).

The description continues to explain how particularly stunning Lena is and how amazing she (and the other three girls) look in the pants. All the main female characters in Brashares's novel are characterized as attractive, but this is not unusual in a young adult novel. In teen literature, it seems to have become important the girls are beautiful or sexy. Orenstein (1994) claims that "girls know, in spite of the overt messages of success and achievement proffered them, that their body is their most valuable commodity; indeed, they believe it defines them."

If the characters in these novels are not particularly beautiful, they are miserable and self-deprecating. Take, for example the notorious Georgia, the leading character in Louise Rennison's 1999 diary-format novel *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging*. Georgia, it would seem, is not your typical teenage ravishing beauty. However, it is difficult to accept she is as hideous as she would lead us to believe. A large portion of Georgia's diary is devoted to criticizing her own experience. Early on she lists six things she feels are "very wrong" with her life (p. 3). Four of these six things relate to her physical appearance. Later, after describing her ideal boyfriend (p. 17), Georgia flatly states, "Anyway, I'll never have a boyfriend because I am too ugly." It is possible, conversely, to see Georgia's self-deprecation as a reflection of how girls truly feel in our culture today. Bombarded by messages that the only real illustrations of femininity are models of physical perfection, impressionable teens and pre-teens feel increasing pressure to be gorgeous. This often-unattainable goal leaves adolescent girls obsessed with beauty and appearance, much like the fictional Georgia.

Another criticism of young adult literature for girls is that it is often dominated with the notion that

attaining a boyfriend is the ultimate success in a female's life. If the main female character does not already have a boyfriend, she seeks one throughout the book and wins him in the end. "To have a boyfriend is presented within the text as the ultimate goal and the inevitable course of events" (Motes 1998). Rennison (1999) provides us with a fine example of this common theme in *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging*. The reader witnesses the irrepressible main character Georgia fumble through a few dreadful relationships with less than appealing boys before the book concludes with her winning the eye of the boy she's been pining after all along, prompting her to scrawl cheerfully in her diary, "All is well that ends well. I am now nearly Robbie's girlfriend" (p. 234). While not overt the message presented by these books is that females are not sane, successful or happy people without a boyfriend.

But it is not enough to have a boyfriend; it must be the *right* boyfriend. While it is certainly commendable that a girl be selective in choosing a significant other, it is the way in which these characters choose that causes concern. The study by Motes claims that boyfriends are rarely described as or valued for anything other than their looks or coolness-factor (1998). Little to nothing is said about their internal traits or personal characteristics. Are they kind? Honest? Thoughtful? Moreover, do these girls even care? In *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging*, Georgia begins her obsession with her future boyfriend (whom she refers to as "the Sex God") after seeing him only for a brief moment (p. 48). It is the fact that he is "gorgeous" and a member of a rock band that draws her to him. In truth, they spend much of the book not speaking to each other over a misunderstanding, and the reader learns next to nothing about his personal character as a human being. This same situation is repeated once again in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* when Bridget decides Eric is the boy for her moments after laying eyes on him. She knows nothing more about him than the fact he's a soccer coach and "beautiful" (p. 69).

"Beautiful" is exactly the same term LaVaughn uses to describe Jody, the boy she has a crush on (p. 22) in Virginia Euwer Wolff's 2001 National Book Award Winner *True Believer*. She is so overwhelmed by his beauty that she never gets to know him for who he really is. This leads to heartbreak when she eventually discovers quite by accident that Jody is a homosexual.

To be fair, not all books starring teenage girls present these stereotypes. In fact, Wolff's *True Believer*, stands in the face of stereotypes and rejects them. The main character, LaVaughn, is not described as exceptionally beautiful. In fact, she's not described at all. Her height, weight, facial features and race are left entirely up to the reader to decide. While LaVaughn does develop a crush on Jody and thinks of him often, she

also is depicted studying, taking advanced classes, getting a responsible job and planning for college and a career in nursing. This teenage girl clearly has more to offer than her body and she knows it. Finally, LaVaughn's mother is an example to all girls and women, breaking-up with her boyfriend when it becomes clear he has nothing to offer the woman but hollow compliments (p. 184). LaVaughn, herself, is left without the boyfriend at the conclusion of the book. It is plain that this teenage girl does not require a boy to feel whole or successful. She is content to be surrounded by her friends, facing a promising future.

MALE GENDER REPRESENTATION ISSUES

While, in recent years, girls have been encouraged to develop and celebrate their girl power, boys do not have the equivalent boy power. "Boys need, and yet are still left wanting, the moral and functional force that our society now eagerly and properly grants to female human beings" (Brooks 2000). What is this "power" that girls enjoy but boys are being denied? It is the fundamental right to discover whatever one is and, then, fully be that without fear of judgment or rejection. We as a society have worked toward this for decades and have won it—for girls. Girls are encouraged to expand their roles and enter fields once considered traditionally male. On the other hand boys are not encouraged to cross gender boundaries for fear of being criticized as sissy or effeminate. There is no doubt that boys are just as capable as girls of being intelligent, creative or imaginative. But to participate in activities that highlight these abilities considered unmanly. Boys, too, need the right to discover and explore their talents, whatever they may be, without being judged as less of a person.

There have been recent critical studies of the themes and subject matter in young adult literature including female gender roles, the portrayal of racial minorities and homosexuals, sexuality and even spirituality. However, very little attention has been given to the portrayal of male characters in adolescent fiction or non-fiction. This is alarming. If girls and young women are having their ideas about femininity shaped by the fiction they read, then surely the same must be true for boys and masculinity.

Nodelman (2002) suggests that books for children and young adults perpetuate negative stereotypes of men and boys by reinforcing the assumption that concern for others is a feminine trait. He proposes that boys and men are forced to disguise their more tender feelings of love for or need for others. To care for others is to feel a sense of responsibility for others. Accepting these responsibilities is a sign of weakness and will lead to a loss of freedom. The general idea is that the portrayal of a responsible, conforming man is the portrayal of an emasculated man or a repressed

man. As Nodelman puts it, "Real men revel in their anarchic impulses; do not necessarily obey the law or any presumed authority; and flee constraint by domesticity, or orderly employment, or the duties of good citizenship." Because of this, when boys appear in adolescent fiction, it is often so writers can characterize them as rebellious or aggressive.

Perhaps one of the finest examples of this "real man" in young adult literature can be seen in Gary Paulsen's novel *The Beet Fields* (2000). The nameless teenage boy depicted in this gritty novel flees domesticity, choosing to live a transient life doing migrant farm labor and working for a traveling carnival. The boy eagerly joins the carnival, modeling himself after the rough, sleazy carnival owner who "summed up everything he ever wanted to be in a man" (p. 106). Paulsen's novel concludes with the boy joining the Army, probably out of his avid sense of adventure and danger more than any desire to be responsible or conform.

Another example of this impulsive, rebellious man appears in Chris Crutcher's novel *Ironman* (1995). Crutcher's teen hero, Bo Brewster, repeatedly finds himself in trouble thanks to his aggressive and rebellious behavior. He is punished by isolation when, at the age of nine, he refuses to accept his father's degrading discipline and slams the front door so hard it cracks the windowpanes (p. 23). Later in life, when his football coach questions his masculinity, Bo quits the football team and storms off the field in a rage (p. 3). He continues this defiant behavior and is eventually sent to anger management class for an incident in which he calls a teacher an "asshole" (p. 8).

Writer Mem Fox (1993) has expressed her concern over the lack of emotion male characters have been allowed to show in children's and young adult novels. Fox worries the effect these books may have on young males, presenting the idea of manhood as being stoic, brave and bearing the overwhelming responsibility of providing for a family. She asks, "Could children's literature be partly to blame for trapping males in a frightful emotional prison and demanding intolerable social expectations of them?" In *Hanging on to Max* (2002), Margaret Bechard's novel about Sam, a teenage single father, the reader is presented with the image of an emotionally repressed boy bearing the crushing responsibility of raising his infant son. Although we see female characters cry in stressful situations like leaving a baby at daycare for the first time (p. 19) or being witness to a child's injury (p. 121), it is not until Sam decides to give his son up for adoption that he is allowed to break down and cry (p. 138). Even then, it is only for a few moments. Also, whereas the teen mothers are depicted as loving and nurturing toward their children, Sam is continuously portrayed as logical and emotionally distant. When teenage mother Claire

discusses her decision to keep her baby she phrases her choice in terms of “want,” asking Sam if he felt the same way. Sam describes his choice in terms of responsibility, saying, “I’d known what I *bad* to do.” Because the tidy resolution of the novel may lead readers to believe that, since everything turned out well, Sam’s behavior and choices were correct and, therefore, ideal. This message reinforces the belief that males should be unemotional and logical.

Stoic, macho and aggressive behavior is presented as natural to all boys, maybe even celebrated. This does not benefit boys, but only furthers stereotypes and discourages other behavior. Literature might do well to expand the definition of masculinity to include more positive characteristics. Brooks suggests “we can try acting as if boys were *nice* rather than surely dangerous, *intelligent* rather than merely instinctive, *moral* rather than selfishly opportunistic, *sensitive* rather than emotionally crude” (2000).

SUGGESTIONS FOR AVOIDING GENDER-BIAS IN LITERATURE

Whether writing or recommending books for young adults, there are steps you can take to recognize and avoid gender bias and gendered stereotypes. Rudman (1995) suggests several criteria appropriate to adolescent literature. First, fiction should avoid stereotypes, portraying characters as individuals. There is no shame in presenting a male or female character with negative characteristics, as long as that character is clearly drawn and unique, avoiding implications that he or she is typical and representative of his or her entire gender. Next, occupations and activities should be presented as accessible to both genders with typically male activities not being the standard for which all should strive. Achievements should be judged equally, not through gender role differences. There are few things more condescending than hearing “she’s athletic...for a girl” or “he is a good artist...for a boy.” Also, if physical descriptions of characters are necessary, they should be more representative of reality. Females need not always be portrayed as weaker, smaller, more delicate and exceptionally attractive. Males need not always be tall, strong, muscular and dreamy. Finally, males and females should be depicted as being both logical and emotional, depending on the situation and independent and dependant when appropriate.

Equally important is that the literature avoids being obvious in its attempts at equality. While well meaning, if the author does not approach the issue with finesse, the text easily becomes boring and preachy. Mem Fox, when discussing the issue of writing gender-equal books for children, expresses her belief that it is the

insidious subtlety that has conditioned readers until now. To reverse the negative effects, writers need to be equally subtle. In her simple words, “Laboring the point kills the point of laboring” (1993).

CONCLUSION

Seek and you shall find. If one looks hard enough, one can find anything he or she wishes. It can easily be argued that critically acclaimed and award-winning books such as these are of such literary excellence that the characters are presented as individuals and the events and behaviors that occur are unique to their experience and not a general stereotype. Most studies regarding gender stereotypes in young adult literature, in fact, are based on the much maligned, cookie-cutter variety of adolescent literature such as series books. Others argue that, although it is clear gender bias does exist, literature is simply reflecting society. All literature reflects the author’s experiences and knowledge, which are shaped by society. Still, Lehr (1995) suggests, “Perhaps it would be wise to acknowledge that there is much in literature that reflects the ‘way things are,’ but this reflection reinforces the status quo.”

Perhaps the best strategy for combating gender bias in literature is to teach young adults literary awareness. The growing consensus is that we owe it to our youth to teach them to think critically about what they hear, see and read (Temple 1993). By teaching young adults to evaluate and question texts, we need not worry if they are unconsciously digesting harmful and distorted messages. Even as they grow old, teens will always be confronted with biased messages, whether it is in advertising, television or literature. What matters most is that they are aware of the messages being delivered and what they decide to do with them. As Motes (1998) states, “If readers are conscious of the gendered messages found in tests, they can choose to adopt those understandings or rebel against them.” Done this way, reading holds the ability to entertain, educate and empower our youth.

REFERENCES

- Ballash, Karen. “Remedial High School Readers Can Recover, Too!” *Journal of Reading* 37 (1994): 686-687.
- Bechard, Margaret. 2002. *Hanging on to Max*. Brookfield, Conn.: Roaring Brook Press.
- Brashares, Ann. 2001. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. New York: Delacorte.
- Brooks, Bruce. “Will Boys Be Boys? Are You Sure?” *Voice of Youth Advocates* 23 (2000): 88-92.
- Crutcher, Chris. 1995. *Ironman*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

Dutro, Elizabeth. "‘But That’s a Girls’ Book!’ Exploring Gender Boundaries in Children’s Reading Practices." *Reading Teacher* 55 (2001-2002): 376-384.

Finders, M. "Queens and Teen Zines: Early Adolescent Females Reading Their Way Toward Adulthood." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 27 (1996): 71-89.

Fox, M. "Men Who Weep, Boys Who Dance: The Gender Agenda Between the Lines in Children’s Literature." *Language Arts* 70 (1993): 84-88.

Gill, Sam D. "Young Adult Literature for Young Adult Males." *ALAN Review* 26 (1999): 61-63.

Lehr, Susan, ed. *Battling dragons: issues and controversy in children’s literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995.

Millard, E. *Differently Literate*. London: Falmer, 1997.

Motes, Julia J. "Teaching Girls To Be Girls: Young Adult Series Fiction." *New Advocate* 11 (1998): 39-53.

Nodelman, Perry. "Who the Boys Are: Thinking About Masculinity in Children’s Fiction." *New Advocate* 15 (2002): 9-18.

Orenstein, P. *School Girls: Young Women, Self-esteem, and the Confidence Gap*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.

Paulsen, Gary. *The Beet Fields*. New York: Laurel-Leaf, 2000.

Rennison, Louise. *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.

Rudman, M. *Children’s Literature: An issues approach*. (3rd edition). White Plains, NY: Longman, 1995.

Telford, L. "A Study of Boys’ Reading." *Early Childhood Development and Care* 149 (1999): 87-124.

Temple, Charles. "What If Beauty Had Been Ugly?: Reading Against the Grain of Gender Bias in Children’s Books." *Language Arts* 70 (1993): 89-93.

Wilhelm, Jeff. "It’s a Guy Thing." *Voices from the Middle* 9 (2001): 60-63.

Wolff, Virginia E. *True Believer*. New York: Simon, 2002.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathryn Jacobs (kjacobs@acpl.lib.in.us) is a Young Adult Services librarian in Allen County Public Library.