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**From the Selected Works of Melissa R. Ames**

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## Chapter 2 - How Pop Culture Shapes - Excerpt.pdf

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# How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life

## From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the-Prowl

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## 2

## Reading Between the Lines: The Lessons Adolescent Girls Learn Through Popular Young Adult Literature

On 20 September 2014, Emma Watson, the newly elected United Nations (UN) Women Goodwill Ambassador, gave a speech at the UN headquarters to launch the 'HeForShe' Campaign, which sought to recruit one billion men as allies in the battle against inequality being fought by women around the globe. Watson, the actress most famous for her role as Hermione Granger in J. K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series, spoke out against the ways in which feminism is framed as an anti-men movement, urging her listeners – men and women alike – to abandon the 'us vs. them' mentality that thwarts gender equality. The video of her speech went viral. *Vanity Fair* author Joanna Robinson called the speech 'game-changing' and noted that Watson's role as the 'universally adored heroine' gave her 'an automatic in with male and female millennials', making it one of the rare cases 'where an actor being conflated with their role might be a good thing.'<sup>1</sup> But in the wake of the speech, other critics spoke out against the notion of Watson being the new face of feminism<sup>2</sup> – another white, heterosexual face, many noted – and dismissed the campaign as simply another iteration of clicktivism likely to prompt little change. In an article for *The Huffington Post*, Neha Chandrachud wrote:

Liberal white feminism tends to cling to these seemingly iconic moments in which feminism briefly becomes more palatable, more easily sold to the masses. We should be weary of the long-term effectiveness of the #HeForShe campaign. Join the conversation with a hashtag! End global misogyny with an empty promise and a tweet.<sup>3</sup>

While nearly 350,000 men have made such a pledge since the campaign's launch,<sup>4</sup> commentators took issue with the fact that Watson's invitation was accompanied by rationales concerning how feminism would

help improve men's lives and address 'harmful notions of masculinity'.<sup>5</sup> Wasn't improving women's lives cause enough? The message behind the campaign's name itself was also met with scrutiny: 'Women don't need to be rescued, whether it's by men, Emma Watson, or the United Nations. Positioning men as the saviors of oppressed women isn't productive, and devalues the work that feminists have been doing for decades.'<sup>6</sup>

Of course, in some ways, Watson's role at the helm of this campaign should serve as proof that women are far from damsels in distress, or at least that they're no longer constantly depicted that way in our cultural products. After all, she's the embodiment of a character that has been awarded endless feminist praise. She's 'the bushy-haired, average-looking, extremely intelligent Hermione Granger [...] the heroine women have been waiting for.'<sup>7</sup> Her talent, wit, and bravery can be credited for how Harry Potter ultimately remained 'the boy who lived'.<sup>8</sup> But, in other ways, it's fitting that such a debate should arise about whether Watson deserves to be hoisted upon a feminist pedestal as similar feminist debates are unfolding in the literary genre her legacy is so intimately tied to.

### The sneaky feminist agenda finds its way onto bookshelves

As the landscape of young adult (YA) fiction continues to change in the 21st century – and the market continues to thrive<sup>9</sup> – attention to the role this body of literature has on gender formation has never been greater. While it's still significant that it was the Harry Potter series and not the Hermione Granger series, and that even in the 21st century Rowling, like many female authors before her, chose to write under initials in order to mask her gender (thus appealing to her target audience of boys), the worlds of YA fiction are much more female-friendly than they once were. Of course, not everyone is happy about that.

Armed with old myths about gendered reading practices and skewed statistics, some have bemoaned the fact that women now 'dominate' the YA scene, resulting in alarmist pieces like Sarah Mesle's article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 'YA Fiction and the End of Men', and Robert Lipsyte's *New York Times* article, 'Boys and Reading: Is There Any Hope?' In his article, Lipsyte complained that 'boys' aversion to reading' was increasing and that males 'were being treated as a sideshow' in the literary market.<sup>10</sup> He complained that YA authors were catering to a target audience of girls, and that this existing bias toward female-orientated books was compounded by the fact that such 'novels are bought by female editors, stocked by female librarians and taught by female teachers. It's

a cliché, but mostly true, that while teenage girls will read books about boys, teenage boys will rarely read books with predominantly female characters.<sup>11</sup> Punctuating his prose with this other apparently horrific f-word, Lipsyte reflects nostalgically on the yesteryears of the publishing industry, noting that 'children's literature didn't always bear this overwhelmingly female imprint.'<sup>12</sup> Apparently, progress toward gender equality can be a painful pill for some to swallow.

Of course, Lipsyte's argument is almost laughable and ignores the numerous ways in which the literary world is still stacked in favor of men. For example, the vast majority of books taught in the public school system are written by men.<sup>13</sup> And his tirade simply fuels a myth that ultimately serves as 'a self-fulfilling prophecy': the notion that boys will only read books focused on male characters.<sup>14</sup> As Alison Flood notes in a piece for *The Guardian*, this tired cliché that teenage girls can identify with narratives about boys while teenage boys cannot (or will not) identify with narratives about girls, has been the problematic rationale Hollywood has been using for years to excuse its 'systematic exclusion of female characters from cinema narratives.'<sup>15</sup>

Lipsyte and others aren't completely wrong in noting a shift within the YA publishing market, but the scale of that shift is obscured behind hyperbolic rhetoric. For example, *The Atlantic* ran a piece titled 'Why Do Female Authors Dominate Young-Adult Fiction' after NPR released a reader poll for the top teen novels in which 63 percent of the titles chosen as finalists were penned by women.<sup>16</sup> Meghan Lewit concluded: 'If the results of the NPR poll are a reflection of the reading populace, the YA world is a place of relative harmony compared to the battle of the sexes being waged in adult fiction,'<sup>17</sup> suggesting that female YA authors are not hitting the 'literary glass ceiling'<sup>18</sup> plaguing the rest of the market.

But the problem with the conversation surrounding this shift toward a greater female presence in the YA literary realm is that it is grounded in shock, awe, and dismay.

It's interesting how a slight predominance of female authors on a list immediately makes people think 'female dominance.' If the numbers were reversed, we would perhaps say appreciatively that the list was close to being gender balanced. We expect to find male dominance everywhere – anything else is an unusual occurrence, and as such it stands out. And this affects how we view the world far more than we realize.<sup>19</sup>

Elizabeth Vail, author of 'The Legacy of Katniss, or Why We Should Stop 'Protecting' Manhood and Teach Boys to Embrace the Heroine',

took her fellow journalists to task for calling the presence of a female protagonist one of the newest 'tropes' to hit YA fiction.<sup>20</sup> She argued, the 'last time I checked, half the population on earth is female. So saying "having a female protagonist" is a trope is on par with saying "having a human protagonist" is a trope, or "having a protagonist who inhales oxygen and ingests organic matter to live" is a trope.'<sup>21</sup>

Further, the statistics being used to make proclamations about women's supposed takeover of the genre are slightly misleading. A study of the award winning YA books since 2000 did reveal that women penned slightly more of those texts than men (56 percent versus 42 percent, with the remaining 2 percent being co-authored by a male-female writing team); but even within those critically acclaimed texts, 49 percent of the protagonists were male, while only 36 percent were female. And even if we were to focus on authorship alone, as the researchers note, we can hardly call a figure like 56 percent 'female dominance.'<sup>22</sup>

And while the data seemingly paints a positive picture concerning gender representation in youth literature, it doesn't actually paint a very comprehensive picture. Other studies have shown that when youth literature is analyzed more broadly, this slight female edge – if it can truly be called that – quickly dissipates. A study of 2014 new releases found that as children's ages decrease, so does the presence of female characters. While 65 percent of the literature aimed at 12–18-year-olds had female protagonists, in texts marketed to 9–12-year-olds, this figure drops to 36 percent.<sup>23</sup> Studies of children's literature present an even bleaker picture. A study of nearly 6,000 children's books published between 1990 and 2000 revealed that 'males are central characters in 57 percent of children's books published each year, with just 31 percent having female central characters.'<sup>24</sup> The gender imbalance even extends into texts in which the characters are animals, with male animals starring in 23 percent of the books per year while their female animal counterparts are at the center of only 7.5 percent of the annual releases.<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of these statistics, perception can be a powerful thing. And since many of the most popular YA texts of the past decade have featured female protagonists, the idea that women are ruling this literary scene may linger on for some time. And while it's fine to praise characters like 'The Hunger Games's' Katniss Everdeen, the many accolades she has received for being a strong female character, positive role model, or feminist heroine often eclipse the fact that such exemplar female characters have existed in the genre for well over a century. Before the likes of Hermione and Katniss there were Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1932), Harper Lee's *To*

*Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), Zilpha Keatley Snyder's *The Changeling* (1970), Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970), Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* (1989), Laurie R. King's *Speak* (1999), Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* (2013), and countless others' celebrated female characters.<sup>26</sup>

So why pay attention to this literary legacy – to the strong young women tucked into the pages of YA novels? It's just escapist fiction meant for teens, and it can't possibly wield that much cultural influence if it's only reaching a subset of a specific age demographic, right? Wrong. Part of the reason YA literature is getting all this attention is exactly because it is *not* just being read by tweens and teens. Adults are rapidly consuming these texts too. Marketing research indicates that approximately 55 percent of the people who buy literature designated for 12–17-year-olds are adults, and 28 percent of these purchasers are buying them for their own reading pleasure.<sup>27</sup> Similar to the panic caused by the slight shift from male to female lead characters, the increasing number of adults reading YA texts has caused critics to make apocalyptic predictions about the death of literacy. In an article for *The Los Angeles Times*, Susan Carpenter notes: 'It used to be that the only adults who read young adult literature were those who had a vested interest – teachers or librarians or parents who either needed or wanted to keep an eye on developing readers' tastes. But increasingly, adults are reading YA books with no ulterior motives.'<sup>28</sup>

This apparently is bad news, because in 2014 various publications ran articles shaming adult readers for their juvenile reading practices. Writing for *Slate*, Ruth Graham's article titled 'Against YA' ran with the subheading: 'Read whatever you want. But you should feel embarrassed when what you're reading was written for children.'<sup>29</sup> A month later, *Vanity Fair* featured the scathing commentary of *The New Yorker's* literary critic, James Wood, who criticized Donna Tartt's Pulitzer-winning novel, *The Goldfinch* – a novel focused on a 13-year-old boy who survives a terrorist attack – calling it 'further proof of the infantilization of our literary culture: a world in which adults go around reading *Harry Potter*.'<sup>30</sup> The hits kept on coming, with critics from the *New York Times*,<sup>31</sup> *The Daily Review*,<sup>32</sup> and *The New York Review of Books*<sup>33</sup> 'decrying the demise of adulthood' and urging the adult readers of YA fiction to 'grow up.'<sup>34</sup> Unsurprisingly, these criticisms were matched with a wave of pieces defending the genre and adult consumers' affection for it.<sup>35</sup> So, the moral of the story: everyone's reading YA literature, or talking about those who are reading YA literature, so the genre's reach is not to be underestimated.

Further, the ways in which the genre impacts its target audience – tween and teen girls – during this formative stage of development should not be ignored either. In this chapter we turn to some of the recent darlings of the YA lit scene to critique the messages they are sending to teenage girls concerning gender and sexuality. With the field of YA literature so rich with potential texts to analyze, we decided to turn to the series with the most visibility – the ones that have crossed over to film and television, securing audiences across both print and visual media. Analyzing some of the best-selling/blockbuster hits from three YA subgenres – paranormal romance (the 'Twilight' and 'The Vampire Diaries' series), dystopia ('The Hunger Games' and 'Divergent' series), and melodrama (the 'Gossip Girl', 'A-List', and 'Clique' series) – we highlight the conflicting instructions that girls receive about body image, sex, and gender as they are schooled through these pop culture products.

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