Dealing with Stereotypes in Young Adult Books

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by Chris Crowe

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A friend of mine, a level-headed, open-minded fellow, asked me to read the manuscript copy of a novel he had recently written. I enjoyed his book but was troubled by one aspect: all the females were hip, open-minded, intelligent human beings, but all the male characters were insensitive jerks. The favorable portrayal of women in the book didn’t bother me, but I was troubled by the consistently negative treatment of the male characters. Comeuppance, you may say. A timely turn of the tables, just desserts, literary affirmative action, payback time.

Maybe. And maybe, given the historic male dominance of literature, it’s all justified. Reports affirming the shabby and less-than-even-handed treatment of women in literature abound: the 1992 AAUW report, "How Schools Shortchange Girls," points out that books and school curricula pay little attention to female role models, often offering stereotypical images of females instead. A study of the high school textbook canon reports that female characters in commonly used anthologies tend to be physically weak and passive, often "voiceless victims of negative experiences with men" (Pace 35). Another study of the English curriculum in American high schools claims that "despite the long-held belief that girls are better writers and more willing and eager readers than boys, literature by and about men predominates in the English classroom" (Lake 36). A national survey of public high schools confirms the presence of a male canon: it found that of the 11,579 book-length works reported as required reading, 81% were by male authors. The survey revealed another bias: 98% of those required books were by white authors (Applebee 27-28). So white male characters are finally getting their due, but I don’t like it, not because I’m a white male, but because it’s not good for young readers.

Given the plethora of reports on the overbearing maleness in literature for young adults, I probably shouldn’t be surprised or disappointed when books treat males negatively or present them as mindless buffoons. (It certainly happens often enough in TV sitcoms.) But giving male characters their own
2 Brigham Young University

medicine—in spades, many times—does not teach young readers about gender equity. To be fair and honest, male and female characters should be portrayed as they really exist: some good, some bad, many in between.

In good YA novels, this balance or equity has existed for some time, and I’m convinced that fair use of varied gender roles can be maintained in literature without turning the tables on males or lionizing either sex at the expense of the other. Two YA authors who treat both sexes fairly and realistically are Cynthia Voight and Katherine Paterson. Female protagonists are common in their novels and they become positive role models in their own right. This method of presenting a strong female character is more effective and honest than creating one by surrounding her with bumbling males. Chris Crutcher’s protagonists are always male, but the females in his books, though usually minor characters, are intelligent, capable, and modern. Books by these authors and others present characters—male and female—fairly as human beings with strengths and foibles, wart-ridden and winsome. And in quality books, this even-handed treatment extends beyond gender to include race and role.

This does not mean that good YA books are free from stereotypes; good YA books use stereotypes carefully and fairly because, after all, stereotypes are based on generalized experiences: more males than females tend to enjoy sports, but that doesn’t mean females don’t like sports; English teachers tend to be bookish folks with a guardian-like attitude toward language, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have other interests; most librarians are female, but that doesn’t mean male librarians are nonexistent. Readers share certain perceptions of roles and people, and this allows authors to develop minor characters efficiently without detracting from the main flow of their stories. Good authors do this judiciously.

Though the situation is improving, ethnic and gender stereotyping will not go away. Those of us who work with young readers have a responsibility to discuss the use of stereotypes with them. We can ask if they think a character is stereotyped, and if so, whether the stereotype fair or unfair. We can encourage them to consider why an author chose to use a stereotypical character rather than a unique one. We can lead them to books that present characters who are in similar roles or situations very differently. This guidance can help them see beyond stereotypes and find the uniqueness of characters and the positive role models that exist in quality YA fiction.

Such guidance is vital because without it, many students will encounter nothing outside the traditional canon. One study of the high school canon (Applebee) reports that 63% of secondary English teachers use their literature anthology as their main source of readings, and another 28% rely on their
anthologies for supplemental readings. This means that the gender and ethnic stereotypes in the canon are likely to be perpetuated. Teachers and librarians can help overcome the traditional biases by introducing students to good YA books and stories, readings that will show them the world as it is, that will present two sides to issues, and that will provide positive role models of both sexes and various ethnic groups.

This is not as easy to do as it is to suggest. Many booklists (and many of us) tend to divide YA books into "girls' books" and "boys' books." This is partially justified by our experience: we know that many girls love *A Bridge to Terabithia* and just as many boys despise it; we also know that many boys love *Hatchet*, but that it does not appeal to an equal number of girls. Categorizing books by gender promotes some common stereotypes about gender and about readers. It's better to promote the idea that "girls' books" are books that girls choose to read, that "boys' books" are books boys choose to read, and that there's *considerable* overlap in these categories. If we direct young readers according to their interests rather than their gender, we can help them encounter a greater variety of reading. This will also help minimize bias and stereotype.

Teachers, especially language arts and English teachers, play a vital and obvious role in reading selection. Most have been trained in the traditional canon and may feel uncomfortable or disloyal if they suggest other reading. School librarians and other enlightened individuals can assist in the detoxification of addicted classicists by tactfully and gently reminding teachers that YA books are intended to supplement, not supplant, the classics, that YA books can motivate students who might otherwise never crack the cover of a novel, and, of course, that YA books can offer broader and fairer coverage of ethnic and gender issues than much of the classical canon. Librarians can also familiarize teachers with quality YA novels in specific ways. They can present booktalks for English classes, informally discuss new titles with English teachers, and promote quality YA books campuswide via newsletters and annotated lists of library books. Consistent and well-planned activities like these help promote books that provide positive gender and ethnic role models.

Parents can also help young readers encounter quality literature that is gender and ethnic fair, but many parents are unable to keep up with the flood of new books and often refer to their own school experience—the traditional canon—when suggesting readings for their children. Aggressive librarians and open libraries can help parents and their children discover the great quantity of worthwhile books currently available. Here are some suggestions: On Back-to-School Nights, library workers could hold a series of booktalks for parents. Children and YA librarians could write a book review column for their local newspapers. Librarians and English teachers could sponsor a reading club to
4 Brigham Young University

involve students and parents in reading and reviewing new books. Libraries could start a newsletter (or piggyback on an existing one) to parents to introduce quality new books and review quality old ones. School libraries could devote one night per semester for a special family night for children and parents to come to the library to see and hear about good books. These few ideas share a common point: once parents understand and become familiar with the quality YA books available, they will begin to promote these books in their homes.

This article concludes with a list, a very limited list, of books that present characters in a variety of situations and that deal positively with gender and ethnicity. The list can be used as a starting point for teachers, librarians, parents, and. But it is only a starting point. Each of us must add to it as we encounter other quality books that reinforce fairness and diversity.

In a perfect world, we would value gender and ethnic variety. Unfortunately, we don’t live in a perfect world, so we must do what we can to promote the many fine YA books that do deal with diversity positively. But beyond the books we read, we must act openly and honestly in our dealings with and discussions of all people. Unfair and negative stereotypes can be diffused, and perhaps eliminated, when YA books and the people who promote them become sensitive to and respectful of the diversity in our society.
Females in positive roles

A Wrinkle in Time, Madeleine L’Engle, 1962
Amazing Gracie, A.E. Cannon, 1991
Cam Jansen series, David Adler
Celine, Brock Cole, 1989
Crazy Horse Electric Game, Chris Crutcher, 1987
Dicey’s Song, Cynthia Voight, 1982
Enchantress of Crumbledown, Donald R. Marshall, 1990
*The Girl with the White Flag, Tomiko Higa, 1991
The Giver, Lois Lowry, 1993
Homecoming, Cynthia Voight, 1981
*I Am Regina, Sally M. Keehn, 1991
Island of the Blue Dolphins, Scott O’Dell, 1960
Jacob Have I Loved, Katherine Paterson, 1980
*Journey of the Sparrows, Fran Buss, 1991
*Julie of the Wolves, Jean Craighead George, 1972
*Lyddie, Katherine Paterson, 1991
Midnight Hour Encores, Bruce Brooks, 1986
Missing May, Cynthia Rylant, 1992
Morning Girl, Michael Dorris, 1992
*My Name Is Not Angelica, Scott O’Dell, 1989
My Name Is Susan Smith, The Five is Silent, Louise Plummer, 1991
Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Mildred Taylor, 1976
*Sarah, Plain and Tall, Patricia MacLachlan, 1985
Sex Education, Jenny Davis, 1988
Speaker for the Dead, Orson Scott Card, 1986
The Night White Deer Died, Gary Paulsen, 1991
*The Road to Memphis, Mildred Taylor, 1990
*The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle, Avi, 1990
Tisha, Robert Sprecht, 1984
To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee, 1960
*Year of Impossible Goodbyes, Sook Nyul Choi, 1991
Z for Zachariah, Robert C. O’Brien, 1975
  * = included in the "Strong Women" package offered by The Trumpet Club Bookclub, February 1994

Females in athletic roles

A Different Season, David Klass, 1988
Bury the Dead, Peter Carter, 1987
Darkling, K. M. Peyton, 1990
6 Brigham Young University

*Forward Pass*, Thomas Dygard, 1989
*Fox Running*, R.R. Knudson, 1975
*High and Outside*, Linnea A. Due, 1980
*In Lane Three, Alex Archer*, Tessa Duder, 1991
*No One Was Looking*, Rosemary Wells, 1980
*She’s on First*, Barbara Gregorich, 1987
*The Magic Box*, Olga Cossi, 1990
*There’s a Girl in My Hammerlock*, Jerry Spinelli, 1991
*These are the Best Years?*, Nadine Roberts, 1989
*To Be the Best*, Holly Simpson, 1989
*Zanballer*, R.R. Knudson, 1972
*Zanbanger*, R.R. Knudson, 1977
*Zan Hagen’s Marathon*, R. R. Knudson, 1984

**Females in nontraditional roles**

*Alanna* series, Tamora Pierce, 1983
*Amy and the Cloud Basket*, Ellen Pratt, 1975
*You Are the Rain*, R.R. Knudson, 1978

**Multicultural protagonists portrayed positively**

*A Gathering of Flowers: Stories about Being Young in America*, Joyce Carol Thomas, 1990
*A Jar of Dreams*, Yoshiko Uchida, 1981
*Among the Volcanoes*, Omar S. Castaneda, 1991
*And I Heard a Bird Sing*, Rosa Guy, 1987
*Australian Literature: An Anthology of Writing from the Land Down Under*, Phyllis Fahrie Edelson, ed., 1993
*Baseball in April and Other Stories*, Gary Soto, 1990
*Bless Me, Ultima*, Rudolfo Anaya, 1972
*Call It Courage*, Armstrong Perry, 1940
*Dragonwings*, Laurence Yep, 1975
*Eye of Darkness*, Jamake Highwater, 1985
*Hoops*, Walter Dean Myers, 1981
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou, 1969
Island of the Blue Dolphins, Scott O’Dell, 1960
Jirohattan, Hana Mori, 1993
Julie of the Wolves, Jean Craighead George, 1972
Ki Te Ao: New Stories, Apirana Taylor, 1990
Kim/Kimi, Hadley Irwin, 1987
M.C. Higgins, The Great, Virginia Hamilton, 1974
Morning Girl, Michael Dorris, 1992
Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Mildred Taylor, 1976
The Banyan, Albert Wendt, 1984
The Cay, Theodore Taylor, 1969
The Ceremony of Innocence, Jamake Highwater, 1985
The Chief, Robert Lipsyte, 1993
The Contender, Robert Lipsyte, 1967
The Education of Little Tree, Forrest Carter, 1976
The Girl with the White Flag, Tomiko Higa, 1991
The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan, 1989
The Moves Make the Man, Bruce Brooks, 1987
The Shadow Brothers, A. E. Cannon, 1990
Who’s Hu?, Lensey Namioka, 1980
Words by Heart, Ouida Sebestyen, 1979
Year of Impossible Goodbyes, Sook Nyul Choi, 1991

Males dealing sensitively with sensitive issues

A Day No Pigs Would Die, Robert Newton Peck, 1972
Blue Skin of the Sea, Graham Salisbury, 1992
Bridge to Terabithia, Katherine Paterson, 1977
Call It Courage, Armstrong Perry, 1940
End of the Race, Dean Hughes, 1993
Everywhere, Bruce Brooks, 1990
Lizard, Dennis Covington, 1991
Park’s Quest, Katherine Paterson, 1988
Running Loose, Chris Crutcher, 1983
Sex Education, Jenny Davis, 1988
The Arizona Kid, Ron Koertge, 1988
The Chosen, Chaim Potok, 1967
The Fighting Ground, Avi, 1984
The Machine Gunners, Robert Westall, 1976
The Moves Make the Man, Bruce Brooks, 1987
Males in nontraditional roles

A Special Gift, Marcia Simon, 1978
Alias Madame Doubtfire, Anne Fine, 1987
Jirohatten, Hana Mori, 1993
Mr. Tod's Trap, Malcom Carrick, 1980
No More Saturday Nights, Norma Klein, 1988
The Cheerleader, Norma Klein, 1985
Tough Eddie, Elizabeth Winthrop, 1985
No Kidding, Bruce Brooks, 1989
What if They Saw Me Now?, Jean Ure, 1982

Conflict over gender roles

All Together Now, Sue Ellen Bridgers, 1979
Elliot and Win, Carolyn Meyer, 1986
Everybody Knows That!, Susan Pearson, 1978
How I Put My Mother through College, Corinne Gerson, 1981
"Masquerade," Munshi Premchand in Return Trip Tango, MacShane and Carlson, eds., 1992
"Miss Butterfly," Toshi Mori in American Dragons, Laurence Yep, ed., 1993
Send No Blessings, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, 1990
Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind, Suzanne Fisher Staples, 1988
Surrogate Sister, Eve Bunting, 1984
The Arizona Kid, Ron Koertge, 1988
The Birds of Summer, Zilpha Snyder, 1983
The Girl Who Changed the World, Delia Ephron, 1993
The Great Male Conspiracy, Betty Banks, 1986
The Oval Amulet, Lucy Cullyford Babbit, 1985
The Real World, Harriet Sirof, 1985
The Secret in Miranda's Closet, Sheila Greenwald, 1977
Tuesday's Child, Nancy Baron, 1984
Who Could Forget the Mayor of Lodi?, Virginia Bradley, 1985
Who's Hu?, Lensey Namioka, 1980
Works cited and professional articles about gender issues and stereotyping in YA literature


Epstein, Connie C. "Young Adult Books," Horn Book Magazine, Jan-Feb 1987, 100-103.

Forrest, Linda A. "Young Adult Fantasy and the Search for Gender-Fair Genres," Youth Services in Libraries, Fall 1993, 37-42.


Mines, Jeanette. "Young Adult Literature Female Heroes Do Exist," The ALAN Review, Fall 1989, 12-14, 54.


Note of Apology

We apologize to our readers for three omissions in the May/June 1994 issues of CBR—all of them related to the article on artist John Steptoe. First, *The Story of Jumping Mouse* is a Retold Native American Legend from *Seven Arrows*, copyright ©1972 by Hymeyohsts Storem. Second, the credit below each illustration should have given credit to Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books plus the Estate of John Steptoe. Third, the last illustration showing Jumping Mouse turned into an eagle, should not have cropped off the tall tree. Steptoe knew that to a small child a tall tree seemed very tall and the tall tree was an excellent way for him to show his child readers how high an eagle can soar. Following is the full illustration as it should have been reproduced in the May/June issue.