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Challenging Girlhood

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About Author

Mary Ann Harlan is an Assistant Professor at the School of Information at San Jose State University. She earned her PhD in 2012 completing research that focused on information practices of teen content creators. Since that time she has been researching representations of girlhood in popular texts, particularly Young Adult literature. Her current research investigates how teens understand fiction as an information source, and the practices they engage in while reading fiction that uses information to learn. She also is the Teacher Librarian Program Coordinator, having spent 10 years in school libraries in California.

Information literacy, the ability to effectively seek, evaluate, and use information, is a concern of library science and instruction as evidenced by a variety of evolving standards from professional organizations (American Library Association, 2018; Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), 2016). A close look at these standards reveals an assumption that information is fact based, and information literacy is an academic skill. This makes sense as the mission of organizations such as ACRL and AASL is to support librarians in teaching at both the higher education and K12 levels (About AASL, 2006; About ACRL, 2011). Research in information literacy, as well as information behaviors and information practices, however, has developed a broader understanding of information—one might say they position information as anything that is informing (Bruce, 2008). Furthermore, everyday life information seeking and information behavior research extends the notion of information sources including the people around us, media we encounter, and all manner of less academic sources. Recently I have begun to ask how non-informational texts or aesthetic texts, in other words, fiction, work as an information source. Do we read fiction to learn? Are stories a way to learn about ourselves and the world and in what ways might they be?

Current conversations including #ownvoices, #weneeddiversebooks, and a reemergence of Rudine Sims Bishop's 1990 article on books as windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors assume that fiction is a source of information. While these conversations occur in multiple communities, they dominate conversations in the young adult literature world. The basic premise is that reading fiction can tell us something about our world and/or ourselves within the world when we engage with story. I think this is an assumption worth investigating. However, for the purposes of this article I accept the belief that there is some truth to the idea that we read fiction to learn about ourselves and our world. Based on this assumption, critical reading requires us to examine fiction as information source in terms of what constructions are presented in the stories, as representation has many facets, and the information in stories can both perpetuate and/or challenge social norms and expectations.

In the humanities, specifically literary criticism, there has been a consistent call for critics to apply the same rigor of critique to literature classified as young adult as there is for other literary categories (Hill, 2015; Trites, 1998). However, within the Educational and Library and Information Science fields the focus of research has been primarily on the reader and/or literacy programs including classroom reading pedagogies. I often read the argument in both the professional and research literature that the

value of Young Adult (YA) literature lies in “giving voice” to adolescents. This is particularly acute by those promoting the use of YA literature in areas such as classroom instruction, bibliotherapy, and creating lifelong readers (these three things are not necessarily interrelated). This argument is reader-focused rather than textually-focused, and does not apply critical theory to the texts in the way literary criticism might. This is problematic in failing to acknowledge the interplay of text and reader. In focusing on the reader with little to no critical analysis of the text we may miss the larger patterns of YA literature that “reinforce the contradictory positions of adolescents in our culture” (Trites, 1998, p. xi). By focusing on what we imagine of the reader experience, either through anecdote or questions that frame reader experience and neglecting the text we forego our own information literate reading of a text, and do a disservice to our patrons by not thoroughly examining the text we recommend them to use to make sense of their world.

My own interests and current research focus on girlhood as a specific form of adolescence (Harlan, 2017; 2018). To establish the concept for my reader: girlhood is the construction of girl through representations of girl in various forms of media. I am particularly interested in how girlhood is presented in YA literature and how YA literature reinforces or challenges systemic structures, particularly the patriarchal structure of American culture. As a medium, YA literature is produced for a teenage audience in ways that other media such as film and television might not entirely be. Despite its intended audience, YA literature is written by adults, bought and produced by adults, and reviewed and promoted primarily by adults. To this end it has been argued that YA literature promotes adult concerns (Trites 1998; Younger, 2009). As both a medium that is grounded in adult worldviews and one that is understood to be representative of youth experience, we should interrogate the construction of girlhood within the story. Critiquing texts highlights adult sensibilities, emphasizing that what a text provides for a reader may be more complex than a surface reading of themes and plot. In doing so, assumptions should be and can be challenged and we problematize representation, as well as simplified notions of the role of YA literature in helping youth read their world.

While this is a much larger research agenda on my part, this paper is an introduction to how girlhood is constructed culturally, and how those dominant girlhoods are represented, problematized, and reinforced in YA literature. This is a grounding to the much bigger question: how do adolescents experience fiction as information? Or even, do they?

Defining Girlhood

Catherine Driscoll writes that “girls are brought into existence in statements and knowledge” (2002: 5). This is the foundation of girlhood, the narrative of the experience of being a girl, built on assumptions that have calcified into truths and direct the way we talk about girls in our culture. There are multiple ways we construct narratives of girlhood. These include, but are hardly limited to developmental understandings of youth, policy narratives, artistic representations, and public performance by girls. These constructions are then circulated through media.

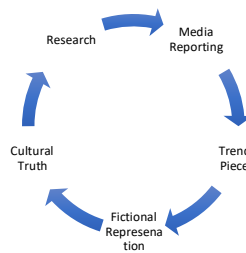


Figure 1: Cycle of Media Circulations

Figure 1 renders a simplified cycle of elements of media circulation in social constructions of singular identities; note that while there is a possible starting point it is an iterative process. Constructing modern girlhood often begins with researchers exploring questions regarding girls’ experiences – sometimes these questions come from observations, other times from previous cultural truths that need to be challenged. Research takes time but when results are published it is often with clear limitations to the findings, and caveats. Journalists then report findings, often focusing on the most sensationalistic element, ignoring the limitations and caveats (or in order to maintain funding, press releases focus journalists on the sensationalistic elements). Then, other journalists write human interest stories purporting to uncover the newest trend. These trend pieces suggest that the most sensationalistic finding is more widespread, or more prevalent than it is. This more often than not leads to a moral panic. Examples include sexting, oral sex parties, hook up culture, etc. Moral panics are fear-based and sensationalistic, and journalism feeds on itself in regard to both more trend pieces and full length parenting texts. Trend pieces evolve into fictional representations in movies, television shows, and books, and because we are now inundated with a media vision of “girl,” a cultural narrative of girlhood emerges. The best example of the process in recent years is the research on relational aggression, the resulting parenting texts *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden*

Culture of Aggression in Girls (Simmons, 2002) and *Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping your Daughters Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World* (Wiseman, 2002). Wiseman's book resulted in a Tina Fey-produced movie *Mean Girls* (2004), and the now firm belief that girls are emotional bullies. In the cycle of defining girlhood through media, some of the concerns of girls may be identified, but these concerns are filtered through adult expectations, readings, production, and therefore, present an adult construction of girlhood.

So how are these girlhoods represented in YA literature? What information is within the texts of YA literature? In the past twenty-five years, there have been three dominant narratives of girlhood – the Ophelia or at risk girls, mean girls, and the emergent Alpha girl. In this paper, I explore those narratives and include samples of how they are represented in YA literature, noting how literature can problematize the narratives.

At Risk Ophelias

In the early 1990s the narratives about adolescents were rooted in developmental psychology, including a long term understanding of adolescence as a time of storm and stress as defined in G. Stanley Hall's notion of adolescence. In terms of defining girlhood, the construction of adolescence as a time of risk undergirded research related to girls' loss of self-esteem and the risky behaviors they engaged in as they entered middle school. For instance, in 1994 the publications *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap*, by Peggy Orenstein and *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher brought attention to the negative impact of low self-esteem on girls. Through interviews, reviews of research, and their own analysis, Orenstein and Pipher described how girls entering middle school demonstrated a loss of self-esteem resulting in slipping grades, eating disorders, cutting, or other behaviors that were deemed harmful. Pipher's book, in particular, spent three years on the New York Times bestseller list and sparked numerous public discussions. Despite critique over the years regarding the biological determinism of Pipher's work and the resulting media focus on suburban white girls, Americans came to believe all girls were at risk – of sexual assault, of self-harm, of eating disorders, slipping grades, promiscuity, and other behaviors that concerned adults.

Twenty-five years later, YA literature girl-at-risk stories are still quite prevalent. In the pages of YA literature, girls are victims of abuse, sexual assault, and bullying. They engage in self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, cutting, drugs and alcohol addiction and binge drinking, and participate in self-imposed social

isolation. The difference between adult media narratives and YA literature is that often the arc of the YA novel is related to girls finding their voice, or to recovering from their trauma. This pattern is particularly clear in Laurie Halse Anderson's work, which has given us two significant girls at-risk: Melinda in *Speak* (1999), who is a victim of a sexual assault and is learning how to be a survivor and Lia, in *Wintergirls* (2009), who is coping with an eating disorder and her grief at the loss of her friend. In both novels, the girls are learning to find their own strength. This is primarily how at-risk narratives work in YA literature. The nature of plotting, conflict and resolution leads to struggle and survival. As protagonists, girls are subjects of their story rather than a constructed object of girlhood which does problematize the narrative of at-risk girlhood. Yes, there is risk, but girls are subjects who can heal, develop strategies for living, and become healthy survivors.

Despite fiction presenting a complexity in girls' experiences through the use of interior voice of the character and leaning into girls' own subjectivity, there is a presentation of rightness. In girls at-risk and recovering narratives in YA literature, girls are also overwhelming isolated from community, they are responsible for their own healing and move individually toward subjectivity and voice. The story therefore emphasizes personal responsibility for one's own healing rather than exploring how community can assist and support healing. As an information source YA literature perpetuates individual heroism, and a need to find inner strength on ones' own. On the other hand, in stories in which building relationships can be a catalyst for healing, too often the relationship is a romantic relationship such as the one in *Just Listen* (Dessen, 2006) and *Saint Anything* (Dessen, 2015). It is the emergent relationship with boys that lead to characters having the strength to speak up. (Although the latter Dessen has an adult mentor.) This information can be read as suggesting the girl is heterosexual and in need of male support. This construct furthers patriarchal definitions of girlhood rooted in notions of male protection and, therefore, ownership. As Trites (1998) suggests, this "socializes adolescents into their cultural positions" (p.54). A cultural girlhood that is heterosexual, in which girls need male protection to speak up. While not all YA literature featuring girls at-risk takes this approach, for instance, the aforementioned *Speak* and *Wintergirls* do not, it is strikingly common.

Furthermore, one could critique the sheer number of titles across all genres that have at-risk girls as protagonists as giving the impression that all girls are at risk of either self-harm or trauma. While the numbers related to sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and self-reported behaviors such as eating disorders, cutting, addictions, and bullying are concerning, they are not every girl. Additionally, we can critique YA literature for the same reasons and in the same ways we criticize the media focus on white

girls; particularly middle class, suburban white girls, which ignores the impact of traumas and experiences of girls of color. Most often the girls in the pages of YA literature who fit within a construction of risk due to eating disorders, self-harm, sexual assault are the white, suburban middle class girls.

Bad Girls?

Lower class girls and/or girls of color have different narratives within our cultural constructions of girlhood (if they are represented at all). For instance, girls of color are often cast as “bad” or criminal within media narratives, which is somehow not presented as at-risk (Brown, 2011). The casting of girls of color as likely criminal ignores the structural ways girls are constructed through legal policies and the societal expectations that place more responsibility for their actions on them, than within the more biological determinism of the at-risk narrative deployed for white middle class girls. An example of how media reporting on a rise in arrests of girls constructs a narrative out of context is the ignoring of policies that could potentially change the understanding of the story. For instance, the following policies increase arrest rates for crimes that are not particularly new:

- **Relabeling** of girls' status offense behavior into criminal behavior, which sometimes involves the arrest of girls involved in scuffles with family members for assault.
- **Rediscovery** of girls' violence by media and policy makers alike. Self-report data has consistently shown that girls engaged in more violence than arrest statistics indicated, in past decades. We simply did not arrest girls for this behavior, but that has now changed, due to policy shifts in enforcement.
- **Uprimming** refers to policies (like "zero tolerance policies") that have the effect of increasing the severity of criminal penalties associated with particular offenses (National Resource Center for Domestic Violence, 2004).

These policy shifts have a larger impact on girls of color, particularly African Americans and Latinxs. Furthermore, comparison of school suspension rates indicates that this is true in the institution of school, as well.

The impact of the bad girl narrative as it is deployed against girls is underexplored in narratives of girlhood, both in adult popular media and YA literature. One exception to consider is Nova Ren Suma's “The Walls Around Us” which explores incarcerated voices. For instance, the narrator muses about how the girls found themselves incarcerated:

Maybe, long ago, we used to be good. Maybe all little girls are good in the beginning. There might even be pictures of us from those early days, when

we wore braids and colorful barrettes, and played in sandboxes and on swing sets, if we knew days so easy or wore such barrettes... But something happened to us between then and now. Something threw sand in our eyes, ground it in, and we couldn't get it out. We still can't (p. 155).

This book explores how race and class can protect perpetrators through societal expectations, while working against lower class girls and girls of color. Despite this example, YA literature perpetuates the idea of at-risk as being behaviors related to white suburban middle class girls, therefore perpetuating societal understandings of what risk is, related to girlhood. It fails to adequately problematize how institutions apply systemic racism and classism in a way that is legitimately risky to girls.

Mean Girls

In the 2000s, perhaps as a response to the at-risk narrative of the 1990s, a narrative of girlhood-as-mean girl emerged. In 2002, Rosalind Wiseman published *Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boys, and the New World of Being a Girl* (updated in 2009). Also published in 2002, and dealing with a similar topic, was Rachel Simmons' *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. Both books detailed relational aggression; how girls used name-calling, ostracization, and other emotional bullying tactics to navigate peer relations. The books reported research findings wrapped up in anecdote, writing in an easy manner for parents, teachers, and others to read. They were full of familiar stories and telling quotes from girls. In keeping with the cycle of defining girlhood as the books became best sellers, the media supported the narrative, circulating stories of girls perpetrating damage through relational aggression, including the Tina Fey movie *Mean Girls* (2004) based on Wiseman's book. Like the at-risk narrative, mean girls themselves were racialized, as girls of color were more often cast as physically rather than relationally violent, despite research that detailed how relational aggression existed in a variety of racial groups (Currie, Kelley & Pomerantz, 2009). Additionally, by focusing on girls, the role of patriarchy and heterosexism in power structures that allowed for relational aggression to occur was not critiqued in popular media, even though research suggested heterosexism played a powerful role (Brown, Cheney-Lind, Stein, 2007; Brown & Tappan, 2008; Currie, Kelley & Pomerantz, 2009).

In YA literature, mean girls are rarely the protagonist—they are often the antagonist. However, when they are the protagonist the interiority of the characters problematizes simple constructions of mean girls. As narrators they are unlikable in the beginning, but they also are revealed to have reasons for anger, mostly rooted in trauma. Courtney Summers provides examples of this complexity in both *Cracked Up to Be* (2011) and *Some Girls Are* (2009) as both novels focus on mean girls and

power struggles within girl friendships. Parker from *Cracked Up to Be* was on the surface a perfect girl who has unraveled, but she was also a bully. In the beginning of the book she has isolated herself from her friends through anger and sarcasm, trying to be alone. Regina also does not lose her mean girl edge despite her fall from grace in *Some Girls Are* so even while you recognize that what is happening to her is based in a lie, it is still hard to initially empathize with her. In both stories, Summers gives us girls who are operating within a culture that values boys, and leaves girls creating power structures in systems where they have little actual power. The antagonist Anna in *Some Girls Are* “doesn’t like being single for any lengthy periods of time” (p. 88), recognizes that having a boyfriend affords her power and therefore sides with the boyfriend rather than her friend, Regina. This problematizes easy narratives of mean girls as powerful and places their actions within the context of a patriarchal system in which avenues to power are limited for girls. Both Parker and Regina demonstrate an interior awareness of their faults as mean girls, while recognizing the need to maintain that identity for self-protection and power.

Another example of a mean girl protagonist is *Before I Fall* (Oliver, 2010) a story in which the author gives her mean girl a chance to transform into a better person. In various iterations of a repeating day, Samantha displays a complicity of cruelty as well as an awareness of her complicity. However, her private thoughts (interiority) and her own discomfort with her actions are also represented, and eventually she begins to make choices to atone, to be a different girl. In YA literature, mean girl protagonists provide complexity through interiority, reminding us of the mean girl as a person. Unlike the perpetuation of the Ophelia girl, the mean girl in YA literature is problematized within the structure of her community, providing glimpses into how power lies within their choices and how tenuous their experiences are. Mean girls become whole, and their actions are placed within context, that makes them understandable, even sympathetic, offering a critique of a simple construction of mean girl. To this end YA literature constructs mean girls differently than mainstream narratives, but these examples are few, and primarily YA literature positions mean girls as antagonists which indicates an adult sensibility to simplify bullying into the duality of right/wrong without examining motivation deeply, or the very real complexity of relationships.

The Alpha

The overarching societal expectation of girls could be framed as good girl, the tabula rasa of girlhood against which other girlhood narratives are framed. In American culture good girls are just that – good, a vague adjective. They are sweet, they are friendly, they do well in school. When they are little they play princess and dress up. As they grow up they settle into being good students, are on student council, and participate in

extracurricular activities but are not overly ambitious. They do not draw attention to themselves in public. They do not get in trouble, or if they do it is easily rectified. Good girls have close friends but are friendly to everyone. They have historically been “the girl next door,” or an “all-American girl.” They are presented as a girl with natural beauty, but they are not so beautiful that the average or ordinary boy cannot interact with her without feeling intimidated. Good girls are easy to talk to. Most importantly good girls are nice, they are likable, and they represent the girl adults want to know.

As research examines the impact of girl empowerment programs and post-feminism on girls’ experience, a different version of good girl has appeared. The good girl is also the smart girl, sometimes referred to as an alpha girl, gamma girls, perfect girls, and “do it all” super girls. This girl does well in school, participates in multiple extra-curricular activities, has an active social life, and does all of this effortlessly. Media stories about these girls document their successes, often as evidence of the success of girl power programs and an equitable society. In a 2002 *Newsweek* article Americans got to “Meet the Gamma Girls,” nice girls who were independent without breaking rules, involved in school, and had a healthy social life, without being mean or at-risk. In 2006 Dan Kindlon introduced us to them in his book *Alpha Girls: Understanding the New American Girl and How She Is Changing the World*, detailing girls who are leaders, ready to make a difference in our world. Interestingly ten years later Pomerantz and Raby challenged the narrative of alpha girls when they published their research in *Smart Girls: Success, School, and the Myth of Post-Feminism* (2017). In this title the authors investigated the pressure to be perfect and the fall-out that these girls were experiencing, placing them back into the narrative of the at-risk Ophelias. Still at the core of the narrative good girls are a girlhood that reminds us of a simpler experience of youth, —one in which we can believe that girls should be good: likable, quiet, virginal and friendly.

In YA literature, good girls reflect the construction of girlhood as defined above. They are well liked but not popular per se, particularly not in the mean girl-trope of popularity. They usually have a small circle of friends. They often have part time jobs, get along with their parents and family, mostly, and do not exhibit typical at-risk behavior in terms of limiting their drinking of alcohol (if at all), no drugs, little sex, healthy body image, and no self-harm. They have crushes on boys or develop relationships with boys over the course of the novel so they are primarily presented as heterosexual, although not always. If they are queer they have the same characteristics; well-liked, good students, and so on. They are often found in contemporary realistic stories and romances—and yet even within these stories young adult literature can problematize simple definitions of the good girl.

In Sarah Dessen’s *Along for the Ride* (2009), Auden is a good student, accepted into a top college, with extra curriculars, and who never

gives her parents problems. She is on the surface a proto-typical good girl. But because we get to know Auden we come to realize that she has no friends, and she has used perfection as an escape and an attempt to have her parent's attention. It is not particularly healthy or strong in the ways we purport to want girls to be. Other examples include Samantha Reed, who strives for perfection in her sterile and lonely home, while yearning for the chaos of the Garrets in *My Life Next Door* (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Macy in *The Truth About Forever* (Dessen, 2004) tries hard to be perfect, so that none will know her grief, or pity her, but she is also quite isolated. On paper, Auden, Macy, and Samantha look put together with perfect lives but they all face a particular pressure towards perfection that leaves them isolated. This is consistent with real life girls discussing the pressure they feel towards perfection, and the internal narratives of not being enough and the sense of aloneness they feel in their striving (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). It also circles back to narratives of risk, emphasizing adolescence as a time of "storm and stress." While the nature of fiction requires conflict, the unassailable message within all of these narratives reinforces developmental beliefs of adolescence that perpetuate adult narratives of who we think youth are.

The good girls of YA literature inhabit and present an existence as kind, quiet, and unlikely to cause trouble. They do not get angry. Even Sam, who chooses to tell her mother's secret is making the right and ethical choice, and therefore despite having knowledge of a crime is a likable girl. Furthermore, she becomes a caretaker, and ultimately provider for the Garret family. Inasmuch as YA literature contributes to a construction of girl, the good girl presence furthers ideas of a right way to be in the world. While Trites writes that the "driving force of YA literature is to interrogate social constructions foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual" (p. 20) I would argue that good girl constructions within YA literature reproduce a world that valorizes girls as nice, and expects them to conform to caretaking, emotional giving inhibiting capacity to express anger or assert ambition. Good girls in YA literature do not often dare to "disturb the universe" in seeking their own subjectivity in the world, rather they conform to feminized ideals of woman inherent in patriarchal systems.

Conclusion

How fiction provides information to a reader and how a reader experiences fiction as information is an ongoing area of interrogation. However, fiction, as a part of media, falls firmly in the conversation of does art reflect or create reality? This is a question that is explored in a variety of fields, media studies, literary criticism, and popular forms of art – film, music, etc. – among other areas. I argue that if we are going to engage in roles in readers advisory for youth and supporters of information literacy, we also should engage that question. YA fiction for

both adult readers and its intended teen readers is part of a constellation of media representations of youth that impact how we construct youth and their experiences. To be information literate readers of YA literature we must critically examine the intended and unintended constructions of youth. For girls, the girlhood in YA literature represents girls individually finding voice within power structures of our culture, including patriarchal systems that control behavior through expectation (be a good girl) and protection. On the other hand, YA literature does problematize girlhood, and its breadth allows for a variety of representations. Still, critical reading can suggest adult agendas may complicate any intended empowerment of girl through situating girls within expected behaviors—of healing, of reforming, of being nice—and within institutions—age hierarchies, school, —and within culture—patriarchal, racist—without examining the impact of institution and culture on those expected behaviors. And so, representation matters, but we should look beyond the demographics of that representation.

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Author's note: Much of this material is modified from my book *The Girl-Positive Library: Inspiring Confidence, Creativity and Curiosity in Young Women*.