Let’s Hear It for the Girls: Resilient and Remarkable Women in Today’s YA Literature

As a young reader I was always drawn to books with quirky characters who were usually girls. I loved all of the classics: Anne of Green Gables, Pippi Longstocking, Margaret (of Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret fame), and even the sisters in Little Women. So, even though there were fewer female characters for me to discover in children’s literature, I somehow found them anyway. Quite often, I found myself wishing and hoping to read about characters like this in high school. Sadly, that only happened in eleventh grade when I read To Kill a Mockingbird.

In the last two decades, two series have taken the popular culture by storm: Harry Potter and Hunger Games. While fantasy and dystopian genres were rarely my choice, I found myself drawn into both series by the craft of the stories and the appeal of the female characters. The women in the Harry Potter series are complex and varied, just like women in the real world. Hermione, although not the main character, is a major force in the narrative and the importance of her role is sustained throughout the seven novels.

Katniss, the main character of the Hunger Games trilogy, is cunning, physically strong, and (at times) manipulative. As the central character to the trilogy, it is Katniss who must decide the path of action as well as whom to trust in this dystopian thriller.

The women represented in the literary worlds of these novels are not limited to archetypes or stereotypes; they are fully developed and entertaining. While these two series have extended to movie franchises and product lines, there are many other YA texts with compelling females as their central focus.

Lesser-Known Heroines

Speak (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson

This story is told over the course of a school year. The main character, Melinda, has survived date rape and has chosen to remain silent about the incident. While that could be interpreted as a weakness in her character, she is nonetheless strong throughout this first-person narrative. Looking at the high school experience from the outside gives Melinda an interesting perspective; and even though she is struggling with her secret pain, she is astute and even funny at times. The powerful narrative is valuable for teens and can lead to some raw and honest discussions about teen drinking and teen relationships.

Stargirl (2000) by Jerry Spinelli

Although the title indicates this novel’s focus on a female protagonist, the narrative is told from the point of view of a male character,
Leo, as he observes a new student make her way in his high school. We come to learn that Stargirl has been homeschooled throughout her childhood and doesn’t understand the politics of high school. The concepts of acceptance, popularity, and individuality (according to her peers) are lost on this kind soul. Stargirl is a remarkable example of being true to oneself no matter what peers may say or do.

Jumping Off Swings (2009) by Jo Knowles

Told through multiple perspectives, this book tells the story of two teens who are forced to deal with the consequences after they find out their “one-night stand” has resulted in pregnancy. Ellie, the main character, describes the highs and lows of this unique situation; she is in awe of her changing body but she also longs to have a normal teenage experience in high school. She has to face Josh, the father of her baby, along with her other friends and peers. She witholds the ignorant taunts of students who see a pregnant teenager and assume the worst about her. Ellie struggles to make one of life’s most challenging decisions about her unborn baby and ends up being a fine example of grace under pressure.

The Fault in Our Stars (2012) by John Green

This YA novel is an utterly heart-breaking story of two teenagers, Hazel and Augustus, who meet at a cancer support group and fall in love. Perhaps it relates to their terminal diagnoses, but these two characters speak in a way that seems to transcend normal teenage banter. They exhibit a maturity and a profound awareness about the world around them and about being young and in love. There are parts of this book that are beyond depressing, yet I couldn’t help but cheer Hazel on to the very end. She lives in a world where truth, beauty, and true love exist even in the context of terrible illness.

These are just a few examples of YA literature in which female characters are revealed as complete, captivating, and complex. Please share your ideas for YA texts with EJ readers. Email me titles or even short reviews. Happy reading!

Works Cited


Pauline Skowron Schmidt is an assistant professor in English education at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. When she is not busy teaching, she enjoys reading YA literature. Email her at pschmidt@wcupa.edu.
Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards

NCTE Book Series and Virtual Conference

Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards
English Language Arts, Grades 6–8
Tonya Perry with Rebecca Manery
ISBN 978-0-8141-4943-3  No. 49423
$24.95 member/$33.95 nonmember

Each book includes:
- Analysis of the key features of the CCSS and answers to some of the most common questions
- Vignettes from individual classrooms, offering snapshots of instruction that show how teachers developed their practice
- Charts and handouts demonstrating how principles and standards can be aligned
- Recommendations for professional development, for both individuals and communities of practice

English Language Arts, Grades 9–12
Sarah Brown Wessling with Danielle Lillge and Crystal VanKooten
ISBN 978-0-8141-4944-0  No. 49447
$24.95 member/$33.95 nonmember

These resources explore how student-centered teaching remains crucial to every classroom and provide examples of how to uphold NCTE principles of effective teaching in a time of Core Standards.

Virtual Conference Recordings

Grades 6–8: Presented by Tonya Perry  No. 15433
Grades 9–12: Presented by Sarah Brown Wessling, Danielle Lillge, and Crystal VanKooten  No. 15434

Conference recordings include:
- Four 60-minute sessions by national literacy leaders and classroom teachers
- Recordings that can be downloaded and revisited as often as needed

$150.00 member/$150.00 nonmember

Shaping literacy for tomorrow, today.
Visit our website: https://secure.ncte.org/store/
or call toll-free: 1-877-369-6283
Evidence-Based Teaching and Learning

Principles in Practice

Literacy Assessment Strand

Reading Assessment: Artful Teachers, Successful Students
Diane Stephens, editor
ISBN 978-0-8141-3077-3 • No. 30773
$24.95 member/$33.95 nonmember

Through case studies of individual students and lively portraits of elementary classrooms, editor Diane Stephens and colleagues explore how artful pre-K–5 classroom teachers, reading specialists, and literacy coaches come to know their students through assessment and use that knowledge to customize reading instruction. The teachers detail the assessment tools they use, how they make sense of the data they collect, and how they use that information to inform instruction.

Beyond Standardized Truth: Improving Teaching and Learning through Inquiry-Based Reading Assessment
Scott Fulkins
133 pp. 2012. Grades 9–12
ISBN 978-0-8141-0291-6 • No. 02916
$24.95 member/$33.95 nonmember

Fulkins brings educators into his and colleagues’ classrooms to demonstrate how high school teachers across the disciplines can engage in inquiry-based reading assessment to support student learning.

Supporting Adolescent Readers through Classroom-Based Assessment Web Seminar Recording
$49 member/$99 nonmember

Our Better Judgment: Teacher Leadership for Writing Assessment
Chris W. Gallagher and Eric D. Turley
ISBN 978-0-8141-3476-4 • No. 34764
$24.95 member/$33.95 nonmember

This book explores how to move assessments to the center of professional practice by approaching writing assessment through an inquiry framework. This method encourages collaborations with students, other teachers, and community members to help you build your own assessment literacy, expertise, and leadership.

“After reading the first chapter… I knew I had to order the whole thing!”
— Penny Kittle, NCTE member, literacy coach, and author

The books in the Literacy Assessment Strand are based on the IRA–NCTE Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing, Revised Edition.

NCTE
National Council of Teachers of English

Shaping literacy for tomorrow, today.
Visit our website: https://secure.ncte.org/store/
or call 1-877-369-6283
In schools everywhere, educators are getting together to remodel literacy learning. You can connect with them across the school year by...

Putting Your School on the Map!
www.literacyinlearning.org/map

Sign your team up for free on the Literacy in Learning Exchange and join the movement of educators who are making change happen in their schools.