

**“A Masterless Woman”:  
Queens as Alternative Role Models**  
*Annmarie Mullen*

When people ask me to name my favorite historical fiction novel, I always hesitate because I have two choices: *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Tarnish*. *A Tale of Two Cities* is Charles Dickens’ quintessential novel of the French Revolution, and the innocents caught up in the conflict. *Tarnish* is Katherine Longshore’s young adult historical fiction novel about the romance between Anne Boleyn, future queen of England, and Thomas Wyatt, Renaissance poet. One is a staple of the Western canon, the other unknown outside of particular online circles. One is written by a man, with a male protagonist, while the other is written by a woman, with a female protagonist. Answering with one would get me approving nods and expressions of agreement, while answering with the other would get me perplexed looks and quirked eyebrows. After all, *A Tale of Two Cities* lands on every list of 100 Most Influential Novels of All Time. *Tarnish* is just girly trash.

When something is seen as feminine—whether because it is written by a woman or marketed towards young girls or features predominantly female characters—it is also seen as frivolous, silly, or worthless. Because of the number of female authors and female-led stories, young adult and historical fiction is often seen as a lowly form of writing, about as worthwhile as fast food, something for silly girls to consume because their silly brains can’t handle higher forms of writing.

These responses to young adult and historical fiction negatively impact young girls, because those types of fiction are often the only types to offer positive, well-rounded female protagonists. When society shames young girls for their interests in these kinds of stories, girls find themselves cut off from potential role models, from relatable stories, and from a wider community of girls like themselves.

Representation matters, particularly for marginalized people. When I discovered Anne Boleyn, a whole new world opened up to me. Here stood a woman who hadn't been conventionally attractive, who had relied more on her wits and force of personality to get ahead, who had ambition and desire and cleverness and rage in equal measure, who remained true to herself and her convictions even until death. But such a woman was not commonplace in mainstream media. For us girls and women, unfortunately, representation typically comes in the form of hypersexualized, objectified female characters. By objectification, I mean the theory that women go through "a process of dehumanization" (Fox et al. 350) to become sexualized commodities for straight male pleasure. Once objectified, women "are not perceived as deserving of moral consideration" (350) because they are no more human than a car or a can of Coke, their only purpose to be used and abused by men.

Sexualization has a particularly insidious effect on young girls, as sexualized images of teenage girls saturate the media landscape. In a study of modern advertisements directed towards adolescent girls, researchers found that "the message from advertisers and the mass media to girls (as eventual women) is they should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be dominated and even sexually aggressed against, and they will be gazed on as sexual objects" (Merskin 120), despite their youth and sexual inexperience. In

fact, that inexperience becomes part of the fantasy. Men do not want young girls to have role models who reflect the reality of being a young girl, but role models who reflect the fantasy of teenage girlhood—innocent enough to be sexually alluring, but aware enough to use their ‘wiles’ to seduce men. The media encourages these fantasies in their “fetishization of young girls’ innocence and their vulnerability to physical and emotional violence” (120). When girls look to the media for representation, they don’t see well-rounded girls with a wealth of interests or diverse personality traits; they see that men find their innocence and their pain sexually attractive.

Girls looking to other types of media for more positive, less objectifying media are derided for their search. Anything connected to women “is devalued...because women are seen to have little value” (“Patriarchy’s Magic Trick”) outside of their service to men. We see this stance in everything from the job market to the media—jobs done predominantly by women, like teaching or nursing, are undervalued, while media marketed or produced by women is cheap, trashy, or unintellectual (“Patriarchy’s Magic Trick”). The culture “imbues us with a sense of the inferiority of women, that tells us, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that anything a woman does is obviously easy, requires little effort, and is of minimal value to society” (“Patriarchy’s Magic Trick”). In terms of media, teenage girls often bear the brunt of this sexist derision. Anything teen girls enjoy, from boy bands to Starbucks to vampire novels to Ugg boots, becomes fair game for unrelenting, misogynistic criticism. In fact, teen girls cannot enjoy anything without someone writing a poorly thought-out thinkpiece or hastily drawn comic on how stupid said thing is.

The media must always remind girls that “their interests are vapid and trite” (Moss) because young girls unironically enjoying a piece of media constitutes the single greatest threat to society—or at least to men. Most often, the media directs their ire towards ‘young adult fiction,’ which actually has no codified distinction from regular ‘literature.’ One demonstrable difference lies in the fact that young adult fiction, like *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, and *Divergent*, often focuses on teenage heroines. Apparently male power fantasies like the Superman comics can be considered ‘real art,’ but female power fantasies will be looked down upon, begging the question, “How are they [teenage girls] supposed to grow up to be writers, thinkers, artists, lawyers, doctors or anything when they feel subhuman?” (qtd. in Moss). The answer appears to be—they aren’t supposed to grow up to achieve much of anything. Teenage girls are meant to be broken, either by the media’s unflagging hatred of anything marketed towards teen girls or by the media’s bombardment of sexualized female objects.

Female historical fiction novelists, and female historical fiction fans, receive a great deal of criticism for the apparent dangers of historical fiction. In building his case against the merits of historical fiction, author Toby Litt offers the hypothetical of “an entirely naïve reader who picks up a novel by Philippa Gregory...this reader...completely trusts the writer not to mislead her” (Litt 111). Not only does Litt mark Gregory for particular condemnation, but also imagines the potential reader as a girl. Indeed, Philippa Gregory has become the posterchild for trashy historical novels. Her novels, mostly centering on the women of the Wars of the Roses and Tudor-era England, are derided both by other historical novelists and by actual historians, although she has a large following among teenage girls (Bordo 228). That teenage girls show great interest

in Gregory's novels shouldn't come as a surprise because Gregory focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of teenage girls and young women during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

I acknowledge there exist valid criticisms of Gregory's work. Personally, I don't appreciate Gregory's tendency to idolize some of her female characters at the expense of others, or her insistence on her (false) credentials as a historian. As an Anne Boleyn admirer, I vehemently disagree with the portrayal of Anne in her novels. However, I have to wonder if some of the most virulent criticism centers on Gregory because of her female focus. Susan Bordo devotes most of a chapter in her book, *The Creation of Anne Boleyn*, on the poor historical and literary qualities of Gregory's writing, while allowing other (male-focused) writers like Hillary Mantel or Margaret George more leeway. Hillary Mantel, in contrast to Gregory, receives equal parts praise and condemnation for her novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, both of which center on Thomas Cromwell and utterly villainize Anne Boleyn. Mantel "is intent on building a case against Anne...as a cold, self-seeking manipulator" (Bordo 237) in contrast to the humanization of Cromwell, but because she writes in a more 'poetic' style (235), she receives a pass. Nitpicky as this may seem, especially for someone who, as I said, doesn't even enjoy Gregory's novels, I can't help but think that part of the disgust with Gregory comes from a woman writing about women for young women. Better that women writers center their stories on men, like Mantel, or don't write historical fiction at all as Litt suggests, rather than introduce young girls to historical female characters.

That people like Litt would encourage the isolation of teenage girls from fictional representations of powerful women, written by women, constitutes an injustice because these kinds of books can open up unique

avenues of thought and expression suited for young girls. Research has proven that fiction by itself promotes empathy (Fottrell), and historical fiction has even more benefits. Historical fiction can unearth history so often relegated to footnotes or esoteric graduate theses. As writer Meredith Turtis states, “Not everyone gets their stories told; and often, those [stories]...are about women” (Turtis). Historical fiction offers a unique opportunity for female authors to write about historical women and, by doing so, give young girls more role models to admire. Kathryn Lasky, author of the successful *Royal Diaries* series, saw her own historical fiction writing as offering this kind of empathetic outlet for young girls, as “these characters might be princess but they still, on many levels, had the same responses of ordinary twelve-year-old or fourteen-year-old girls” (Lasky). In a book centered on the teenage Elizabeth I, or the teenage Marie Antoinette, girls can read about characters who look or act like them, rather than being forced to empathize with, say, Louis XVI or Napoleon or whatever other historical male receives the majority of attention from historians. This kind of writing about women, for women, and by women can help young girls “see [them]selves in them, understand them, and perhaps most importantly, feel [they] know them” (Turtis). The ability to empathize with female characters is incredibly important for young girls who so often only have objectified, male-produced versions of women to look to for inspiration. That the female characters in these books were also once real women adds a further layer of importance because it can spur these girls to dig deeper into women’s history, a subject so often forgotten. Feminist media critic Susan Bordo tells of hearing several parents “praise [Philippa] Gregory for luring their teenaged daughters out of the mall and into an appreciation for history” (Bordo 228) because of Gregory’s knack for breathing life into historical

figures. Not only, do girls gain fictional role models, but they also discover a chain of historical woman of which they can become a part.

Historical fiction can offer the kind of alternative, well-rounded representations of women so lacking in mainstream media. Though the women may have some unsavory qualities, they also act more like real women than idealized fantasies. Feminist scholar Alison Light, for example, discusses her own experiences with historical fiction as mostly positive. Much of the historical fiction she read centered on the Tudors because of the number of powerful women at the time, including, but not limited to: the six wives of Henry VIII; Mary I, the first queen regnant of England; Mary, Queen of Scots, the infamous Scottish queen regnant; and the legendary Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen (Light 61). Light describes how female authors depicted these women as “‘Women of Substance’” (61). Despite the acknowledged perils of the time period, the authors portrayed the women not as hypersexualized damsels in distress, but as women and girls in charge of their own lives. In these kinds of books, girls are not encouraged to seek out traditional ‘female’ activities like marriage and childbearing. In fact, “marriage is often depicted as inadequate and oppressive, the realm of violence (including wife-beating and wife-murder) and of bad or nonexistent sex...Similarly, motherhood is far from idealized” (63). These kinds of depictions stand in direct opposition to the mainstream depiction of young girls and women existing purely for male consumption. Media forces sexual submission down young girls’ throats, trying to convince them that being the object of a man’s sexual or marital desires is the highest spot a woman can attain. In contrast, much female-centered historical fiction depicts marriage as an oppressive institution; for example, in Elizabeth I’s installment of *The Royal Diaries* series, she ruminates on the sad fates of her father’s wives, two of whom were

executed, including her own mother (Lasky 5-8). In Gregory's *The White Princess*, focused on the life of Elizabeth of York, the marriage between Henry VII and Elizabeth starts with rape and remains an abusive relationship throughout the novel. These books do not dress up marriage as the zenith of a woman's life, but rather as a potential danger, an important lesson for young girls to learn when they are so often discouraged from their own dreams in favor of 'settling down' with a man.

Historical fiction allows for a more nuanced portrayal of female sexuality, one where a woman can navigate her own sexuality while still participating in public life. The heroines of these books "do not get tied down by motherhood, are socially mobile...even get the top job" (Light 63). Their sexuality may bring about criticism from the males around them, but it doesn't topple them from their positions of power. The depictions of sexuality can also help young girls explore their own sexualities in a more controlled environment than mainstream media. Take Elizabeth I as an example. As a young girl living in her stepmother Catherine Parr's house after the death of her father, Thomas Seymour, Catherine's fourth husband became enamored with Elizabeth. His treatment of her could, in modern terms, be construed as sexual assault: once, he forced Catherine to hold Elizabeth down while he sliced her dress to shreds with his hunting knife (Sharnette). Many young girls have experienced unwanted sexual advances or contact. For young girls, "becoming accustomed to male scrutiny can be deeply traumatizing" (Light 65), and perhaps no young girl will ever become completely 'accustomed' to her own objectification. In fact, I would argue, no young girl should ever become 'accustomed' to her own objectification, because that would imply an acceptance of the validity of that objectification. Girls deserve to feel like humans, not objects, because they are humans, not



objects. However, in fiction, “what would be fraught with fear and guilt in actuality, is made painless in fiction” (65), so that young girls can work through their own experiences with older men through the fictional Elizabeth. They can also see a pathway to escape, a glimmer of hope that they will not necessarily be doomed to life under an oppressive male figure, but may someday become “a masterless woman whom we are asked to respect and admire” (65). Again, when we think about the interests of teenage girls, we see that society sets out to discourage girls from ever having the same ambitions as their male counterparts. But if Elizabeth, a royal girl living in a time of patriarchy not quite so different from our own, can find a way of retaining control over her body and her life, why can’t the girls of today?

Historical fiction does not, of course, come without problems. Although novelists do not have to recreate history perfectly in their books, there is a danger in taking too much liberty with facts. Bordo warns that “people are being culturally trained to have difficulty distinguishing between created ‘realities’ and the reality thing...and that’s the way advertisers and politicians want it” (Bordo 229). Surely the advertisers of sexualized female models would not object to historical novels presenting such sexualization as natural or empowering for teenage girls. Female authors are also not exempt from harming young girls with their depictions of historical women. *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Philippa Gregory’s most famous novel, “strikes a...clear-cut division between the good and the wicked woman, with Anne playing the role of the wicked witch and Mary [Boleyn] the long-suffering, virtuous heroine” (220). This novel reinforces the patriarchal virgin-whore dichotomy, where passive women get rewards, while ambitious and active women get damnation. Such a depiction hardly helps young girls. While women can be portrayed

as villains without it automatically being sexist, it would be much more revolutionary if *The Other Boleyn Girl* depicted a healthy and loving relationship between the two Boleyn sisters, instead of an aggressively competitive one.

It must also be mentioned that not every girl has the opportunities afforded to historical noblewomen. Although the patriarchy has affected women of all classes throughout history, it remains a fact that those of the upper-classes will often have more access to power than those of the lower-classes. While Elizabeth I can escape the sexual tyranny of her stepfather, such an escape is not always available to modern day girls of lower classes. Still, historical fiction can and should be a form of escapism for girls as much as superhero comics or action movies are a form of escapism for boys; and while historical women are not perfect role models, they are alternate ones that can and do allow young girls to consider other ways of existing in this world beyond 'sex object.'

While historical fiction is far from perfect, it offers something undeniably important for young girls—nuanced reflections of themselves. Young girls cannot have only sexualized objects for representation when young boys have everyone from Superman to John McClane to every United States president from whom to draw inspiration. Young girls need to know that they can be more than a receptacle for sex, that they can lead countries or spark revolutions or simply have control over their own lives. For me, I would not be the person I am today without historical fiction. Discovering Anne Boleyn inspired me. It thrilled me to know that it was possible for women to be human and messy and powerful, while also reminding me how far we still have to go as a society. After all, Anne's story did not end like a fairytale, unless that fairytale was *Bluebeard*. To deride my interest in Anne Boleyn and media about her as

nothing more than girly or trashy is to deny the importance of that kind of representation in my life. Every girl, no matter her race, sexuality, class, or religion, deserves to have their Anne Boleyn—and historical fiction can give them to her.

## Works Cited

- Bordo, Susan. *The Creation of Anne Boleyn: A New Look at England's Most Notorious Queen*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.
- Fottrell, Quentin. "The huge difference between what men and women read." *MarketWatch*, vol. 29, January 2015, <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/fiction-readers-an-endangered-species2013-10-11>. Accessed 3 May 2017.
- Fox, Jesse and Rachel A. Ralston, Cody K. Cooper, and Kaitlyn A. Jones. "Sexualized Avatars Lead to Women's Self-Objectification and Acceptance of Rape Myths." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2015. *SagePub*. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0361684314553578>.
- Lasky, Kathryn. *Elizabeth I: Red Rose of the House of Tudor*. Scholastic Inc., 1999.
- Lasky, Kathryn. "Writing the Royal Diaries." *Kathryn Lasky*, 30 March 2010, [www.kathrynlasky.com/blog/post/writing-the-royal-diaries](http://www.kathrynlasky.com/blog/post/writing-the-royal-diaries). Accessed 3 May 2017.
- Light, Alison. "'Young Bess': Historical Novels and Growing Up." *Feminist Review*, no. 33, 1989, pg. 57-71. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1395214?seq=14#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395214?seq=14#page_scan_tab_contents).
- Litt, Toby. "Against Historical Fiction." *Irish Pages*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2008, p. 111-115. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20788519?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20788519?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).
- Merskin, Debra. "Reviving Lolita? A Media Literacy Examination of Sexual Portrayals of Girls In Fashion Advertising." *The American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2004. [citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1028.2328&rep=rep1&type=df](http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1028.2328&rep=rep1&type=df)

- Moss, Laura. "Why must we hate the things teen girls love?" *Mother Nature Network*, 9 October 2015, <http://www.mnn.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/stories/why-do-we-hate-things-teengirls-love>. Accessed 3 May 2017.
- "Patriarchy's Magic Trick: How Anything Perceived as Women's Work Immediately Sheds Its Value." *Crates and Ribbons*, 13 December 2013, <https://cratesandribbons.com/2013/12/13/patriarchys-magic-trick-how-anythingperceived-as-womens-work-immediately-sheds-its-value/>. Accessed 3 May 2017.
- Sharnette, Heather. "Queen Elizabeth I's Early Years: The Troubled Teens." *Elizabeth R*, <http://www.elizabethi.org/contents/earlyyears/teens.html>. Accessed 3 May 2017.
- Turtis, Meredith. "Novels About Real-Life Women Are Saving Forgotten History." *Vanity Fair*, 28 July 2015, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/07/novels-abouthistorical-women-saint-mazie-circling-the-sun>. Accessed 3 May 2017.