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# Where Is the Girl Power? The Search for Authentic Portrayals of Female Athletes in YA Lit

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# Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

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## Where Is the Girl Power? The Search for Authentic Portrayals of Female Athletes in YA Lit

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In April 2013, during an interview preceding the WNBA draft, Baylor University's basketball phenom Brittney Griner casually said she was gay (Borden). She had not scheduled a press conference nor had she written a confessional piece for a major news publication; she merely answered a question, and the reporters continued with the interview. Little fanfare followed. A few weeks later, the world of sports media would be consumed with the coming-out of current NBA player Jason Collins in an editorial he wrote for the May 6, 2013, edition of *Sports Illustrated*. He became the first openly gay (male) athlete still active on a major American team roster. Griner's statement received nominal attention when compared to the serious cultural conversations stirred by Collins's editorial. In perspective, with the stories of these two individuals' "coming outs" happening so differently yet

only weeks apart, we must address how unrealistically female athletes are still perceived in our society, despite the slow, but steady, reach toward gender equality thanks to the legislation of 1972's Title IX.

There is a perception of the female athlete as being overly masculine and assumedly lesbian to the point of her having to constantly defend her heterosexuality. Patrick Burke, quoted in a *New York Times* column following Griner's subdued announcement, said, "In sports right now, there are two different stereotypes—that there are no gay male athletes, and every female athlete is a lesbian. . . . We've had tremendous success in getting straight male players to speak to the issue; we're having a tougher time finding straight female athletes speaking on this issue because they've spent their entire careers fighting the perception that they're a lesbian" (Borden). The female athlete is constantly battling the stereotypes that accompany the positive aspects of being a strong, competitive athlete, stereotypes that lead to a problematic gendering of our sports culture; instead of thriving within a culture that is intended to promote positive personal growth and healthy relationships, our young female athletes find themselves pegged into inau-

thentic identities or discouraged to participate at all.

I (Emilee) speak from experience. A lifelong athlete, my athletic career culminated with an athletic scholarship to a large university. During my four years of collegiate volleyball, I grew in sisterhood with my teammates, as we practiced, played, travelled, lived, ate, and participated together in many other wonderfully sweaty aspects of the athletic grind. As part of the athletic community, we also socialized with other groups of female athletes, members of the numerous female athletic teams sanctioned by the university. We were all ruthless competitors, crossing paths in the hallways of the training buildings and weight rooms as we acknowledged the dedication and commitment we, as elite athletes, made to our respective sports. Tenacious on the court and field, we were also young students coming into our own identities as females, including sexual identities practiced in both gay and straight orientations. In our community of female athletes, there were lesbian and straight women, yet, to our community, it was rarely part of the conversation; instead, our conversations focused on scouting reports, conference standings, and training regimens. Gay or straight, we were female athletes.

Few athletes reach the upper levels of collegiate competition, but there undoubtedly are millions of young female athletes joining local soccer clubs and traveling basketball teams every year. Yet, despite this visible aspect of our culture, our YA literature seems to be lacking in its presentation of athletic female protagonists. As an adolescent, I was heavily involved in school and club sports because, as a six-foot-tall twelve year old, I was good at them; I also read *Vogue*, drew fashion sketches, and shared short stories I had written with my friends. I adored Lisa Leslie and Gabrielle Reese, standing 6'5" and 6'3", respectively, not because I saw them as pioneers of professional female sports as I do now, but, to adolescent Emilee, they were world-class athletes who also dabbled in the fashion world as beautiful, fabulous models.

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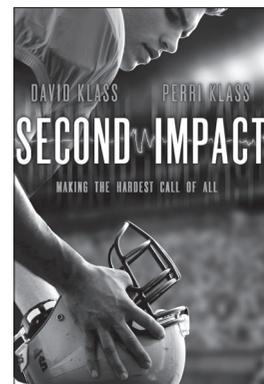
Later, as a college athlete, I remained dedicated to my sport but also enjoyed my studies in media arts and English and the many opportunities I had to attend poetry conferences, art house film screenings, and the occasional experimental electro-technic guitar performance. So, in writing this column, I sought texts that developed a female character in whom I could see myself as a young woman who was athletically successful and artistically inclined. My search was largely unsuccessful, as the few female protagonists I encountered were flat, uninteresting characters with

few interests outside of athletics. This deficiency must be addressed if the YA genre is to remain in line with the authentic intricacies of the adolescent's life, and if its characters will continue to engage the beautifully multifaceted personalities of our young adults. The texts we provide for our YA readers ideally should guide them through the questions, difficulties, and complexities of adolescence, including the complexities that accompany a female participating in the largely masculine world of sports.

Jon Scieszka recently added a new volume to his Guys Read collection titled *Guys Read the Sports Pages* (Walden Pond, 2012). Edited by Scieszka, the book is a collection of short stories about boys and the sports that strive to engage the reluctant male reader. While this reluctance is a growing concern to educators and authors involved in recommending YA literature of merit to young readers based on their unique personalities, including traits commonly seen in young males, the publication of this collection suggests we continue to operate under antiquated notions of boys as quarterbacks who don't like to read and girls as cheerleaders who don't like to get sweaty.

The collection, though, does shine in certain parts, such as Chris Crutcher's "The Meat Grinder," a story that addresses the realities of child abuse, personal anger, and the importance of faith in oneself. This story is particularly engaging because of the humorously cynical voice of Devin and his relatable perspective on being pressured to try out for the football team despite having the "muscle definition of a chalk outline" (122). Another bright spot of Scieszka's collection is "Max Swings for the Fences" by Anne Ursu, as it inverts our expectations with the tennis-playing Max, inspired by Venus and Serena Williams, and Molly, a passionate baseball fan and the best pitcher on the sixth-grade baseball team. Ursu's story is one both male and female athletes would appreciate but is unfortunately confined to a collection narrowly marketed to young males.

The 2013 novel *Second Impact: Making the Hardest Call of All* by David Klass and Perri Klass incorporates the perspective of the female athlete through using a double-voiced narrative structured as a blog being co-written by Jerry, the high school quarterback fighting through his past



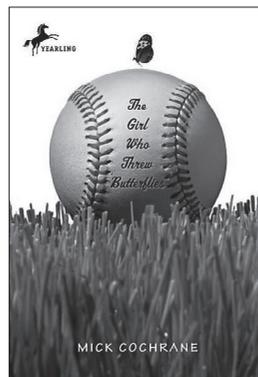
troubles, and Carla, the sports editor of the school newspaper who is also fighting to rehabilitate after a soccer injury. The main characters of Jerry and Carla are developed through the blog posts they write in response to the events surrounding the school's football season. Jerry, who forfeited his eligibility the season before because of a drunk driving incident, discovers his talent for creative writing and is encouraged by Carla to reach out to the school community with his insightful voice published on the school newspaper's blog. Carla, who is recovering from ACL surgery to repair the ligament damaged during her soccer season, is a seasoned sports reporter faced with her decisions concerning rehabilitation and her ultimate return to the playing field. They develop a relationship that remains platonic, an appreciated factor considering the overwhelmingly inescapable romantic element typically present in YA "sports" novels, an element so prevalent that we are seeing an emerging genre known as the "sports romance" within YA literature. It is not that YA texts should avoid these romantic elements authentic to the adolescent's experience, but such romance becomes problematic when it becomes the prevailing force that deters the female athlete from pursuing her passion for sports. Again, in researching this column and reviewing potential texts, it seemed as if many "sports" books featuring female protagonists relied heavily on the conflict created by her latest "crush" or by a "love" interest spawned from sideline gossip among cheerleaders and quarterbacks.

*Second Impact*, though, tackles a difficult subject while still voicing the two remarkable characters of Jerry and Carla without depending on the predictability of a romantic plot line. The novel approaches the controversy of the danger of high-impact injuries, specifically concussions, in football. Both Jerry and Carla are faced with pivotal decisions: Jerry's concern for the safety of his friend versus his commitment to the school culture of football and Carla's journalistic integrity versus the future implications on her college admissions due to the unethical actions of her principal. The novel ultimately focuses on Jerry as the school's star quarterback, unfortunately neglecting Carla's athletic endeavors beyond the initial narrative of her knee surgery. Nevertheless, *Second Impact* is an excellent example of a YA novel that reaches beyond the dangerously typical story of the high school quarterback and the female who sacrifices all agency to appear more attractive to him, as this novel shines with themes of loyalty and integrity beyond the confines of gender.

Mick Cochrane's 2009 *The Girl Who Threw Butterflies* is quickly becoming the classic YA novel

that champions the athletic female character of which we yearn to see more. Molly, despite having played softball for her seventh-grade team, crosses the chalk line onto the baseball diamond, into the world of the eighth-grade boys' baseball team, a team on which her overhand knuckleball is not only effective but downright lethal to the unsuspecting batters she faces. Cochrane's narrative is tender and endearing, as Molly is faced with trials beyond the diamond, including the death of her father and the tense relationship that has since developed with her distant mother. Molly's voice is thoughtful yet authentic in her concerns of becoming cast out among her peer group and her male teammates, yet Cochrane pointedly highlights the multitude of voices that exist on the margins of Molly's world, marginalized not only because of gender but also because of race, learning styles, and lifestyles. Moreover, Cochrane's story avoids the aforementioned drudgery of the early adolescent romance as he carefully crafts Molly's close friendship with a teammate not into a fleeting crush but instead a meaningful companionship based on true friendship and support.

As educators, authors, and publishers, we must champion novels such as *Second Impact* and *The Girl Who Threw Butterflies*, novels that present the female athlete with care paid to the avoidance of dangerous, and untrue, stereotypes of the young athletes playing and competing within our schools and sports clubs. For those of us who are creating, publishing, and promoting YA texts, we must consider several questions that



naturally accompany the sports genre within YA literature. Why does a YA “sports” novel featuring a female protagonist also tend to feature a (superficial and unnecessary) romance? Are our young readers being taught that females are inseparable from their romantic inclinations? Are the thoughts of young readers so consumed by cute boys, cute girls, or the need to “get” a partner that they cannot possibly focus on hurling a ball, finding the back of a net, or side-stepping an approaching defender? In a culture that is experiencing a leveling of gendered playing fields in a way never before seen in institutional funding, legislative protection, and media recognition, we must work to put novels in the hands of our YA readers that do not break down the tremendous progress that has been made.

I might not have found a novel featuring a female volleyball player who loved to read *Vogue* and design her own couture fashions, for example, but, thankfully, there

are resources available for those educators willing to take on the challenge of presenting authentic portrayals of female athletes to our YA readers. One recommended resource is the sports literacy blog created by Alan Brown of Wake Forest University. Brown has compiled extensive lists of not only sports-focused YA fiction (appropriately categorized according to sport and the themes addressed, including gender and sexual identity) but also titles of academic publications presenting vital research on all aspects of the athletic culture within YA literature and our classrooms. This blog can be found at <http://sportsliteracy.wordpress.com>.

Female athletes are dynamic, quick, powerful, beautiful, heterosexual, homosexual, and, above all else, athletic. This means they are competitive in a way that transcends all gendered limitations, and this competitiveness must be reflected in the YA literature being published. We cannot con-

tinue to support the female character who, somehow, “gives up” her competitive nature because residing on the peripheral sidelines of sport better meets our feminine “expectation.” We must challenge authors and publishers to produce books that voice the diversity of female athletes in rich authenticity and powerful prose, developing our female characters to be just as determined—and competitive—as our male athletes, because, believe it or not, we are. 

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