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

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Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

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 char-

acter, 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

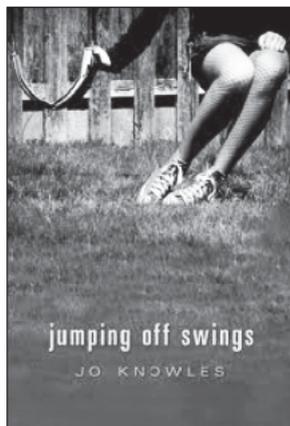
Although the title indicates this novel's focus on a female protagonist, the narrative is told from the point of view of a male character,



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

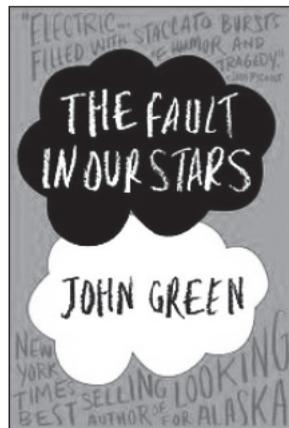
Told through multiple perspectives, this book tells the story of two teens who are forced to deal with the consequences after they find out their "one-night stand" has resulted in pregnancy. Ellie, the main character, describes the highs and lows of this unique situation; she is in awe of her changing 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 withstands 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 heartbreaking 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! 📖

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