Beverly Pace

Dr. Warner

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Female Narratives Set in Historical Contexts

            In today’s modern world, words like “intersectional feminism” and “sexual objection” have become more common. So, I wonder where then are all the narratives about girls and women? Film and television contribute to the underrepresentation of women. In fact, “Only 12% of all clearly identifiable protagonists were female in 2014” (Cipriani). In the literary world, women continue to be underrepresented as well with “literary magazines focus[ing] their review coverage on books written by men, and commission more men than women to write about them” (Flood). This male domination of the literary world may be unfairly stifling women’s narratives. For these reasons, I will focus my annotated bibliography on female narratives set in historical contexts because like John W. Scott says, “[C]ontary to customary practice, women are valid historical subjects” (Scott 31).

            This project includes a variety of different literature and media written for young adults and showcases a female protagonist and/or emphasizes the female experience . The protagonist will also be set in some historical context, not limited to any specific region or historical moment. I have collected a broad arrangement of literature and media with settings in America, India, Korea, Germany, Holland, Japan, and France. The times in which the literature or media are set are also vast. Sometimes characters must deal with life during war, after war, or a world influenced by a specific historically event. My selections are carefully picked because I want to display female characters and female experiences in a variety of different historical events around the world.

            Men are historically intertwined with war and battles, with only female soldiers making large contributions in the past one hundred years, it is easy to cast aside women in war stories. However, I agree with Hillary Clinton when she says that women are, “victims of war. Women lose their husbands, their fathers, their sons in combat. Women often have to flee from the only homes they have ever known. Women are often the refugees from conflict and sometimes, more frequently in today’s warfare, victims” (Evon). In other words, girls and women are also ( just like men) affected by war and oppressive events such as India’s human trafficking or America’s Industrial Revolution, only women’s experiences and feelings differ from that of men. With experiences that are unique and vary from the dominant male point-of-view, people shouldn’t “dismiss women’s history” (Scott 32).

            The telling of female stories are important for girls and woman alike. Literature and media has the potential to build narratives that help girls and women, and provide them with good relatable role models.  Lena Dunham, a contemporary author, says it best when she states,

There is nothing gutsier to me than a person announcing that their story is one that deserves to be told, especially if that person is a woman. As hard as we have worked and as far as we have come, there are still so many forces conspiring to tell women that our concerns are petty, our opinions aren’t needed, that we lack the gravitas necessary for our stories to matter. That personal writing by women is no more than an exercise in vanity and that we should appreciate this new world for women, sit down, and shut up. (16)

Integrating female literature and media in classrooms should be more common because female characters are complex and feel universal emotions like love, fear, etc. Additionally, female characters, as evident in the selections, present ideas that are unique to girl- or womanhood such as maturation and menstruation, mother and daughter bonds, and many other themes about one’s self worth as a girl and more. Real life girls like Anne Frank as well as fictional characters like Liesel Meminger from *The Book Thief* are equally inspiring. We owe it to girls to represent them more than has been done in the past, especially when females make up 51% of the world’s population.

Annotated Bibliography

“Maryum,” director. Streetlights Films, 2002.

Maryum is just an ordinary teen living in New Jersey until the relationship between America and Iran worsens. As an Iranian American, Maryum never knew very much about her birthplace (she moved to America as a young girl) but now she is forced to confront her cultural identity when Iran captures American hostages during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis. Maryum and her poor family are subject to discrimination and bigotry as the crisis changes America’s rhetoric about Muslims and their alleged links to terrorism. This resource is significant because it contains a wonderfully in-depth portrayal of Maryum. She is a thoughtful, feisty, and brave female character who tries to find the line between her American culture and her Iranian heritage. The 1979 Iranian hostage crisis is the historical event that this movie centers on as it begins to change how safe and comfortable Maryum and her family feel. This movie portrays a strong female lead and displays the impacts of a historical event.

Frank, Anne et al. *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*. New York, Doubleday, 1995.

            This canonical text is a remarkable account of a Jewish girl, Anne Frank. In order to hide from German Nazis, Anne and her family must go into hiding, and they successfully evade capture for nearly two years. In the sad end, the Frank family and the other family their in hiding with are discovered and sent to concentration camps. This diary (unlike other literature on this list) is nonfiction. It is an honest and poignant account of Anne Frank’s life—sometimes mundane, but always gripping. I especially like this “Definitive Edition” because unlike previous editions of the diary, this one kept almost every entry intact—even the scandalous entries when Anne writes about how much she hates her mom or daydreams about sexual encounters. I believe that young readers would appreciate the maturity of this diary as well as the relatable themes of love, hope, sexuality, and more.

Kyung-Sook, Shin. *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*. New York, Pegasus Books, 2015.

            This novel is about an unnamed female protagonist who reflects on her teenage years when she was living in South Korea’s capital, Seoul. With multiple flashbacks, the protagonist mostly recounts her life as a teen working in industrial factories and daydreaming of becoming an established writer, which she becomes. The story is sad because of the tough labor conditions in the factories and the lonely and oppressive life in Korea, but in telling her story, the unnamed narrator is able to “purge herself” (Lee). This resource is significant because it tells the emotionally victorious story of the unnamed narrator during the 1970s, “harsh postwar period, when Korea was ruled by a dictator, when political dissent meant banishment and safe working conditions were not even an afterthought but a laughable request” (Lee). Despite all she must face, the protagonist doesn’t back down. The historical context provides dark descriptions of Korea as a punitive dictator takes over, and the female point-of-view propels the story forward, which makes the 365 page novel a fast read.

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

            This highly popular novel is narrated by Death and tells the story of the nine-year-old German girl, Liesel Meminger. Her life turns upside down as World War II is beginning. Her brother is dead, her parents are missing, and Liesel is forced to live a life where she must steal books to console herself from the horrors against Jews like her friend Max. This book deals with the role that language plays in propaganda and raises some important questions about how dangerous hateful rhetoric can be (i.e., Adolf Hitler speeches of hate). This book is unique because unlike most World War II stories that focus on Jewish people, *The Book Thief* is about how the war wasn’t easy for anybody, even the German people.

            Alcott, Kate. *The Daring Ladies of Lowell*. New York, Random House Inc, 2014.

                Alice Barrow is a Lowell mill girl during America’s Industrial Revolution of the early 1800s where working conditions are tough and unfair, but becoming friends with “Lovey Cornell, a saucy, strong-willed girl who is outspoken about the dangers they face in the factories” makes life easier to bear (“Penguin”). One day, Lovey is “found dead under suspicious circumstances, [and] a sensational trial brings the workers’ unrest to a boiling point, leaving Alice torn between finding justice for her friend and her growing passion” for Samuel Fiske, “the handsome and sympathetic son of the mill’s owner” (“Penguin”). This book contains the classical struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, but Alcott gives it more depth by adding in elements of suspense and romance. Will Alice get love or justice or both? I believe this book will appeal to girls as well as boys because while the book addresses romance (something boys will scoff at), the mysterious death and thrilling trial will keep them engaged.

Donnelly, Jennifer, Watts. *Revolution*. New York, Delacorte Press, 2010.

Andi Alpers is having a tough time dealing with her parent’s divorce and is “heartbroken by the loss of her younger brother” (Amazon.com). Her father suggests they visit France and once there, Andi finds the diary of Alexandrine—a girl who lived during the French Revolution. The intertwining stories make “the past become terrifyingly present” (Amazon.com). This resource has the ability to teach readers about the “innocence of the monarchy in the French Revolution” and show that “not everyone is as good as they seem” (“Center for Teaching”). Readers will also be impressed by the plethora of different female perspectives *Revolution* provides from both the past and present. There are ordinary people learning about the French Revolution for the first time like Andi as well as people who lived during France’s uprising such as some lower class and upper class characters. There are conflicting, shifting, and common attitudes strung together in this fast paced novel great for readers aged twelve to eighteen.

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Chains*. New York, Simon &Amp; Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2008.

            Isabel and Ruth are sisters and slaves sold to cruel owners named Anne and Elihu Lockton right before the start of the American Revolutionary war. The girls hold on to hope that their previous (and now deceased) owner’s lawyer will provide them with freedom, which they were promised, but wartime conditions make it so the lawyer is temporarily unavailable. Time passes and life doesn’t get any better, especially when poor Ruth is arrested at Anne’s request. Isabel turns her attention to finding sensitive information about the war and general George Washington when her slave friend, Cruzon, tells her such information could lead to freedom. However, after investigations as a Patriot spy, Cruzon’s plan fails. The tensions between British colonies fighting for independence and Britain trying to maintain power over the colonies worsens, heightening conflicts everywhere. Isabel begins to lose hope until she discovers Ruth is still in the colonies so she and Cruzon escape from New York to presumed safety. Isabel then “asks Curzon if he's able to get up and walk… and the story continues in *Forge*, the next book in the [three-part] series” (Schmoop.com). This book focuses on a highly independent and courageous female, Isabel. She wants freedom and to protect her younger sister. This book takes a unique approach in fiction about slaves. One pitiful historical fiction often makes is focusing writings about slave life after the Revolutionary War. *Chains,* on the other hand, writes about slavery when America was still British colonies, and the novel illuminates some of the main differences of slave life before the revolution and after the revolution ends.

Pope, Jessie. “War Girls by Jessie Pope.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, July 2004.

            This is a poem about working class woman during World War I. The speaker is probably male, but he tells of the female experience and is thus an aptly fit for this bibliography. He vividly describes how women are, “No longer caged and penned up” and by taking jobs traditionally held by men before the war, “ They're going to keep their end up” (Pope). Utilizing simple language, Pope makes the poem’s meaning clear and concise. I think the young readers will appreciate this poem and the historical context of it. It’s a significant poem because it is a commentary about traditional gender roles that women played as caretakers and housekeepers, but how that changed with World War I. In this new life without their husband’s support, women must go out to work “like a man” (Pope). I might suggest this poem to young readers struggling with parents who hold antiquated traditional views about gender roles, which can sometimes exist as a generational gap usually does divide parents and their children.

Magoon, Kekla. *Fire in the Streets*. New York, Aladdin, 2012.

            Maxie is a fourteen-year-old African American teen involved with the civil rights activist group, the Black Panthers. She soon discovers that a Black Panther member is siding with the police, providing them with confidential information. Eager to “earn her place in the Panthers,” Maxie hopes to find the traitor (Dickenson). This book sheds light on the often “underappreciated” role of young girls and women during the 1960s civil rights era led by Dr. Martin Luther King (Dickenson). This book can help girls and teens understand their place in social activism groups, especially since the fight for social justice continues today with the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement and others. This book deals with themes of loyalty, justice, and femininity (when Maxie remembers her ex-boyfriend).

McCormick, Patricia. *Sold*. New York, Hyperion, 2006.

           Told in powerful vignettes, *Sold* is about the emotionally evocative story about Lakshmi, a thirteen year old girl sold into sex trafficking in India. All alone, Lakshmi must adapt to her new life, and only finds solace in the words of her mom, “*Simply to endure is to triumph” (*McCormick). When Lakshmi has to opportunity to return to her old life with her family, will she be strong enough to seize her chance? This amazing story is significant in regards to its cultural and historical implications, and is told beautifully through the voice of a wonderful protagonist. Lakshmi embodies the resiliency of the human spirit and the will to survive. She proves she can do more than endure, but also triumph. With the unfortunate statistics that suggest high levels of sexual abuse among women, *Sold* has the ability to help anyone who is a victim or knows a victim of abuse. This book deals with sensitive content, but is also careful to condemn all abuse.

Golden, Arthur. *Memoirs of a Geisha: a Novel*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

This novel is the fictional account of a Japanese female who tells her life story from girlhood to adulthood. In 1929, at the age of nine the story’s protagonist, Chiyo Sayuri, is sold into slavery. As a slave, Chiyo learns the art of a geisha at a popular geisha home. When Japan enters World War II, all geishas must stop their practice and Chiyo goes to work in a factory while facing the threat of bomb warfare. Chiyo survives the war and her life continues in Japan, with more trials and challenges along the way until her story ends in America. Chiyo’s world is one, “where appearances are paramount; where a girl's virginity is auctioned to the highest bidder; where women are trained to beguile the most powerful men; and where love is scorned as illusion” (Amazon.com). Unlike other selections on this list, this is the only book that focuses on a character that is not immediately recognized as a strong female. Interestingly enough, there is a lot of debate about her motivations, thoughts, and ultimate decision to move to America on online platforms and blogs discussing if Chiyo is strong or weak. The fact that Chiyo’s character has been interpreted in many ways would make this book engaging for students. I include this novel in the selection mostly because I believe it would compare well with other books in this bibliography, but especially *Sold.*

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