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Female Protagonists in Fantasy Novels

**Introduction:**

In many stories, books, tales, etc. of the past, women have been portrayed as weak, helpless people who are always in need of being rescued. This is still true for many other areas of the world. Many of the fairytales that young girls are introduced to have this theme, which may teach them that they need a man to save them. This, even if not as true as it was in the past, still perpetuates this idea, even if it is hidden deep within a woman’s conscience, that men should be chivalrous and be the ones who supports the women. Of course in today’s times, this idea has slowly been disappearing and we have books and the media to thank for that. To introduce young girls to books that can show them and teach them that a man isn’t necessary is a wonderful thing. Books are used to empower young women, to teach them that they are in control of their own fates, their own destinies, and that they choose their own paths and do not need a man to do those things for them. There are books like the *Graceling Series* by Kristin Cashore that teaches that a man is not needed, and even if you do have a man, you do not have to give up who you are. There are also books like *Ella Enchanted* by Gail Carson Levine or *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch where the girl is the one who saves the boy. These books will teach valuable lessons all the while allowing the reader to be able to escape the real world, even if only for a while.

My approach to this was to think of all the books that I had read and then to ask friends if they had any suggestions while also looking online for strong female protagonists in young adult fantasy novels. This hasn’t only been a learning experience for me, I hope that these books will be a learning experience for anyone and everyone.

**Rationale:**

I will be honest and say that I am one of those women who may sometimes feel like it is the men who should support the women, but only because I was raised in a traditional household. I want young women to know that this is definitely not true, as nice as it can be, especially for the women of my ethnicity. We Hmong are very patriarchal and are generally, in terms of gender roles, very traditional. We, especially those still in Laos and Thailand, believe there are set gender roles and they shouldn’t really be mixed. Only after coming to America recently has the gender roles been challenged. All of our stories, movies, books, etc., still show the maiden in distress being saved by a man or a woman needing a man. Hmong women are looked down on if a divorce occurs, even if it was all due to the men, whether he cheats or calls it off. Hmong women are looked down upon if they aren’t married by a certain age. There are a lot of aspects of the culture that makes it to where a woman is made to be nothing if she doesn’t have a man, and sadly, it is still passed down here in America, in the 21st century.

This isn’t just for the females though. Young men are still taught that they should be the ones with the higher incomes, the supporter of the family, etc. Males feel pressured into doing being the breadwinner and doing these things and many feel like their pride is at stake or can go into depression for not being able to. There have been many debates about whether, on a first date, the men should pay or split the check half and half. Why not let the women pay? These stories and books can show men that they don’t need to feel so pressured about these issues. These stories show them that women are capable of protecting themselves and that it is okay to rely on women as much as women rely on men.

I would like to introduce these books where there are strong female leads to show these young women that they do not need to feel like they are nothing without a man, that if they choose to live the single life forever, they will not be looked down upon or that men won’t be looked down upon if they aren’t able to support their women as much as the media portrays. These are the books that will help shape the future for many young women and men, no matter race, religion, etc.

Annotated Bibliography

Cashore, Kristin. *Fire*. New York: Firebird, 2011. Print.

Fire is the last human monster with the power to control minds. There are rebels fighting to overthrow the young king when the prince comes to seek her help in uncovering the rebels’ plans. Fire begins to realize the true extent of her power and all the good, and bad, that she can do with it. This book teaches that everyone has worth and has something to offer the world. It also teaches that sexual desires are a normal function of the human body and to not be ashamed of it. *Fire* contains themes of family, friendship, death, and self-worth.

Cashore, Kristin, Jeffery C. Mathison, and Cathy Riggs. *Graceling*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt. 2008. Print.

Katsa is born with the Grace, a skill in certain individuals, to kill. Being the King’s niece, she is used as his assassin, but is secretly plotting to overthrow him with the help of old and new friends, finding who she truly is along the way. This book teaches women that they do not need to change the way they are to gain a man’s love. This book contains themes of acceptance, death, friendship, and love. It was ranked as number one by the public for “Best Strong Female Fantasy” on Goodreads.com.

Fagan, Deva. *Fortune’s Folly*. New York: Henry Holt, 2009. Print.

Fortunata makes a living by telling fake fortunes and is tricked into telling a fortune for the prince. She is then forced to fulfil the prophecy or have her father be killed. This book teaches children to not lie and that wit and brains can help in escaping dangerous situations. It is also wit and intelligence that helps to get the man in the end. This book has themes of family, friendship, and death.

Hale, Shannon. *Princess Academy*. New York: Bloomsbury Children’s. 2005. Print.

Miri’s small quarry town has been deemed the home of the future princess and soon, an academy is set up to teach every girl within certain ages to be a princess so the Prince can come and choose his bride. All Miri ever wanted was to be of help to her town, and she finds her chance when bandits come to kidnap the future princess. This book teaches that no matter how small and weak someone is, their thoughts and actions can go a long way. It also teaches boys that they don’t need to be a prince to win a girl’s heart, being who they are is all a girl needs. This book deals with themes of friendship, family, courage, and education.

Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997. Print.

Ella has been” Cursed to be obedient… She tames ogres with her gift for speaking in tongues, and she refuses the man she loves because she knows he can’t save her from her curse. Actually, she saves his life with her quick wits, and he is the one who shows her tenderness and compassion. In the end, only she can save herself, and she has the force of will to do it. Ella is a funny, clever, brave protagonist who refuses to fit herself into the mold society has created for her.” (Claire Fallon) This book teaches that anyone can fight the circumstances forced upon them and come out unscathed and stronger than before. It also teaches that brute strength is not needed to save someone, wits and brains are enough.

Levine, Gail Carson. *Fairest*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006. Print.

In Aza’s kingdom of Ayortha, two things are valued above all else: beauty and voice. Aza has the most beautiful voice of the land, but lacks the looks. She has a magical talent though, the talent to “throw” her voice. Her beautiful voice attracts the attention of the prince, along with his new step-mother, who has plans of her own for the kingdom. This book teaches not to judge a person based on their looks and to love oneself for who they truly are. This book has themes of self-acceptance, friendship, and family.

Maas, Sarah J. *Throne of Glass*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.

Celaena is put into a competition, unwillingly, by Prince Dorian as his champion to find a new assassin. There she must fight other contestants, all men, for her freedom. As the competition goes on, contestants begin to slowly die and it is up to Celaena to find out who the killer is. (“Throne of Glass”) This book teaches women, and men, that women are on equal grounds with men, enough to be able to fight and survive against men. This book has themes of unlikely friendships, death, and courage.

Mead, Richelle. *Vampire Academy.* New York: Razorbill, 2010. Print.

Rose is a dhampir, half human, half vampire, who is in charge of protecting the Moroi mortal vampire princess, her best friend, Lissa, and her secret power, from the evil Strigoi vampires. When dead animals keep showing up in Lissa’s belongings, they know someone is on to Lissa’s secret and must figure out who it is before it is too late. (“Vampire Academy”) This book teaches that friendship is one of the most important bonds there are and that women do not need a man to protect them, they can rely on other women. This book deals with themes of betrayal, friendship, family, and forbidden love.

Munsch, Robert N., and Michael Martchenko. *The Paperbag Princess*. Lindfield, N.S.W.: Scholastic Australia, 2006. Print.

Although this is for a younger audience, this book is perfect to introduce young women into strong female protagonists. “Princess Elizabeth has it all: beauty, riches, and a prince to marry. Suddenly, a dragon attacks and takes everything from her. He destroys her castle, burns all her clothes, and kidnaps the prince. Instead of shedding tears, Elizabeth springs into action. Having nothing to wear, she puts on an old paper bag and sets out to rescue her prince. “(AllReaders.com) This book teaches that sometimes it is the man who needs to be saved, and that it is perfectly fine. It also teaches to be grateful for who a person is and the things they had to give up to be where they are. This book contains themes of courage, self-sacrifice, and strength.

Pierce, Tamora. *Alanna: The First Adventure Song of the Lioness Quartet*. N.p.: Atheneum/Random House, 1984. Print.

Alanna talks her twin brother into switching places with her so she can be a knight and he can become a witch. She pretends to be a boy and “takes on the identity of Alan of Trebond. The story details Alanna’s training as a page, where she deals with bullies, rigorous coursework, and ultimately trying to make sure no one finds out about her deep secret.” (Mariah Ramsour) Alanna teaches that the viewed gender roles are easy to dismiss to achieve a goal. If a girl wants to be a knight (only for men), she can, and if a boy wants to be a witch (only for women), he can. This book deals with themes of bullying, determination, and friendship.

Works Cited

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