Carpe Librum:
Seize the (YA) Book

The Future Is Female:
Bad-Ass Feminists in YA

As I write this final column for *English Journal*, I can’t help but reflect on my reading habits over the past year. From the 2016 election cycle to the Women’s March in January 2017 and beyond, I have pushed myself beyond the limits of safe reading choices, seeking out works that would inspire my students. I searched for books that would reflect what I see when I look at my preservice teachers, mostly female, who are ready to enter classrooms and challenge their own students.

As I was preparing this column, I received my panel assignment for the 2017 ALAN workshop and it all fell into place. Simultaneously, though, I heard about the possibility of an all-female film remake of *Lord of the Flies*, and I was left scratching my head. Didn’t Libba Bray already write the female version of that story in *Beauty Queens*? Yes; yes, she did, and she did not hold back in addressing this phenomenon in an article in *Entertainment Weekly*, saying “there is a gross imbalance of men in charge, it’s much harder to get female-centric projects made... the lack of gender diversity—and diversity in general—at the power levels of Hollywood is staggering.”

What this column hopes to accomplish is to level the playing field by posing these essential questions:

- How do we teach girls that they matter?
- How do we help them speak up and speak out?
- How can we make hashtags like #MeToo obsolete?

*Moxie* by Jennifer Mathieu

In this contemporary fiction piece, “Dutiful Vivian” is fed up with the misogynistic attitude that permeates every slice of her high school experience—from the random dress code checks that seem to negatively affect only the girls, to the teachers and administrators who don’t listen to what the girls have to say. Vivian discovers some zines from the 1990s among her mother’s things and gets inspired.

What better way to address the issues at her school than to start a secret society in which “Moxie Girls Fight Back”? The movement starts small with hearts and stars drawn on the backs of hands, and then it grows to a full-blown movement that includes a dramatic walk-out.

The novel also poses an essential question for teenagers: Can you fall in love with someone who sees the world differently than you? Vivian notices Seth, a new boy at school, with small hearts and stars on his hand—and she is intrigued. She also experiences inner conflict as she wants to keep the empowerment from the Moxie Movement all to herself. Even more confusing to her is that her very progressive mother has started dating a colleague whose car is adorned with a prominent Republican’s bumper sticker. Vivian wrestles with judging people by their words and their actions as this novel reaches its climax.

What I love about this novel is that Vivian sees her mother as a person and not just a parent. When she discovers the zines, it allows her to see the trajectory of the rebellious teenager her mother once was. As the audacious Moxie Movement grows and a manifesto is composed, the girls soon discover that there is
room for everyone at their table—queer girls, black girls, and even some boys. More importantly, the author sprinkles into the story quotations by famous feminists such as Angela Davis and Audre Lorde that will likely encourage readers to follow up with more inquiry into feminism.

**Love, Hate and Other Filters** by Samira Ahmed

Ahmed’s tale of young Maya is a perfect fit for today’s tumultuous political climate. Maya is a Muslim, a scholar, a photographer, and is described as the “responsible Indian girl” who knows what is expected of her from her parents. She is eager to learn more about the art of photography at New York University but is reluctant to tell her parents that she has been accepted since it conflicts with their traditional plans for her.

Maya finds solace in her progressive Aunt Hina, who knows about Maya’s dream to move from Chicago to New York City. She also finds herself caught up in a love triangle of sorts. There is Kareem, who is older, sophisticated, and deemed a suitable Indian boy by her family; and then there is Phil, the “all-American” football player, who happens to be Caucasian.

As the title suggests, there is a lovely extended metaphor of Maya using the camera to view the world around her. Artistically, this makes the story a little less heartbreaking. Unfortunately, there is a terrorist attack in a city just like Chicago, and because Maya’s surname is the same as the terrorist, she finds herself a victim of prejudice. Maya will have to find the strength to frame herself in the world—instead of hiding behind her camera.

**Here We Are: Feminism for the Real World** edited by Kelly Jensen

If, for some strange reason, you are not able to include a full-length novel in your curriculum but are looking for smaller opportunities to broaden students’ perspectives, then these two volumes can help. **Here We Are: Feminism for the Real World** is a multigenre, multimodal exploration of what it means to be a feminist. The book is filled with poetry, essays, and infographics; readers will delight in all the options.

**The Radical Element: 12 Stories of Daredevils, Debutantes, and Other Dauntless Girls** edited by Jessica Spotswood

In a similar format, **The Radical Element** takes the reader on a journey from 1838 to 1984 via historical fiction. Though not exhaustive, this book contains some unique tales of women who were socially and ideologically well ahead of their time. The editor notes that she intentionally addressed
intersectionality in this companion to A Tyranny of Petticoats: 15 Stories of Belles, Bank Robbers and Other Badass Girls, which was published in 2016.

New Rules

So, how do we nurture the next generation of young people? Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s We Should All Be Feminists is a good place to start. Feminists want to be considered equal, and who doesn’t want that? Why do we still stigmatize that word? Circling back to Beauty Queens, one of the characters asks, “Why do girls always feel like they need to apologize for giving an opinion or taking up space in the world?” And another says, “Sometimes I just want to burn down all the rules and start over.” I couldn’t agree more. Let’s not be afraid to break the rules. Let’s not subscribe to a singular perspective just because “we’ve always done it that way.” I think it’s time to burn down all the rules, start over, and (finally) embrace equality for all of our students.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. We Should All Be Feminists. Vintage, 2014.


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Remember Walter

I don’t remember the first day I met you. The classroom a sea of brown and black faces, me like milk spilled on the floor. Only noticing when I pulled you from a fight, fists clenched, anger pulsing at your temples. A brawl with a girl, no less, and as a new teacher, you were nothing I was prepared for. Every day, the same baggy blue t-shirt, same greasy jeans, same passive eyes in a perpetual look of disdain. You were a boy in favor of blue and opposed to red (a life and death rivalry). I remember I thought you were a lost cause. Skipping school, picking fights, homework . . . never done, still sixteen in the eighth grade, like a leaf withering from the tree.

Then you surprised me, something in your life set off a chain reaction. You started showing up, started to care. But your world was an impossible trap. In the lunchroom, your whispered words whipped the officer’s pride. When he struck—you fought back. I remember your face smashed against the cop car. I remember your hands shackled behind your body. I remember your tears as fresh scars on rigid flesh. The light in you flicking off like a switch.

—Mary-Celeste Schreuder

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