

A Student's Perspective

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Fictional Characters in Books as Positive Role Models for Adolescent Females

As I flip through the television channels on a quiet Sunday afternoon, I have nothing particular in mind that I would like to watch. I spend no more than a few minutes on each station, yet I am already beginning to notice a pattern in the way women are portrayed.

I see a popular female vocalist dancing provocatively wearing almost nothing on one channel, while on the next, it is a one-joke movie patronizing an overweight girl. Two infomercials follow, both for products that will make women look skinnier and prettier, and therefore “better.” A bit frazzled, I switch from television to the radio. My favorite station is playing an advertisement for a new soap opera that airs on Monday nights. In this week’s episode, the lead female character is caught cheating on her husband, and then proceeds to commit a crime and try to run from the law. Any girl who watches TV or listens to the radio is bombarded not only with negative stereotypes of females, but also with the message that the most important qualities to possess are physical and aesthetic. From where, then, are girls supposed to derive positive role models?

I began asking myself this question two years ago as an eighth grader at Tenafly Middle School in Tenafly, NJ, when I participated in R.O.G.A.T.E., or Resources Offered for Gifted and Talented Education. My hypothesis was that fictional characters in literary works can be positive role models for adolescent females. I knew I wanted to research a topic relating to books, as reading had always been one of my favorite pastimes. And, as a 14-year-old girl on the cusp between childhood and adolescence, I also felt that my research should be aimed at teenaged girls, because after all, that was what I was.

I used two types of primary resources in my research. The first kind was an interview. I conducted two interviews, one with a media specialist at an elementary school in my town, and the other with Dr. Sally Morgan Reis, author of the book *Work Left Undone* (1998) and head of the Neag Center for Gifted and Talented Youth. The second kind of first-hand resource that I used was a survey of girls in grades 6–12 about their reading habits, the types of books they most enjoyed reading, and whether or not they agreed with my hypothesis and why.

I found the results of my survey very surprising. Of all girls surveyed, 66% responded that there had been characters in books that they felt they could use as role models in their lives. One tenth-grade girl wrote, “over the years, fictional characters have shaped my world . . . reading about someone else’s life has made mine different, as it made me feel good about myself.” Another eighth-grade girl identified with Katherine from the novel *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Speare, 1986) because “when Katherine moves to America, she felt like an outsider. I felt the same way when I moved to America from Puerto Rico.” Other characters, like Salamanca in *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994) and Novalee Nation in *Where the Heart Is* (Letts, 1995), were cited as positive role models in readers’ lives. It had not occurred to me that historical characters would be in contention as role models, yet an overwhelm-

ing number of girls mentioned Anne Frank as being an inspiration to them; this shocked and pleased me at the same time. The majority of those surveyed replied that they could relate most to characters that had similar personality traits and experienced similar situations.

I also used many secondary resources, including books, pamphlets, Web sites, and articles in newspapers and magazines. One particularly helpful article that I used was entitled "Using Video Therapy to Address the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children" (Milne & Reis, 2000). This article was the first to teach me about bibliotherapy. *Bibliotherapy* is a term that many professionals use to describe the connection between readers and characters in stories. There are four stages of bibliotherapy: the first is *identification*, where readers see similarities between themselves and characters. Next is *catharsis*, where readers allow emotions and internal conflicts to rise to the surface. The third stage is *insight*, where readers make the connection between the characters and themselves, and finally, *universalization*, where readers understand that their problems are not unique and that they are capable of exploring different and effective methods for coping with them. The concept of bibliotherapy plays very nicely into my hypothesis because, like me, it supports the concept that characters in books are positive role models.

After months of reading, interviewing, surveying, analyzing, and interpreting, I finally reached a conclusion. From the evidence I gathered, I inferred that my hypothesis is valid and truthful. Fictional characters that display good qualities and traits, such as honesty, bravery, creativity, and kindness, can teach the girls who read about them to possess these same qualities in their own lives. These characters also deal with

issues and conflicts that are widespread and common to almost all teenage girls, making them personages to whom girls can easily relate.

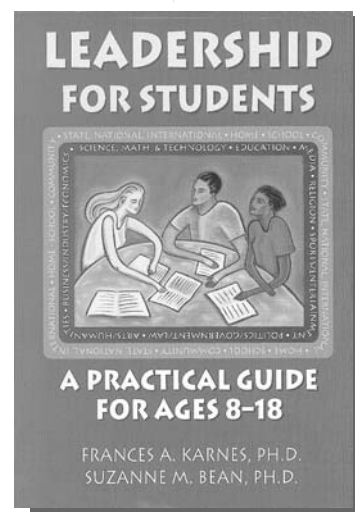
The applications of my research, as devised by myself, are very effective and easy to practice. My findings can pertain to classroom strategies. Teachers need to assign girls to read, either in-class or for summer reading, books that contain positive role models. Parents should do the same in providing their daughters with these same types of books. The most vital application, however, is on a large-scale: there must be a change in media content, and this alteration must be a radical one in order to try to repair some of the damage that has already been done. Those who bring change consist of children's book editors, movie and television producers, and radio announcers and advertisers.

The next time a girl is bored and seeks entertainment on television, in a movie, or on the radio, it would certainly be in her better interests to look no further than her bookshelf; for it is here that she will *truly* find a *true* source of entertainment, in addition to enlightenment, identification, and positive influence. GCT

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