

Reading Ladder: Strong Female Protagonists

Sydney Redigan

Dr. DeBlase

EED 6310

17 October 2013

Rationale

This Reading Ladder is designed for a class of 9th grade girls and has a theme of strong, young, female protagonists. It is intended to provide readers with compelling coming of age stories that feature characters who portray a variety of types of strength and come from different cultural backgrounds. The books in this Reading Ladder also represent multiple genres and offer a vast range of content and sub-themes.

While the theme of strong, young, female protagonists can be appealing to many different readers, I believe it will be particularly effective with 9th graders, as they have just entered high school, a new stage of adolescence. In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, the authors write, "Some psychologists say that the overwhelming job for all teenagers is the establishment of their own identity, separate from that of their parents" (Nilsen, et al. 20). Because of this emphasis on forging identities, reading about compelling and robust young female characters can both provide young women with literary role models and help them feel they are not alone during this period. In "Females Also Come of Age," Alba Quinones Endicott, writing in 1992, criticizes the lack of female protagonists in traditional young adult coming of age stories. She notes, however, a growing trend of books that offer complex and believable stories of young women's lives. She writes:

Fortunately, several authors successfully depict young women in a more realistic and believable light. They create complex, multifaceted, appealing human beings with whose plight all readers, male and female, can identify... These female protagonists experience the pains of separation and alienation from their families and immediate surroundings in the process of carving their own identity. They

face the task of making difficult choices and which will affect their lives and the lives of the people they care about.” (Endicott 42)

The books in this Reading Ladder — all but one published since the time Endicott writes (Philip Pullman’s *The Broken Bridge* was first published in 1990) — continue in this tradition of compelling tales about the challenges young, female characters face as they forge their own identities. Additionally, the protagonists in these books are not only all female, but they are also all teenagers. As Nilsen, et al. note, “A prerequisite to attracting young readers is to write through the eyes of a young person” (Nilsen, et al. 28). Thus, by offering readers coming of age stories told from the perspective of young, female protagonists, this Reading Ladder will undoubtedly appeal to a class of female 9th grade students.

In addition to offering stories told from the perspective of young, female protagonists, the books in this Reading Ladder also portray the different ways in which a person can be strong. The characters in these books exhibit varying levels of physical, mental, emotional, and moral strength. This variety of strengths is important as it shows young readers that heroism and courage do not just manifest in physical feats or in dramatic acts, but can also be portrayed through quiet, everyday efforts.

The books in this Reading Ladder also feature characters who come from different cultures and nations. The books feature a Latina (Mexican) female protagonist, a Haitian-Welsh female protagonist, a German female protagonist, a racially ambiguous female protagonist from Appalachia, and an Arab American (Bedouin) female protagonist. This is important for readers, particularly young readers for two reasons. First, for readers who come from non-dominant cultures — such as the ones represented in these books — reading about characters that share these cultural backgrounds can provide them with identification and a sense of positive

acknowledgement. In “Hispanic Representation in Literature for Children and Young Adults,” Arlene L. Barry notes that the curricula teachers and schools choose to use can have a strong impact on how students from various cultures perceive themselves. She writes, “The knowledge passed on through the curriculum determines which groups are valued or devalued. Valuing one’s ethnicity allows one to value oneself, an important step in success anywhere” (Barry 630). In other words, if students do not see themselves and their cultures represented in school in a positive way, they will not only suffer academically, but personally. The books in this Reading Ladder will allow students from a diverse group of cultures to see that their identities and experiences are valued by both the teacher assigning the reading material and the literary community that has made the publication of the books possible. As Nilsen, et al. note, readers who come from dominant cultures can also find identification with characters from non-dominant cultural groups:

Young readers can identify with characters who straddle two worlds because they have similar experiences in going between the worlds of adulthood and childhood. Motifs that commonly appear in ethnic stories — including loneliness, fear of rejection, generational differences, and troubles fitting into the larger society — are meaningful to teenagers. (Nilsen, et al. 97)

The second reason that multicultural reading material is important is that it allows readers who do not identify with these cultural groups to empathize with and better understand people from these cultures. Nilsen, et al. quote Michael Cart from the introduction to his book *Necessary Noise*: “Kids need to learn empathy. They need to learn how the other can become us’ and one approach ‘is through reading fiction that captures — artfully, authentically, and unsparingly — the circumstances of kids’ whose lives are different” (Nilsen, et al. 129). The

variety of cultures represented in this Reading Ladder allows for readers to both read about characters from their own cultures and to empathize characters from other cultures. Similarly, books that offer multicultural characters can also help readers see that cultural groups are not homogeneous and that, despite some commonalities, all groups are composed of unique individuals. Nilsen, et al. write, “One of the most important concepts that needs to be taught is that there are large differences among people typically identified as a group” (Nilsen, et al. 98). What better way to understand this concept than by reading about complex and fully developed characters from different ethnic groups?

Beyond allowing readers to identify and empathize with characters from different cultures, these books also offer readers an opportunity to see how socio-economic status, location, and time period affect the coming of age experience. Nilsen, et al. write, “Books cannot substitute for real-life experiences, and one or two books, no matter how well written, are not enough to change a teenager’s view of life. Skilled authors, however, can show what is going on in characters’ minds” (Nilsen, et al. 124-5). Even if a book does not speak directly to a reader’s experiences of worldview, it can be enough to show young readers what others are going through so that they can empathize and understand how other young people live.

The books in this Reading Ladder also offer a variety of genres, content and reading levels. The first book (lowest “rung”) is *Chasing the Jaguar* by Michelle Dominique Greene. Martika, the book’s protagonist, discovers on her fifteenth birthday that she is descended from a long line of Mayan psychics. She uses her powers to help find a missing girl while also dealing with typical teen issues, such as her parents’ separation and life as a Mexican American in Los Angeles. This book is part of the magical realism genre and is appropriate for ages 12 and up, making this an imaginative and accessible first rung of the Reading Ladder.

The second book is *The Broken Bridge* by Philip Pullman, a realistic fiction novel. The book's protagonist, 16-year-old Ginny, is an outsider in her hometown in Wales due to being half-Welsh and half-Haitian. She begins to explore her Haitian heritage, learning some difficult truths about both her long-dead Haitian mother and herself. At a similar reading level as *Chasing the Jaguar*, the themes in this book are slightly more mature and dark, making this an appropriate second rung for the Reading Ladder.

The third book is *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, a work of historical fiction. In this book young Liesel is taken to live with a foster family in Nazi Germany, where she learns to read and discovers a passion for books. As Liesel comes of age under the Nazi regime she learns the value of compassion and courage. As Nilsen, et al. note, "Historical novels allow us – and at their best, they force us – to make connections and to realize that despair is as old and as new as hope, and that loyalty and treachery, love and hatred, compassion and cruelty were, and are, inherent in humanity" (Nilsen, et al. 258). This book deals with heavy themes and an historical setting, but is nevertheless relevant and accessible to today's young readers

Dark fantasy *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins is the fourth book in the Reading Ladder. In a dystopian future, Katniss, the book's protagonist, courageously takes her sister's place in a televised fight to the death, where she struggles to maintain her humanity while also staying alive. *The Hunger Games* contains violent and mature content, but the quickly paced storytelling and engaging and sensitive heroine keeps the book engaging and appropriate for young readers.

The last book is *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* by Sophia Al-Maria, which falls under the genre of literary non-fiction and memoir. In this book, Al-Maria describes her experience being raised by her American mother in the American Northwest and her Bedouin father in the Middle

East. She struggles to find her place in both cultures, while also facing more universal teen issues such as sexuality and independence. Not specifically young adult literature, this book has the highest reading level within the Reading Ladder. Despite its classification as adult literature, this book is undoubtedly a coming of age story that is appropriate for young readers. As Nilsen, et al. note, "One aspect of personal experience books that makes them attractive to young readers is that they are by people looking back on experiences they had when they were young" (Nilsen, et al. 302).

Together, the books of this Reading Ladder offer a progressively challenging look at stories of young, female protagonists, written in multiple genres and featuring a variety of settings and time periods. Endicott concludes her article, stating:

In "Growing up Female," Catherine Ann Ecroyd says, "There are also hundreds of young adult novels which suggest that the only way a girl will grow up is through the love of a boy" (1989, 17). These heroines do not fit this stereotype. Their stories appeal because their conflicts are universal, because regardless of time and place, the reader, whether male or female, can identify with their needs and aspirations. Such conflicts are prerequisites for becoming well-adjusted adults. (Endicott 47)

In a similar way, the protagonists of these books come of age by relying upon their own intelligence, perseverance and integrity. Their stories demonstrate the many ways that young women exhibit strength so that young, female readers can both identify with their challenges and find inspiration in their accomplishments. By offering a variety of genres and cultural viewpoints, these books will appeal to many young readers while also featuring a common theme that connects each story.

Works Cited

Barry, Arlene L. "Hispanic Representation in Literature for Children and Young Adults."

Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy 41.8 (1998) : 630-637. Web. 10 October 2013.

Endicott, Alba Quiñones. "Females Also Come of Age." *English Journal* 81.4 (1992) : 42-47.

Web. 10 October 2013.

Nilsen, et al. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 9th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson,

2013. Print.

Author: Michelle Dominiguez Greene

Title: *Chasing the Jaguar*

Reading Level: Ages 11-14

Sophistication Level: Ages 12 – 16

Summary

Set in modern day Los Angeles, *Chasing the Jaguar* features the protagonist Martika Galvez, an intelligent and academically gifted Mexican-American teenager who is dealing with typical teen issues. Around the time of her fifteenth birthday, Martika begins having strange, eerily realistic dreams about a jaguar. She soon learns that the dreams mean she has psychic powers that she has inherited from her father's Mayan ancestors, who were curanderas, female healers or witches. With the help of her great-aunt, Tia Tellin, who is also a curandera, Martika learns about her ancestors, her powers and how to use them for good. Martika is soon able to implement her psychic powers when her mother's wealthy employer, a car dealer who operates in the black market, sells an unusual jaguar statue stolen from a Mayan temple to the wrong buyer, resulting in the kidnapping of his teenage daughter, Jennifer. Martika believes that her dreams are connected to the kidnapping and with the encouragement of Tia Tellin and the help of her friends Lola and Ramon, she sets off to find Jennifer, guided by her dreams.

Critique

Chasing the Jaguar holds many elements of appeal for young readers. First, Martika is a smart and level-headed heroine who, at the beginning of the book, struggles with many of the issues teenagers face, such as her parents' divorce, living in an unsafe neighborhood, and feeling like an outcast among her wealth classmates. However, as Martika learns of her inherited powers, the book turns into an intriguing mystery that contains elements of both realism and magic, due to her psychic abilities. The book is also appealing for its accessible integration of Spanish into the text. Because Martika's cultural heritage holds such prominence in the book, it is logical that she, her family and her friends would speak Spanglish. This adds an authentic feel to the book's language, while still being understandable to non-Spanish speaking readers.

Author: Philip Pullman
Title: *The Broken Bridge*
Reading Level: Ages 11-14
Sophistication Level: Ages 13-16

Summary

At age 16, biracial Ginny Howard feels somewhat like an outsider in her Welsh village. Her Haitian mother died when Ginny was a baby and her only connection to mother is her skin color and a love of painting. Ginny's relationship with her Welsh father has, nevertheless, been strong until Ginny comes home one day realizes her father may have been keeping secrets from her. After some digging, Ginny discovers that she has a white half-brother from her father's first marriage. The brother's mother is dying of cancer, so he comes to live with Ginny and her father. Ginny's world is turned upside down and she becomes unsure of her identity. She begins to recall memories from her childhood that are now much more meaningful and mysterious. As Ginny begins to investigate her past, she calls upon her own courage and resilience to ask difficult, and often painful, questions and seek out the answers. Eventually, Ginny pieces together the various events and tragedies of her childhood and reconciles with her father.

Critique

The Broken Bridge is an appealing book choice for teen readers due to the mysterious and surprising ways in which this coming of age story is told. Because the book focuses on Ginny uncovering secrets about her past, the reader joins her in this journey, unearthing clues and discovering plot twists along with the character. While the character of Ginny represents a very specific cultural background, Welsh-Haitian, her identity crisis and desire to know about where she came from are likely to resonate with young adult readers from all cultures. Young readers are also likely to identify with Ginny's coming of age experience and even admire the courage she exhibits as she loses the innocence of her childhood. Lastly, young readers are likely to enjoy the rich, descriptive language of *The Broken Bridge*, particularly the descriptions of the coast of Wales and Haiti.

Author: Markus Zusak
Title: *The Book Thief*
Reading Level: Ages 12 and up
Sophistication Level: Ages 14 and up

Summary

The Book Thief begins in 1939 and tells the story of Liesel Meminger, a ten-year-old who is being taken to a small town outside of Munich, Germany, to live with foster parents Hans and Rosa. After her brother's sudden death, Liesel begins stealing books. Hans discovers this and teaches Liesel to read and write and soon this becomes a passion for her. Stealing books becomes a passion as well. A year later, Liesel witnesses a Nazi book burning and decides that Hitler is her enemy, a dangerous position to take in Germany during World War II. Even more dangerous, Hans and Rosa hide a young Jewish man, Max, in their home and he and Liesel quickly become close friends. As World War II escalates, a fourteen-year-old Liesel witnesses horror after horror and begins writing her story in a blank journal. One night while Liesel is writing in the basement, the town is bombed and everyone Liesel knows dies. In despair, Liesel drops her book and it is picked up by Death. As the novel closes, it is revealed that Liesel has lived a long and happy life. As Death takes Liesel's soul away from her body, he gives her back her book she had written, called *The Book Thief*.

Critique

While historical fiction may be a difficult genre for young adult readers to get into, *The Book Thief* offers a story so compelling and uniquely told that it will capture the attention of any reader who is able to handle the grim and mature content. Although the book is narrated by Death, the story is viewed through the eyes of young Liesel, who comes of age quickly and views monstrosities that many adults will never see in their lifetime. Her spirit and ability to find joy despite the circumstances keeps the novel inspiring and not completely pessimistic. With Liesel as a sympathetic and relatable character for young adults, *The Book Thief* offers a look into Nazi Germany that is unique, moving and appropriate for teenagers.

Author: Suzanne Collins
Title: *The Hunger Games*
Reading Level: Ages 12 and up
Sophistication Level: Ages 14 and up

Summary

The Hunger Games is set in a post-apocalyptic United States in the nation of Panem. Panem features a wealthy Capitol and twelve surrounding districts, which once went to war against the Capitol. As part of the surrender terms, each district agreed to send one boy and one girl to appear in an annual televised event called The Hunger Games, a fight to the death on live television. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, who lives alone with her mother and younger sister, volunteers to take her sister's place in the competition when she is chosen in the drawing. Coming from a poor, coal-mining region (most likely Appalachia), the rebellious and independent Katniss is an experienced hunter, an advantage in The Hunger Games. In order to gain sponsors and win over the audience, Katniss and her co-tribute Peeta play up a romance between the two of them, creating a complicated situation in which reality is blurred. Ultimately, Katniss and Peeta are both declared winners. After the games have ended, Peeta learns their relationship was an act for the audience and Katniss is unsure of her feelings toward Peeta.

Critique

While at times violent and disturbing, *The Hunger Games* is nevertheless an important and sensitive book that will intrigue young readers and leave them thinking about their own moral compass. Katniss, while being physically tough and heroic, is also a truly well developed character who faces extremely difficult decisions about how to survive while maintaining her humanity. The fantasy and action elements of this book will certainly entertain and hold the imaginations of readers, but the themes of power, politics, class inequality, sacrifice and reality allow *The Hunger Games* to appeal to readers who are interested in gaining a more profound meaning from a book.

Author: Sophia Al-Maria
Title: *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*
Reading Level: Ages 14 and up
Sophistication Level: Ages 15 and up

Summary

As a teen, Sophia Al-Maria is sent her away by her mother from Washington State to Qatar, where her estranged biological father's Bedouin family lives. Sophia's American mother hopes this move will keep Sophia from growing up too fast. Sophia's father, also unsure of what to do with a teenage daughter, leaves her primarily in the care of his female relatives in the Bedouin clan. In Qatar, Sophia feels her independence is again stifled, this time not by an over-protective mother but by the gender norms of her new home. Sophia experiences first love while in Qatar, made especially thrilling because of the gender segregation. Throughout her teen years, she moves back and forth between America and Qatar, feeling constantly in exile. She eventually finds independence when she moves to Cairo to attend university. Living on her own as a single woman in Cairo proves difficult, but Sophia cherishes the freedom of being on her own and the ability to form her own identity.

Critique

Although this memoir is not specifically for young adult readers, its content is more than appropriate for teenagers, as Al-Maria describes her experience growing up in two very different cultures from a young person's perspective. Readers who have experienced a similar biculturalism will undoubtedly be able to identify with Al-Maria and readers who know little about Middle Eastern culture will learn that many of their prejudices and preconceived notions are perhaps not true. For example, Al-Maria mentions that she often feels freer in the gender segregated Bedouin world than in the United States. These types of observations make for a surprising and unique take on the Arab American experience. While this memoir focuses on cultural similarities and differences, it is ultimately a story of a young woman coming of age and forging her own identity, an experience that all young readers can identify with.