Brave, Determined, and Strong: Books for Girls (and Sometimes Boys)

Barbara A. Ward  
Washington State University

Terrell A. Young  
Washington State University

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Brave, Determined, and Strong: Books for Girls (and Sometimes Boys)

Barbara A. Ward, Ph.D. & Terrell A. Young, Ed.D.

Today’s teachers need to choose texts that provide strong role models for young readers, both male and female. When choosing a book for a girl, merely reaching for any old book with female characters isn’t enough. Care should be taken to find books that feature strong female literary role models, allowing girls to explore their own identities, claim their own voices, and gain confidence, particularly during the adolescent years. The expectations of society and peers often prompt girls to assume false identities. In addition, finding and becoming true to oneself is an arduous task that can be made easier through books with excellent female protagonists.

While books that feature female protagonists may be enticing to girls, teachers should take care to choose books with protagonists that aren’t merely window dressing or arm candy on a male character’s arm. They should instead carefully consider books with fully developed female characters who have a sense of humor about themselves. By exploring the different ways girls navigate the world around them, readers can expand their expectations of the females in their lives and erase their own stereotypes about them. The words of reader response theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1938) still ring true: Through books readers may explore their own nature, becoming aware of “potentialities for thought and feeling within himself [or herself], acquire clearer perspective and develop aims and a new sense of direction” (p. 106). This is especially true when it comes to books for girls. For your reading pleasure, here are some of our current favorite books exploring the world from a female perspective. Don’t be surprised if some of your male students enjoy reading them as well!

Grades K-2


Have you ever wondered what happened before the “Little Red Riding Hood” story? This clever book provides that information, relating how the wolf contacted Little Red Riding Hood, the most popular
character in the forest, for help in becoming good. At first Little Red Riding Hood was delighted with the wolf’s progress, but after awhile the wolf’s good behavior begins to seem a bit annoying. Soon she sets him up to be the “Big Bad Wolf.” This clever, colorful book includes pop-ups, pull tabs, removable letters and newspapers, and much more to engage readers in enjoying this hilarious spoof on a beloved fairytale.


A tiny girl lives inside a castle, which is inside a toy museum, which is inside a snow globe. Visitors can see her if they press their faces against the glass. Although the girl wants nothing, she becomes lonely once the museum visitors leave. The acrylic illustrations provide a sense of eerie fantasy and otherworldliness as the mysterious tiny girl enters the dreams of others in a world she can visit only vicariously. Who knows when she might visit one of us?


As time for the spring dance recital draws near, Katie Duck practices her dance steps and poses, confident that a starring role will be hers. Imagine her surprise when dance teacher Mr. Tutu gives her the part of the caterpillar who wriggles across the stage. But Katie makes the best of her part in this colorful picture book, and her caterpillar’s metamorphosis leaves her triumphant on center stage in the end. Young readers and parents will certainly relate to her initial disappointment and palpable joy when her inner butterfly is released.


In this retelling of the familiar Brothers Grimm tale set somewhere in Africa, the stepmother of Hansel and Gretel, portrayed as a woman who could eat much more than her fair share of any meal, decides that the only solution to the family’s empty food stores is to get rid of the children. On two different occasions, their father reluctantly leads them into the forest. The first time they find their way home using
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stones dropped by Hansel, but the second time hunger drives them to a yummy-tasting witch’s house where she imprisons them and plans to have them both for dinner. After Hansel uses a bone to trick the practically blind witch into thinking he remains scrawny and Gretel uses her wits to persuade the witch into the kitchen stove, the two siblings return home to their father’s loving arms. The gorgeous geometric prints against abundant white space add to the specialness and scariness of this version of the story. Readers will feel as though there are all sorts of frightening creatures in the jungle as well as inside the witch’s house.


Lolo, the baby of the family, is used to everyone paying attention to her. But on the day of her sister’s *quinceanera,* the entire family is distracted, leaving Lolo to her own devices. When, thanks to Lolo’s inattention, the family dog gets loose and steals her sister’s sash, it’s up to her fast thinking and speedy feet to save the day. The acrylic and watercolor illustrations of this lovely picture book capture the family members’ individual personalities vividly, and the inclusion of a dictionary of Spanish terms sprinkled throughout the story add to its delight.


Everyone just loves Nancy, and in the latest installment of her adventures, she takes her unique personality and fancy vocabulary out of the house and into the great outdoors. Nancy and her friend Bree explore wildflowers, trees, and leaves in this continuation of the popular *Fancy Nancy* series. Readers will want to try out the recipes for pine cone bird feeders and extra-fancy lemonade, and the book just may prompt some young couch potato to adventure outside her front door.

Lady Winter covers Sister Spring with a magical white blanket that keeps the world icy and cold. After all, if Spring never wakes up, it will always remain Winter, which she loves. Longing for a warmer season, Robin calls on all his forest friends to awaken Spring, but no one is successful. Finally, Robin bravely flies to Mother Sun for help. Although her intervention awakens Spring, Robin pays a price, with his tummy forever more changed to a brighter color. The words and the paintings in this picture book are memorable, and readers will be grateful for Robin’s bravery.


Disappointed over the contents of her supper, a young girl makes her annoyance known to her mother in this wordless picture book. When her mother sends her to her room, she turns to her teddy bear for solace. Her stuffed animal friend takes her on an overnight adventure into the forest, but both end up safe in their own beds the next morning. The linoleum block artwork, combined with the artist’s painstaking brushstrokes, make this a memorable picture book, one that prompts more than a second look. There is unexpected depth to the images that allows them to carry the plot of the story and reveal emotions perfectly. Young readers will surely relate to the protagonist’s disappointment over what has been served for dinner as well as her short-lived anger.

**Grades 3-5**


Sometimes it is difficult to fit in and to live up to the expectations of others. Even fairies such as Elly, who attends the Mossy Blossom Academy for Young Fairies, worry about fitting in. Elly hates the itchy tutus and flowered wreaths around her head that she is expected to wear. Her wand is rarely charged—she hates being a
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fairy. She would much rather wear jeans and ride her cool skateboard. Her parents have threatened her with no fairy license if she is not successful at her current school since she has been expelled from two fairy academies (it was an accident that she turned her teacher purple!). Readers will enjoy the well developed characters and Elly’s escapades with her family and her human friend in this fantastic adventure.


When the Wild—where fairy tales and fairy tale characters live—unexpectedly expels Julie Marchen’s father Prince Charming, it is up to the 12-year-old daughter of Rapunzel to bring him up to speed about modern technology. But before she can complete her tutorial, things go awry with Zel being turned into a pumpkin, and Sleeping Beauty kidnapped. What is a prince or a princess to do? Julie and her dad set off on a cross-country fairy tale road trip with stops at Graceland, the Grand Canyon, and Disneyland along the way. This sequel to the delectable and highly original Into the Wild (2007) is quite a romp, filled with witty ruminations from the fairy tale characters and with the realization that while the Wild is almost unstoppable, it’s also necessary. After all, we all need a bit of magic in our lives. Durst’s skillful blending of reality and fantasy will leave readers wanting more.


Nine-year-old Piper and her two sisters have many adventures while their navy-man father is at sea. When her mother falls downstairs and breaks her leg, the three girls each write an e-mail message to their father explaining the event. The e-mails offer different perspectives about who caused the accident. As the Gypsy Club hosts its first pet show, Piper is determined that her dog Bruna will be the winner. Who would have imagined that her friend’s guinea pig could dance the tango? Piper Reed fans will love this title and want to watch for the forthcoming Piper Reed Gets a Job.

This moving tribute to the outspoken First Lady combines pitch-perfect prose and beautiful illustrations to introduce a new generation of readers to Eleanor, a woman who was decidedly not silent. But it wasn’t always so. Eleanor grew up quiet and lonely among a family of achievers. Despite her privileged upbringing, Eleanor somehow related with the underdogs and those whose lives were not as easy as hers had been. Unlike other women in her socio-economic class, she wasted little time on frivolity, choosing to use her position of influence to draw attention to poverty and civil rights, issues that mattered to her.


With powerful, quiet lines, this picture book takes readers back to the growing up days of Coretta Scott as she walked to school, determined to follow her own dream while also noting the unfairness of laws in those days. There is a hymn-like quality about the prose that almost evokes a call-and-response to the text. Nelson’s brushstrokes lovingly evoke the essence of this grande dame of the Civil Rights movement and capture her elegance, grace, and strength amid a tumultuous time. The cover itself is gasp-worthy, with Coretta’s elegant visage filling the entire front cover, her hair spreading gently but insistently across the back.

**Grades 6-8**


Thirteen-year-old Iman Bright has been taking dance lessons at The Ailey School in New York since she was four. This photo essay with close-up shots of her elegant poses, stretches, and moves highlights the hard work, struggle, and the rewards of this incredibly self-
disciplined young woman. The text follows her as she attends classes and balances her packed schedule, including Saturday violin lessons. Readers will draw inspiration from her dedication to her craft while also enjoying time with friends. Whether she chooses dance as a career, Iman has clearly used it to build her self-confidence.

Harris, Lewis. (2009). *A taste for red.*

Sixth grader Svetlana Grimm is certain that she is a vampire, and she knows the signs. She can only stomach red foods, and she must sleep under her bed because of her sensitivity to light and noise. When she realizes that she and her science teacher have quite a lot in common, she mistakenly thinks she has found a mentor into the vampire world until her odd new neighbor disillusioned her. This is a delicious, quirky story destined to make its rounds rapidly through the middle grades and possibly prompt a surge in the consumption of all foods that are colored red.


Her courage was tested twice as a teenager in the battle for civil rights in Montgomery, and each time Claudette passed that test with flying colors. This account of a teen who decided she was tired of moving to the back of the bus, and that the time had come to fight for civil rights is based on several interviews the author conducted with Claudette, who now lives in New York. Readers will draw inspiration from her courage and be dismayed at the treatment she received from classmates and neighbors afterward, becoming barely a footnote in the nation’s history.


The fight for our nation’s independence provides the perfect backdrop for an exploration of freedom and fairness for slaves and women. The story of Deborah Sampson, an indentured servant who wanted more from life than what society considered appropriate in 1775, is told from her eyes in this engaging piece of historical fiction filled with details about a woman who wanted to serve her country. Particularly striking are the author’s description of how Deborah, who called herself Robert Shurtleff in order to serve her country, practiced the voice, gait, and mannerisms of a man.
Lin, Grace. (2009). Where the mountain meets the moon.

Minli and her parents work long and hard every day, yet have little to show for their efforts or even little rice to eat. While her mother complains about their poor life, her father shares a wealth of stories with Minli. These enchanting folk stories prompt her to set out on a quest to meet the Old Man in the Moon to ask him to change her family’s fortune. On her epic quest, Minli is assisted by many, including a dragon and a talking goldfish. Readers will be captivated by both the stories and the rich illustrations in this novel.


Lina is known for being a “sock enthusiast,” an athlete, and a great science student. Her life seems to change drastically after her mother dies as her father retreats into books, her best friend seems more interested in her boyfriend than their friendship, and her recently divorced neighbor becomes obsessed with making cascarones (hollowed eggshells filled with confetti). As Lina learns to accept the consequences for some of her poor choices, readers will enjoy the satisfying ending.


Two seventh grades, Ivy June and Catherine, have been selected as partners in an exchange program for Kentucky girls. First, Ivy June spends a week in Lexington with Catherine and her family and attends school there. Then, Catherine goes to the mountains to do the same with Ivy June and her family. Though the girls have very different lives, they find they have much in common. They are drawn even closer together as they rely on their faith and hope to deal with untimely events.


On the edge of her eleventh birthday, Lucky is about to be honored at a party with all the quirky citizens of Hard Pan in attendance. Lucky’s familiar world
grows a bit unfamiliar with the arrival of several visiting geologists and Paloma, a girl who might become her new friend. Much of the plot revolves around the intricacies of friendship, and the breaks for Lucky aren’t always so lucky. In this sequel to the Newbery-award winning *The Higher Power of Lucky* (2006), readers will be reacquainted with Lucky and her extended family, and yes, the word “scrotum” appears in the book. The sequel is satisfying, and the characters continue to grow in honest and appealing ways.


The bond between a mother and a daughter lasts long after death separates the two although time may make the memories of their time together less sharp. In 31 evocative poems, the author explores the essential nature of love and loss and makes the emptiness palpable when the ties that bind are severed. Accompanied by the author’s own folk-art illustrations, the text, while leavened with precious memories, hope, and slow healing, also stings, reminding the reader of the preciousness of time and relationships.

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**Grades 9-12**


Lia and Cassie were friends, sharing secrets, but at some point their lives took different paths. As the novel opens, Cassie has died, having attempted to call Lia 33 times while Lia ignores her calls. Despite their estrangement, Lia may not be far behind Cassie since she hides what she eats and, worse, what she doesn’t eat. Fresh out of a treatment center for eating disorders, Lia keeps a desperate accounting of every morsel eaten, every calorie consumed, and her world is a place where thinner is always better, and less is always more. While
this grim book lacks the spontaneous humor of Anderson’s singular *Speak* (1999),
it brilliantly depicts life in the not-so-fat lane, and is populated by well-meaning but
clueless adults and a protagonist who even edits her own thoughts as harshly as she
restricts her own consumption of food.

New York: Simon & Schuster. 298 pages, $15.99,

Life is going well for eighteen-year-old Indigo
Skye, and then it seems to get even better. Impressed
with her genuineness, a wealthy diner leaves a $2.5 mil-
lion tip at the restaurant where she works the morning
shift. Although Indigo should have taken a clue from
the diner’s own realization that enormous wealth hasn’t
brought him happiness, despite her best intentions, she
finds herself sucked into a world of conspicuous con-
sumption, buying the latest products simply because
they’re new, and growing increasingly mistrustful of those around her, who all seem
to want whatever her money can buy. Confused, Indigo leaves home only to find
that there is a whole culture of folks who want more, more, more, and that even
the musician she has idolized is nothing like she dreamed. In a world where image
is everything, Indigo becomes disoriented and confused. Readers will appreciate
Indigo’s journey back to serenity and ponder their own need to have the latest
name-brand products.


With one blue and one green eye, Katsa is different from the other girls, but
that’s not her only unique characteristic. Her unusual eyes let anyone who looks
at her know that she has been blessed with a grace — in her case, the ability to
fight and kill efficiently. Although she is talented, Katsa resents being used as the
king’s henchwoman and secretly involves herself in a rebel effort against the man
who pays her wages. When she meets equally talented but gentle Po, a fledgling
romance blossoms in this terrific tale of a woman who pushes herself to the end of
her strength and finds there’s even more depth to herself than she ever imagined.
Readers will love the fantasy elements of the story, especially the idea of a ruler with
the ability to persuade everyone who hears him, even when he lies.
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When her little sister wins the lottery to represent her section of the country in the Hunger Games, Katniss volunteers to take her place in a game with only one winner — the one survivor. To win, she knows that she will need intelligence, craftiness, and single-mindedness. Can she really rely on anyone else? The male portion of her team, Peeta, is a likeable but unlikely participant as well, and he and Katniss undergo grooming sessions and are paraded about in elaborate costumes in an attempt to gain support for the team and encourage a larger viewing audience for the Games. On the way to her unexpected victory, the cynical and mistrustful Katniss begins to change, questioning whether her survival will be worth all that it costs. Readers will root for Katniss and Peeta and be as troubled by her moral dilemma as she is. Due out in September, the second title, *Catching Fire,* will resolve some of the questions left unanswered by this book.


Fifteen-year-old Nina Khan finds herself plagued by three concerns during her junior year: the legacy of success her big sister left behind, body hair, and a crush on a guy who seems bewitched by her high school nemesis. Although Nina loves her family and its traditions, she abhors being the only South Asian Muslim in her school, and longs to find a way to be faithful to her family’s dictates while embracing a new culture. She doesn’t want to be exotic—in a bad way. Readers will laugh at Nina’s description of the love lives and misadventures of her best pals Helena and Bridget, and groan at her own attempts at normalcy in a novel that delivers a powerful message about living up to the expectations of others while trying to be true to oneself.
Williams, Carol Lynch. (2009). *The chosen one*  
New York: St. Martin’s Griffin. 224 pages, $16.95,  

In April 2008, millions of Americans watched as Child Protection Services removed more than 400 children from a polygamous compound in Texas. Among those removed were many young girls who had been “plural wives” of older men. No doubt many wondered what would have happened to young girls who refused “the call” to marry old men. The novel tells such a story, describing the experiences Kyra, a 13-year-old who resists being forced to marry her father’s 60-year-old brother. Making the story even more complex, Kyra hides two secrets: her interest in one of the boys in the community and her visits to check out books from the book mobile. High school students will find this book difficult to put down!

References

About the Authors:
Barbara A. Ward and Terrell A. Young are on the faculty at Washington State University. Ward serves on the ALA Amelia Bloomer Award Committee.