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Renita Schmidt
University of Iowa

Amanda Thein
University of Iowa

Kathryn F. Whitmore
University of Louisville

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Reading and Critiquing: An Analysis of Talk about Strong Books for Girls

Renita Schmidt, Amanda Thein, and Kathryn F. Whitmore

This research project was developed in response to the untimely death of Jennifer Wilson. Jennifer, like the three of us, was a literacy professor who cared deeply about issues of critical literacy and hoped to empower students through their reading practices. As women and readers, we know literature affects lives. We were reminded through this awful event that there is still a great deal of work to be done in learning how literature can help girls become strong, empowered women.

Together, we set out to construct a research project that we hoped would answer key questions that cut across our areas of expertise in early childhood, elementary, and secondary reading of literature. Our project was guided by a series of questions: What books with female protagonists should girls read to be strong girls? What evaluation criteria should be used to make book choices for girls? How do intermediate-grade teachers talk about strong books for girls? How do intermediate-grade girls respond to literature featuring strong female protagonists in the context of an after-school book club? Answering these questions involved collecting data from a range of sources—scholars, authors, teachers, and—of course—young girls. However, in this paper we want to highlight the importance of our first data sources—our critical conversations with each other about our own responses to current children’s literature with female protagonists and our talk with other experts about feminism, writing, teaching, and leadership. These conversations, while originally intended primarily to help us select books for our teacher participants to consider, ultimately served a much more important purpose. They illuminated for us the complexity of the questions we were setting out to answer as well as many of the challenges we would face across conversations with our data sources in trying to articulate and define what a strong girl looks like in literature and in life.

Theoretical Frame

We view reading as a social practice (Comber, 2001) that situates transactions of readers (Rosenblatt, 1978) within various critical theories (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Hunt (2003) reminds us that texts are always ideological and influential in some way for readers, so as we prepared to introduce ourselves, teachers, and girls to strong female protagonists and their stories, we read feminist scholarly pieces and talked with feminist experts in the field.

Heine et al. (1999) offered a provocative starting point. We were compelled to update their representation of gender as having a clear binary between *male* and *female* stereotypes and desirable qualities. Reading this study today, we feel the need to complicate ideas about strong female characters in books for children to encompass the lives of girls living in the 21st century. For example, when we discussed strong female characters in books we read as children, Amanda shared her fondness for the Wicked Witch of the West. This helped us realize that although strong women are not always women we want to emulate, we might learn valuable information from them. As scholars who are feminists, it is not our intent in this article to create a positivistic list of characteristics that define strong girls or strong female characters in books. Rather, we want to reveal ways to look closely at how strong female characters behave in books and consider how those ways might help girls in real life.

Definitions of feminism typically include equality for all individuals regardless of gender, race, class, sexuality, or religion. In defining the feminist children’s novel, Trites (1997) draws particularly on strength in human character. She discusses the evolution of resourcefulness in strong female characters and how the feminist movement encouraged changes in the ways characters behaved: “Protagonists in novels influenced by feminism . . . have slowly evolved an ability to think about their place in the community without

becoming so community-oriented that they become self-effacing. The feminist protagonist cares about other people but she cares about herself, too” (p. ix).

On the other hand, Hicks (2004) challenges us to consider ways in which the language of literary texts can offer new voices and experiences to girls. Hicks’s work with fourth-grade girls pushes the boundaries of reading instruction toward a social and critical narrative that privileges setting and sociocultural parameters. In our study, too, context matters and so does gender.

Research demonstrates that boys and girls read for different purposes and through different practices. Boys tend to read widely across genres for utilitarian purposes, while girls often read for social purposes (Simpson, 1996). Likewise, boys often read through academic practices valued in schools, while girls read for personal purposes, conceiving of characters as real people (Greer, 2004). Girls’ reading practices are powerful in their lives outside of schools, helping them acquire agency and negotiate their identities (Finders, 1997), yet schools rarely harness this power to help girls succeed academically, in part because female protagonists are underrepresented in children’s literature (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011), and in part because teachers often choose books that cater to male students (Cherland, 1994). Moreover, girls often disengage with texts taught in schools and begin to lag behind boys in their scores on standardized measures of reading beginning in the intermediate grades (Hartman, 2006). This research literature indicates that reflection on the needs of female students may lead to better teacher choices for texts that will encourage greater academic achievement and self-efficacy for girls.

Strong Girls in Recent Children’s Literature

We read and discussed a variety of new texts for children to define strong girls in life and in books. We limited our search for children’s literature to texts published within the last decade. We studied a variety of lists such as the Amelia Bloomer Project, which offers feminist books for children from birth to age 18, and lists offered by the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and the American Library Association. The books selected for our beginning reading were *Mockingbird* (Erskine, 2009), *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), *The Higher Power of Lucky* (Patron, 2006), *Ninth Ward* (Rhodes,

2010), and *Night Flight* (Burleigh, 2011). The themes that emerged in our content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) will be layered over the themes that emerged in our discussions with scholars and in our own talk about the literature.

In *Mockingbird*, we meet ten-year-old Caitlin, diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome at a young age. Besides the social struggles often associated with Asperger’s Syndrome, Caitlin deals with her brother Devon’s death and her father’s grief. Caitlin’s growth through these struggles helps readers realize she is not only struggling with her own grief but also helping her father deal with his.

Like Caitlin, the protagonist in *The Higher Power of Lucky* deals with several struggles—the loss of her mother and her father’s absence. The financial support he provides for Lucky and her guardian (her father’s ex-wife) is not sufficient, and she feels abandoned by him. This story is Lucky’s quest to find her Higher Power in the desert community of Hard Pan, California. Humor and delicate writing allow readers to follow Lucky’s hope for love and understanding amidst the daily life of a typical, but extraordinary, ten-year-old.

The exquisite poetic novel *Inside Out & Back Again* tells the story of Hà and her family as they are forced to leave Saigon at the close of the Vietnam War. Based on the author’s own escape from Vietnam, the story introduces us to two strong female characters: Hà and her mother. We feel Mother’s worry and sense of loss for her husband who never returned from a Navy mission. We feel the stubborn strength of Hà, who at times resists cultural and gender traditions. The family’s struggle with fear, hunger, and thirst during their escape, and racism once they land in the United States, provides many opportunities for deep discussions about prejudice and racism.

Ninth Ward describes twelve-year-old Lanesha and her adopted midwife-grandmother and how they deal with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Even though Lanesha’s family disowns her because they believe the caul covering her face at birth is a sign of bad luck, she realizes that she is strong and capable enough to face many challenges during the Katrina disaster.

And, finally, *Night Flight*, a nonfiction picture book, uses free verse poetry to describe Amelia Earhart’s solo flight across the Atlantic. The end pages and back matter offer strong factual information to support the poetic text and vibrant images throughout the book. Burleigh offers readers unique perspectives by picturing Amelia at different points during the flight. We not only experience her joy, but also

her concern and worry through Burleigh's effective use of gaze, line, and color.

Our Reading and Critique Begins

All of us read extensively as children, and we believe books helped shape the strong women we are today. As we considered female protagonists we admired as child readers, common names came to mind: Pippi Longstocking, Nancy Drew, Caddie Woodlawn, and even Clara Barton. When considering what made them admirable to us, we used descriptors like "independent," "smart," and "daring," but we also realized that oftentimes the strong girls we admired as children were not allowed to follow the same paths as their male counterparts. Today we might not admire some of those characters as strong women. Nita remembered wondering why Clara Barton was a nurse and not a doctor, and why it was considered unusual and unladylike for Caddie Woodlawn to pull pranks, while it was not unusual for her brothers.

Before we explain our findings, we want to provide some important contextual information about characteristics of this study. The data we focus on in this paper are from our own critical conversations about literature with strong female characters and content analysis of those books. We talked for hours about books that were new to us. In Jennifer Wilson's (2004) words, "Critical talk is longer stretches of talk in which students leave the text to articulate, reflect on, and/or inquire into personal, communal, or societal beliefs; these discussions may shed light on a belief or provide a new lens in which to view a belief" (p. 94). Our primary goal is to privilege these conversations in a way that is rarely done by scholars and teachers in order to highlight the power of reading, talking, and critiquing.

For example, our critical conversations led us to moments of productive discomfort that we worked through as we considered female protagonists in current literature. In *Mockingbird*, Erskine depicts Caitlin as argumentative, and yet logical, by using her inner voice to explain specific reasons for her actions. We wrestled with Erskine's depiction of Caitlin's struggles with Asperger's Syndrome, coming to greater consensus through our conversations:

Amanda: One thing I didn't like about Caitlin was her internal dialogue. It didn't seem authentic. I kind of felt like she made too much progress.

Nita: Don't you think that was the author's way of

teaching us about Asperger's? She's trying to privilege her. She doesn't want to denigrate her. Is she overdoing this in the book purposely or didactically to help children understand the syndrome? And, is that an assumption she has about children, that she thinks child readers need more explicit explanations?

These kinds of disagreements were productive and led us to complicate our own thinking. They led us to questions like, Why is the main character a girl and not a boy? How does gender shape the character? What will girls learn from this character? What makes a book a good choice for girls? And is the character a strong girl?

Next, we present questions and themes that emerged in our critical talk and readings of the texts. These questions and themes represent our current ideas about strong girls in books and inform our ongoing research. Although the themes spanned all books, we offer selected representations for each one.

Strong Girls Are Not Monolithic but Stay True to Themselves

Central in our conversations was a fear of pigeonholing strong girls into the binary characteristics that suggest girls should be more like boys. We knew strong girls can be stalwart *and* emotional, tough *and* gentle. Moreover, we wanted to know what makes a female protagonist strong and what we can learn from these characters. When we interviewed our colleague and feminist scholar, Rachel Williams, she said, "Girls are not monolithic, and so there are so many versions of what girls are" (personal communication, 2012).

The books we selected depict diverse representations of girl characters. Caitlin, in *Mockingbird*, has a strong inner voice that allows readers to see beyond her struggle with Asperger's Syndrome. Even though Hà, the main character in *Inside Out & Back Again*, is only ten, she has experienced turmoil in a war torn country, immigration to a new land, and racism and prejudice as she tries to fit into her new American school and neighborhood. Her mother, as a secondary character, offers a strong female adult version of who Hà may become. In *Night Flight*, Amelia defies so many stereotypes held about women in the 1920s and 1930s when she flies her red Vega across the Atlantic. Reading books like these showed us how varied strong girls can be. These books would help other readers think of strong girls in broad and nuanced terms.

Strong Girls Are Flawed Like Real Girls

Investigating the books, we found that strong girl characters need to be as much like real girls as possible, and that not all strong female characters are good role models. Struggles in life are an important aspect in the books we read. From “willing to face adversity” to “able to defy gender roles and stereotypes,” our discussions identified the importance of seeing girls struggle in positive and agentive ways.

Patron (2006) describes Lucky as a girl who always has her “survival backpack” filled with specific materials for saving bug specimens for her growing collection. Also included in the backpack, however, is mineral oil that Lucky uses to make her eyebrows glisten. Lucky believes she is the same shade as the colors of the desert, and the mineral oil will, perhaps, make her stand out to her best friend Lincoln. Sexual interest between Lucky and Lincoln is not a major element in the story, but Patron alludes to romantic interest in gentle ways not unlike how preadolescent children think about one another in the late elementary school years.

Lucky also worries about her relationship with her guardian Bridgette, most likely because her father is not there to support her. Lucky and Bridgette’s struggle to make ends meet provides opportunities for readers to consider poverty, friendship, love, and differences within family structures. These kinds of struggles make Lucky resonate to readers as a real girl.

Strong Girls Have Embodied Complex Femininity

In the books we read, embodiment and physicality help us understand the complexities of femininity that strong girls exhibit. For example, in *Night Flight*, Burleigh’s illustrations offer a rich, embodied depiction of Amelia Earhart as someone who defies limits of gender stereotypes and stays true to herself. Amelia’s sense of self, her confidence, and her recognition of her place in history are apparent in her direct gaze and the alert look on her face in the opening pages. The illustrations, poetic text, and factual information throughout the book all work synergistically to complicate a reader’s understanding of Amelia Earhart’s life as a strong woman.

Since *Night Flight* is a picture book, we began this discussion by reading the book aloud and discussing the words and pictures together. In the snippets of talk below, we question Amelia’s actions, wonder about her words, marvel at the author’s craft, and feminize her appearance. Nita opened the book and began reading.

Amanda: She looks like a boy.

Kathy: I love her haircut.

Amanda: She might be scared, but she’s brave.

Kathy: And that plane is tiny. And she’s the only one in there.

Nita: And it’s night.

Kathy: Why in the heck did she do that?

...

Amanda: She’s interestingly embodied here too, lots of great facial expressions.

Kathy: And, she has a very feminine face with bright blue eyes.

Amanda: She doesn’t look like she’s wearing makeup and she’s wearing these sort of manly looking clothes.

...

Amanda: She doesn’t cry and she’s not jumping up and down at the end of this book.

Nita: She’s so simple at the end, too! She says, “Hi. Hi, I’ve just come from America.”

Amanda: And, she doesn’t say, “Sorry, I’m in your field!”

Nita: And she doesn’t say, “I just flew all by myself and I just landed and I’m the first woman to do this!”

Reading *Night Flight* aloud together and discussing the embodied depiction of Amelia opened our thinking to more nuanced interpretations of complicated issues surrounding feminism and the struggles women endured as they sought equality. We enjoyed talking about Amelia’s femininity, wondered why she did not check weather patterns before her flight, and thought it was incredulous that she flew at night. Our discussion transcripts identify misunderstandings and confusions we sometimes were able to work through and clarify, but others we never answered adequately. We discussed aspects of being women, but also important aspects of teaching books like this to children—examples of authors’ craft, historical information that is relevant to the time, and ultimately, how Amelia became a humble, competent woman who flew the Atlantic alone.

Strong Girls Act with Agency

Like Amelia, other female protagonists in our collection exhibited acts of agency within their own unique circumstances, and we noticed that some acts of agency were subversive and even defiant. In *Ninth Ward*, Lanisha stubbornly remains in her home during Hurricane Katrina. Knowing she is supposed to evacuate the area, Lanisha and TaShon stay too long, eventually ending up in danger on the roof. While we believe defying authority is often wrong, there are times when disobeying authority is complicated by contexts. Books like *Ninth Ward* provide opportunities to talk about what it means to act with agency within our social and cultural circumstances.

In another example, we admired the strength of Hà's mother in *Inside Out & Back Again*. As mothers ourselves, we found her belief in the importance of keeping her children busy with work and intense English study to be somewhat predictable, but were surprised to see Hà's mother write the word *Christian* on her application to obtain sponsorship to America so that she might receive it more quickly. As we discussed this section of the book, Amanda suddenly declared, "Do strong girls have to bend ideals and be subversive in order to be strong? Many times being subversive is something only YOU know about!"

Private acts of subversion like this one are not uncommon among the strong females in these books. In the opening scenes of *Inside Out & Back Again*, Mother reminds Hà that, according to Vietnamese cultural traditions, good luck will only come to their family if the oldest male in the household touches the floor first on New Year's Day; Hà defies her mother by privately tapping her toe on the floor before anyone else has awoken. In Hà's words, "I hate being told I can't do something because I'm a girl" (p. 214). She is empowered by subverting cultural and gender norms and touching the floor first that morning, even if her act remains private.

In Conclusion: The Importance of Critical Talk

Teacher educators and teachers will benefit from reading together and participating in critical conversations about books (Schmidt, Armstrong, & Everett, 2007; Schmidt, 2011; Wilson, 2004). Opportunities for reading and discussing real books and real-life issues like the ones we discuss in this study about strong girls are often lost in a world where teachers are asked to use scripted texts for reading instruc-

tion. Each of the books we read in this study prompted critical conversations about real life issues—from a poetic nonfiction picture book about Amelia Earhart to a piece of historical fiction set in Vietnam and Alabama in the 1970s.

Many of our discussions ended by considering how we would talk about these books with children. Pictures, place maps, and other tangible artifacts can increase interest and understanding when settings are different from readers' experiences. Even as well-educated women, we wondered about many things within these stories.

The strong girls in these texts made us laugh, cry, think hard, and reconsider our own ideas about what it means to be a strong woman in the 21st century. Caitlin, Hà and her mother, Lucky, Amelia, and Lanisha provide a broad look at how strong girls and women behave. As we talked about their flaws, physicality, subversive acts, and agency as characters, we realized that strong female book characters help us to become stronger women in real life. Each of these characters makes mistakes, as all humans do.

Rather than with a checklist of characteristics that identify strong female protagonists, our critical conversations about books ended with a set of questions that will guide our future book selections as we prepare for literature discussions about strong girls:

- In what ways might the character offer girls moments of productive discomfort related to status quo performances of gender in their communities?
- To what extent does the character stay true to herself, and how does she accomplish that?
- In what ways might the character offer a useful challenge to normative ideas about physical, emotional, and mental perfection? Is she usefully "flawed"? Does she make authentic "mistakes"?
- What kinds of agency does the character have within her own social, cultural, and historical constraints? Does she grow or make changes to the extent possible in her world?
- What unique perspectives on being a girl or a woman might the character offer girls (as readers and as females) to think about and build upon in their own lives?

We learned that we could not and would not want to harness what it means to be a strong girl character by way of a tidy definition or checklist. Rather, our project has illuminated the nuance and complexity of strong girls, and

the tools we use to select strong books for girls must be equally nuanced and open-ended. We hope these questions help others find strong book characters to share with girls in their communities. ●

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Renita Schmidt is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Iowa. She may be reached at renita-schmidt@uiowa.edu.

Amanda Thein is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Iowa. She may be reached at amanda-haertling-thein@uiowa.edu.

Kathryn F. Whitmore is Ashland/Nystrand Chair of Early Childhood and director of the Early Childhood Research Center at the University of Louisville. She may be reached at kathryn.whitmore@louisville.edu.