Report

Young Adult Book Clubs

Feminism Online

Allie Shier

Most young females, particularly in Western contexts, are all too familiar with the traditional structure of the love story: the female protagonist embarks on a journey that ultimately leads her to fulfil her romantic goal of uniting with the male object of her desire. Throughout the history of Western society and beyond, this discourse has been prevalent in many mass media outlets, pervading the content of movies, television, and novels aimed at entertaining young adult females. In this classic narrative, women are presented as being dependent on males for their personal happiness. Whether this narrative is explicitly presented or camouflaged by an intricate storyline involving a seemingly strong and independent female character, this ubiquitous depiction of women in the mainstream media cannot be ignored.

Accompanying these images of dependent and objectified women are feminist images and movements in the media. These images have persisted since the late 1800s, but have historically remained secondary to the standard normative gender presentations that prevail in the mainstream media. With recent technological advances and the development of the Internet, these alternative sites with their feminist viewpoints have become more accessible and increasingly popular amongst young female consumers. The growth in numbers of the online community has allowed young women to unite and engage in critical discourse even as they are bombarded with images of passive, sexualized, and objectified females. One promising forum for contesting these media images is the online feminist book club for young adults. These book clubs are still emerging and expanding as a forum in which young adult females can discuss novels with feminist protagonists and themes, as well as problematize the depiction of females in mainstream novels. Their growing presence online illustrates the power of technology to

provide an impetus for critical discussion, community formation, and broader social change.

The reading group is not a new concept, although its modern features differ hugely from the way in which it was conceived. While reading groups were originally reserved for literate, elite, and upper-class women, they are now composed of individuals from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. This increase in inclusivity has been aided in part by the presence of book clubs online. The plethora and variety of online book clubs cater to individuals with different interests, including but not limited to romance, food and drink, science fiction, graphic novels, and politics.

My Google search of “young adult online feminist book club” generated 2,940,000 results. This large number serves to demonstrate that young feminists who seek to congregate with other like-minded young women are increasingly recognizing the benefits of doing so online: these web pages allow individuals to delve further into literature with feminist themes; to engage in critical discourse with others; and to consider which aspects of the material support feminist views and which are problematic.

One of the first results that appears in this Google search is the *B-Word Worldwide*¹ website. *B-Word Worldwide*, also known as *Bitch Media*, is a non-profit feminist organization that promotes itself online and aims to connect with other e-literate females to “provide and encourage an engaged, thoughtful feminist response to mainstream media and popular culture.” Their website has a feminist young adult book club blog, called *Bitch YA Book Club*. Each of the novels discussed in the *Bitch YA Book Club* involves female protagonists who challenge the dominant hegemonic normative gender codes that continue to flourish in contemporary Western society. In order to choose the books that are read and discussed each month, the contributors encourage the input of anyone who visits the website and expresses interest in the club. Although anyone is able to discuss the books that are chosen, there are five main contributors who lead these discussions each month. These contributors are all American women with a background in writing, and they are all interested in writing feminist material. These panel members are united in their shared interest in reading novels that challenge patriarchy and heteronormativity.

The *Bitch YA Book Club* blog is structured in a way that engages the reader and encourages critical discussion, reflection, and debate about feminist young adult literature. Each month, the contributors begin by providing readers with a brief description of the novel chosen, followed by a Q&A section. This blog is interactive and inclusive, encouraging anyone who is interested to read the feminist young adult literature and to participate in critical discussion. While the book club is aimed at young adults, the online nature of the club makes it difficult to discern the age of the participants. Beneath its posts, the blog has a section for comments and discussions. This discussion section is an integral component of *Bitch Media's* online young adult feminist book club since it allows readers to share their opinions, connect with other like-minded individuals, recommend other novels in the genre, and connect the novel being discussed to broader common themes in young adult literature for girls. Since most adolescents are e-literate in contemporary Western society, this book club is a powerful way of encouraging them to read and actively engage in feminist material rather than passively consuming the patriarchal messages disseminated by the mass media.

In July 2011, the *Bitch YA Book Club* focused on Malindo Lo's (2009) young adult fantasy lesbian novel, *Ash*.² This novel is a modern spin on the classic fairytale *Cinderella*. The protagonist, Ash, dreams of escaping her abusive stepmother and going to fairyland, but she falls in love with the King's Huntress. The panel members discussed and critiqued the content of the book and its issues: sex, romance, friendship, and gender. This book was chosen and well-received by panel members because, as one of them, Jennie, proclaims, "This is a nice [alternative] telling of a tale that has taught generations of women that they will be rescued by a Prince Charming. Ash ends up rescuing herself and getting the girl." This opinion was echoed in some of the fifteen comments submitted by visitors to the blog. For example, farbabdas wrote, "I thought Lo really provided a fresh treatment of the story. I loved reading that this Cinderella doesn't run away from the ball at the stroke of midnight so as not to disintegrate her fancy clothes and reveal to the prince her low station." The contributors also related the novel to the genre of feminist young adult literature as a whole, unequivocally deciding that this novel is a great example of queer literature with a strong and independent female protagonist.

While *Bitch YA Book Club* is a very valuable resource and forum, it does possess some limitations. The book club is not well advertised on its website, which may explain why very few people have posted comments and critiques on the blog. There were some technical flaws with the book club, including many delays in the initial start up of the reading group blog. Moreover, the book club meets once a month, which is quite spread out in terms of time, potentially causing followers to forget about the book club meetings and to busy themselves with other activities. Finally, in terms of the non-Western world many individuals in developing nations do not have Internet access and therefore cannot engage in this discussion. One major limitation of the book club regards the unequal representation of non-Caucasian women. One blogger named Jasmine wrote, "I like the idea so much, but there's only one book by a non-white person on the list, and are any of the people on the panel not white? I thought part of the point of this was representation of more sides of the feminist experience, other than white women."³ Despite these limitations, *Bitch YA Book Club* demonstrates that online book clubs for young adult females are very valuable resources for the encouragement of young adult girls to read feminist novels and engage in alternative discourse.

But the wealth of young adult book clubs online accomplishes more than simply encouraging young women to read and providing them with a forum for discussion. For example, the *readergirlz*⁴ young adult literature blog has two main goals: to promote literacy amongst teens, and to promote the engagement of young females in social service. In the *readergirlz* website's section called *Our Mission*, we read that the reading group advisory board "showcases strong female protagonists while aiming to include multicultural titles, various socioeconomic circumstances, the overlooked, quiet, literary works, and the commercial successes that everyone is excited about." This encouragement of young adult females to read books with these themes helps them to become socially conscious readers learning about their own abilities to actively reach out to the community. Since more individuals are using online resources to expose themselves to alternative material, online book clubs are a perfect way to make use of the social and educational possibilities of the Internet. More individuals are recognizing this: other online book clubs and resources for young females are proliferating on the Internet.

In contrast to these feminist online book clubs there are many that do not challenge the mainstream media images of females. For example, one blog as a part of *Ok! Magazine*⁵ website has a *Twilight* book club geared toward young females. While there are many online blogs, fan-made parody YouTube videos, and discussion boards that challenge the book and the portrayal of the submissive female protagonist, Bella Swan, in the movie series, this book club does not provide an alternative discourse nor a feminist perspective on the series. The blog is interactive in the form of an online chat room, comprised of *Ok!* staff members and website visitors. Bloggers discuss a new chapter of the book each week. They often discuss the love triangle between Bella, Edward the vampire, and Jacob the werewolf, although the discussion sometimes strays to topics such as public appearances of the film actors.

As the online realm becomes increasingly pervasive, its potential to contest images of women that perpetuate notions of patriarchy and misogyny increases. This is especially clear with the development of feminist online reading groups for young adults: these forums are used by young women to engage in critical discussion and debate about novels; to read novels with strong female protagonists; to form a community with other like-minded females; and, ultimately, to promote social change.

Notes

1. <http://bitchmagazine.org/>
2. <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/bitch-ya-book-club-ash-by-malinda-lo>
3. <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/from-the-library-get-ready-for-our-online-ya-book-club>
4. <http://readergirlz.blogspot.ca/>
5. <http://www.okmagazine.com/news/introducing-oks-book-club-%E2%80%94-twilight-saga-eclipse>

References

- Eggenberger, Nicole. 2010. "Introducing OK!'s Book Club—Twilight Saga: Eclipse." *OK!* 25 May 2010. <http://www.okmagazine.com/news/introducing-oks-book-club-%E2%80%94-twilight-saga-eclipse> (accessed 22 October 2012).
- Grover, Lorie Ann, et al. 2008. "readergirlz." <http://readergirlz.blogspot.ca/> (accessed 22 October 2012).
- Lo, Malinda. 2009. *Ash*. New York: Hachette Book Group.

- McAllister, Ashley. 2011. "From the Library: Get Ready for our Online Book Club!" *Bitch Media*. <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/from-the-library-get-ready-for-our-online-ya-book-club> (accessed 22 October 2012).
- Papazian, Ellen. 2011. "Bitch YA Book Club: Ash by Malinda Lo." *Bitch Media*. 01 July 2011. <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/bitch-ya-book-club-ash-by-malinda-lo> (accessed 22 October 2012).
- Wallace, Kelsey. 2010. "Bitch Media: About Us." <http://bitchmagazine.org/about-us> (accessed 22 October 2012).