

Tricia Clasen and Holly Hassel's
Gender(ed) Identities: Critical Rereadings of
Gender in Children's and Young Adult Literature
(2017)

Review

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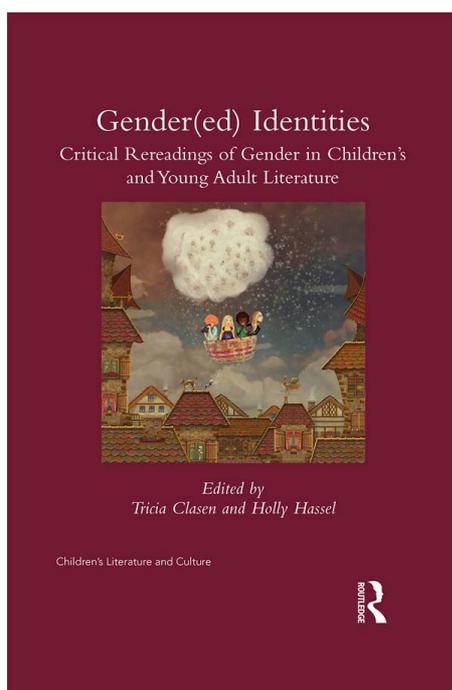
What do Cinderella, Anne of Green Gables, Bella Swan and Coraline have in common? According to the editors of this manifold book, these female literary characters all reflect the way in which representations of gender in literature may influence the construction of personal identity in childhood and adolescence. The authors argue that literature both mirrors and shapes societal expectations relating to gender. Through an overview of assorted fictional characters, readers have access to a wide range of experiences and interpretations over time and genres. With a feminist and multicultural approach, this collection of short essays by American scholars aims to contribute to the critical conversation by offering “historically significant readings of gender and sexuality in children’s and young adult works” (1). The essays are grouped into five thematic sections, each analysing a particular dimension of the subject, as stated in their brief introductions: how gender is both constructed within communities and reflective of the communities in which characters live (I); the relationship between gender(ed) identities and self-concept (II); how children’s and YA literatures offer healing (III); the role of sexuality and romance in YA heteronormative novels (IV); and how meanings of text interact with and are influenced by both genre and context (V).

This collection emphasises the never-ending negotiation that both fictional and real girls (and some boys) are forced into in order to achieve self-fulfilment and social acceptance/inclusion. Eric B. Tribunella's "Pedophobia and the Orphan Girl in *Pollyanna* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning*" offers a fascinating exploration of how children's fiction employs 'the child' as "one of the few remaining subjects of acceptable domination" – a challenging analysis of the romanticisation of the child in our society and within the family. Valerie Murrenus Pilmaier's article "Kindred Spirits: Vulnerability as the Key to Transformative Female Relationship in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*" presents relationships among women as social regulators of gender roles and casts a positive and original light on vulnerability, which is often seen as a negative female trait. Each essay in this collection contains a thoughtful overview of narrative themes such as agency, trauma, resilience, and power. There are some claims within the collection which may provoke debate. One such moment occurs in Nancy Jennings's article "One Choice, Many Petals: Reading the Female Voice of Tris in the *Divergent* Series" wherein Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* is described as an example of "dystopian young adult literature with strong protagonists" along with the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series (102). It is never explained how *Twilight*'s protagonist Bella Swan and her paranormal romance can be effectively paralleled to Katniss Everdeen and Beatrice Prior's political, futuristic adventures in which romance is just the icing on the YA cake, and certainly there are many commentators who might draw significant distinctions between these texts, and question whether Meyer's text could be considered to be part of dystopian YA featuring strong female protagonists.

There is also a marked disparity in approach and intended audience between the different sections of the text. The first sections appear to focus on introducing key concepts to those taking their first steps in feminist and gender/queer theory; while the latter sections develop more complex arguments in greater depth. This could aid readers who do not have extensive experience of these fields, however it could also prove frustrating for those expecting the entirety of the collection to develop established theories and debates. Finally, in a text which purports to offer critical re-readings of gender, there is an imbalance in the articles, with the focus firmly on the 'feminine world,' and very little interrogation of the representation of male characters within children's or Young Adult literature.

In summary, this substantial and thought-provoking collection will likely appeal to a wide range of readers, particularly those new to feminist or gender

theories. All of the essays raise important questions and will help stimulate further consideration and discussion.



WORK CITED

Clasen, Tricia, and Hassel, Holly. *Gender(ed) Identities: Critical Rereadings of Gender in Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Routledge, 2017.