You Go Girl! Stories of Bold, Confident Heroines

Thematic Description and Rationale for the Project

Research has shown that during adolescence something untoward happens to girls. "Pleasing one's peers suddenly becomes paramount, and the 'junk values of mass culture,' which stress impossible levels of beauty and romance, strip away the self-esteem and self-confidence that carried little girls blithely through childhood" (Allen, 1999, 99). Girls are bombarded with messages about who and what they are and who and what they should become. These messages, some good and some bad, come from their families, their peers, mass media, schools, and literature. Literature featuring heroic females in roles that give them equal status and confirm their value in society is invaluable in guiding girls to discover, understand, accept, respect, and love who they are (Ragan, 1998).

Girls "deserve encouragement to read stories with female heroes who transcend their world in positive, female-oriented ways. They deserve introduction to books with strong female characters who have stories worth telling and hearing" (Mines, 2002). Girls need to read about brave, strong girls and women who face and overcome challenges. They need to see that it is okay to expect to be free to make choices, to be active, to pursue a range of interests, to speak their minds. Mary Pipher suggests that girls "need to have identities based on talents or interests rather than appearance, popularity or sexuality" (1994, 283). Girls need to know who they are and value themselves as multifaceted people. They may accomplish this by identifying with an ethnic group or seeing themselves as dancers, actresses, musicians, artists, athletes, or political activists (Pipher, 1994). In short, they need to have heroines to offset the barrage of negative images society presents about females.

This collection of stories is representative of the many stories that are available for girls of all ages that feature fictional and non-fictional female characters who are strong, creative, capable, articulate, and intelligent. Bold characters who are having adventures, solving problems, and achieving their dreams. In this collection there are stories from several categories: picture books, folklore, non-fiction, and novels for middle and older readers.

I found my resources for this project by searching the online catalogs of the University of North Texas (UNT) Library, the Texas Tech University (TTU) Library, the Lubbock Christian University (LCU) Library, and the Lubbock Public Library. I also searched the online databases in EBSCO, FirstSearch, and TexShare, particularly, ERIC, Academic Search Premiere, and WilsonSelect. I also used the search engine Google.com. Focused searches based on the combination of sex,
role, and literature as subjects and the keyword girl resulted in a few very relevant articles as well as several that were not. Broadening the search using girls and reading as keywords resulted in hundreds of titles of varying degrees of relevance. It was quite tedious browsing this lengthy list, but worth the effort in the discovery of several excellent articles that had not turned up on other searches.

Bibliographic Citations and Story Synopses

**Picture Books**


Grace loves stories, and with a boundless imagination and a flair for the dramatic she acts them all out, becoming Joan of Arc, Anansi the Spider, Hiawatha, Mowgli, and Aladdin. One day, her teacher asks who would like to play the lead in the class production of Peter Pan. Grace eagerly raises her hand, but one classmate says she can't because she's a girl and another says she can't because she's black. After Grace relates the day's events to her mother and grandmother, they tell her she can be anything she sets her mind to. Grace's talent bursts forth, and she wins the role of her dreams.


Watching Dad “twisting like a corkscrew” while riding White Dynamite, a mean bull at the rodeo, Lucky Kidd carries on a nervous dialogue about the faraway places that rodeo riders travels. Lucky hopes to grow up to be a great bull rider, too. After the ride, Dad pulls off Lucky’s hat and two long pigtails fall out, revealing that Lucky is a girl.

Upon hearing *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* on the radio, Olive decides that "Olive the other reindeer?" must mean that she is a reindeer. She rushes to the North Pole to help Santa. Olive joins Santa's reindeer team, and her many talents (as a dog) help get the presents delivered on time.

**Folklore**

This charming retelling of the Comanche Indian tale explains the origin of the state flower of Texas, the bluebonnet. To atone for their selfish acts against the Earth, the Comanche People are told that they must burn their most valued possession as sacrifice to the Great Spirits and scatter the ashes to bring an end to the drought and famine. She-Who-Is-Alone sacrifices her warrior doll, her only link with her family who died from the famine, and scatters the ashes to the North, South, East, and West. She awakens to find the hills covered with bluebonnets, a sign from the Great spirits. The People celebrate, the rains return and they praise the sacrifice of the young girl, whose name becomes One-Who-Dearly-Loved-Her-People.


Little Red Cap is a version of Little Red Riding Hood that keeps the ending from the original Grimm’s fairy tale that shows her safely avoiding the wolf because after her first frightening encounter with the wolf she refuses to speak to him and doesn’t stray into the forest. After reaching Grandmother’s house she and Grandmother kill the wolf. Little Red Cap is a heroine who recognizes danger and takes action, not a victim that needs to be rescued.
Non-fiction

This biography from Newbery medalist Russell Freedman captures the spirit of Mildred "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias (1911-1956), the great athlete who seemed able to master any sport she chose. A bold tomboy Texan from a poor family, Babe saw sports as a way to earn recognition, respect and a living, something almost unheard of for a woman at the time. She was an All-American basketball player, an Olympic gold-medalist in track and field, and a championship golfer who won eighty-two amateur and professional tournaments. She also mastered tennis, played exhibition baseball, and was an accomplished diver and bowler. Babe was elected Woman Athlete of the Year six times by the Associated Press and in 1950 was named Woman Athlete of the Half Century. Babe accomplished all of this at a time when most girls and women didn't take part in these sports and there were few opportunities for female athletes. She was brash and confident, and her life constantly tested boundaries: the limits of athletic performance, constraints on female athletes, and the social taboo against discussing cancer in public.


This large-format photo-biography, with its striking cover and artful integration of text, archival photographs, and maps—all aptly printed in blue, celebrates Amelia Earhart's life and contributions to the world of aviation and the status of women. She spent her all too brief years as an advocate for women's education and rights. The story is well told with philosophical quotes from Earhart herself and black-and-white photographs of her early years and adult accomplishments.
Novels for Middle and Older Readers


This Newbery Award Book winner is the story of a young Eskimo girl known as Miyax to her small Eskimo village, and to her friend in San Francisco, she is Julie. When the village is no longer safe for her, Miyax runs away, but she soon finds herself lost in the wilderness on the North Slope of Alaska, without food, without even a compass to guide her. Slowly she is accepted by a pack of Arctic wolves and grows to love them as though they were family. With their help, and drawing on her father’s teachings, Miyax struggles day by day to survive. The time comes when she must leave the wilderness and choose between the old ways of the Eskimo and the new. Which will she choose? For she is Miyax of the Eskimos -- but Julie of the Wolves.


This 1990 Newbery Medal-winner tells a story of friendship and courage. In 1943, during the German occupation of Denmark, ten-year-old Annemarie finds the strength and courage to help save her best friend Ellen’s life when her family smuggles Jews out of their Nazi-occupied homeland to safety in Sweden.

*Jackaroo*, a Newbury Medalist book, is an elegantly written historical adventure-romance set in a distant time and far-off place. Donning the legendary clothes and the mask hidden in a cupboard, Gwyn, the innkeeper's clever, confident, courageous daughter, assumes the role of the daring Jackaroo to help those less fortunate than she. Surprisingly, she discovers that there are others masquerading as Jackaroo, too.

**Story Analysis**

“Children’s literature can introduce or reinforce the idea of gender fairness through the personalities, interests, and actions of various characters (Wellhousen, 1996, 80). Stories such as the ones in this collection feature heroic girls and women who have faced and dealt with obstacles, difficulties, and danger. These characters are role models as well as heroes, and readers may be inspired to emulate them.

While every main character in these stories is female, they are very different in other ways. Some are children, others are adults; one is black, some are white, one is Native American, another is Eskimo, and still another is a dog. The stories are from different genres: fiction, non-fiction, folklore, and novels. The settings and time vary quite a bit, too. But in each story the female character acts in a manner that reflects strength, courage, confidence, compassion, and respect.

**Character Analysis**

Grace is an aspiring actress who explores her world through the personas of the many characters she portrays. Her talent and confidence show “readers that factors such as gender and ethnicity should not be considered barriers to playing any role in life one chooses” (Wellhousen, 1996, 82). Like Grace, Lucky Kidd is able to imagine herself in a role typically reserved for males. She knows the work and difficulty of bull riding and is still confident in her dream. Olive, the spunky dog, is enthusiastic and willing to help in spite of discouragement. She uses her unique talents to solve problems. Grace, Lucky, and Olive all have a vision of what they want to be. The certainty of that vision motivates them to act with confidence and determination.

She-Who-Is-Alone has had to cope with hardship and tragedy, and in spite of that is still determined that she has something meaningful to contribute in the aid of her People. She sacrifices her most precious possession in the hope that it will show the spirits that her People are deserving. While sacrifices by female characters have long been used in a stereotypical fashion in literature, She-Who-Is-Alone is unique in
her belief that the actions of a young girl can actually make a significant difference. This confidence and her willingness to act on it, not the sacrifice itself, make her a heroic character. Little Red Riding Hood is a long accepted modification of an old fairy tale that has the woodsman save the little girl when earlier versions of the tale of Little Red Cap had already shown the girl – and her grandmother – to be the truly capable actors in the drama (Ragan, 1998). Little Red Cap is capable and heroic because she has learned to recognize and deal with danger.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias and Amelia Earhart were not only remarkable in what they accomplished with their respective talents, they were profound examples of what real women can accomplish when they set their minds and efforts to something. The mystique, spirit, and independence of these women continue to inspire young women today. Fictional characters, such as Julie, Annemarie, and Gwyn may seem as real and inspiring as historical figures as they struggle with their personal challenges. Julie faces more than the hardship of surviving in the harsh Alaskan wilderness. She also survives the consequences of going against the expectations of the people of her village and the struggle to discover, accept, and be true to who she is. Annemarie is faced with dual challenges: to go against the community’s acceptance that the Nazi threat is not as dangerous as some suggest and to actually participate in the escape of Jews. Her devotion to her family and the depth of her friendship motivate her to act with a courage that she didn’t realize she possessed and proved that the actions of a single individual, even a child, can make an important difference. Gwyn is another heroic female that makes a difference in the lives of others through her compassion and action. Many female characters in literature act on their compassion, but Gwyn acts in a way that is not the norm in her society with skill and daring that is not usually seen in girls. She accepts the risks as well as the consequences of her actions, and ultimately the rewards.

The characters in the stories of this collection are very different from each other in many ways, yet each one acts with courage and determination when faced with difficult decisions. Each of these individuals acts in a way that maintains or enhances her integrity and makes her an admirable role model for readers of all ages.

**Plot Analysis**

In every story of this collection the main character is faced with a challenge and then faces that challenge. This rather simplistic description belies the power behind the fact that each of these characters is female. Readers are not surprised when male characters are placed in difficult situations in ways similar to the female characters in these stories, but often do not expect female characters to display such strength, courage, and tenacity.
The situations are different: Grace, Lucky, Olive, Babe, and Amelia have dreams of being something – an actress, a bull rider, a reindeer, an athlete, and a pilot – and each must act in a manner that moves them ever closer to achieving their goal. She-Who-Is-Alone, Annemarie, and Gwyn are faced with situations in which they make sacrifices in order to help others. They do not make these sacrifices because they are female, they do it because they feel that they as individuals can make a meaningful difference in others’ lives. As a result of their actions they become more than they were before, not less. Little Red Cap, Julie, Annemarie, and Gwyn cope with situations where they learn to recognize and deal with danger. They also encounter conflict within themselves and with others as they determine their course of action.

Analysis by Genre

Amazing Grace, White Dynamite and Curly Kid, and Olive, The Other Reindeer are picture books with bold, colorful illustrations that bring the characters and action to life. These stories, all of which are fictional, are accessible and inspiring to young readers as well as interesting and meaningful to older readers.

The Legend of the Bluebonnet: An Old Tale of Texas and Little Red Cap are stories from the folklore of two very different cultures. In spite of the differences in their cultures, both She-Who-IS-Alone and Little Red Cap are heroic characters because when faced with difficult decisions they take action. Neither expects nor needs to be rescued from their situations. These stories reflect an expectation in the two cultures that females are able to think and act in response to circumstances around them and that the consequences of their actions affect others.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias: The Making of a Champion and Sky Pioneer: A Photobiography of Amelia Earhart are non-fiction books that entertain and inform readers of the personalities and accomplishments of two incredibly talented women who refused to be deterred by the pressures of a society that discouraged women from doing things normally reserved for men. Non-fiction stories of real girls and women encourage girls to use their talents in spite of obstacles and discouragement.

In novels for middle and older readers, such as Julie of the Wolves, Number the Stars, and Jackaroo, readers meet characters like Julie, Annemarie, and Gwyn, who face dilemmas and decisions much like those faced by real girls. The complex stories novels like these offer realities that mirror many aspects of real life, such as complicated relationships, long-term plans, problems, and consequences, and no quick solutions. These novels illustrate that while girls may indeed face their challenges successfully, the final results are neither simple nor easy, and that is okay.
Summary

"The qualities that give a woman the ability to overcome adversity and achieve her goals are developed through belief in one’s potential" (Allen, 1999, 79). This idea appeared throughout my research for this project in dozens of articles and the many books concerning the factors and influences that girls face growing up in a world of contradictions and meanness. At times it seems impossible that girls could not only survive, but also grow into strong, capable, confident women. It was a revelation to me that there are so many ways that people who care for and about girls can help. One way is to show them admirable female heroes in literature that can serve as positive role models. Characters, both fictional and non-fictional, can provide girls with glimpses of realities that they may already be familiar with as well as possibilities they’ve never considered.

Working on this project has been an adventure in learning and exploration. One of the difficulties I faced was deciding how to focus the project. There are many directions that a study of girls, role models, and literature can take. As a result of the search process and evaluation of resources, I became much more aware of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that girls are indoctrinated to stereotypes prevalent in our culture. I also became more aware of many positive influences that can have a profound impact on girls’ development into strong, capable women. This discussion and collection, which was quite a growth experience for me as a former “little girl of the Sixties,” is just the beginning of an exploration I plan to continue for my personal understanding, expanding it to include other story formats, including music, movies, television series.
Resources


