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« Beyond Katniss: The Resilient Young Heroines of YA Problem Novels »

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## Résumé

Depuis la publication de *Twilight* (Stephanie Meyer, 2005) et de *Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2008), les débats portant sur les héroïnes de la littérature pour jeunes adultes se sont concentrés sur les personnages principaux qui mènent un combat contre des forces surnaturelles ou contre des régimes dystopiques. Plus récemment toutefois, le point de mire s'est détourné de ces héroïnes idéalisées et s'est fixé sur les modèles plus réalistes que l'on peut trouver dans *Eleanor et Park* (Rainbow Rowell, 2013) et *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Emily Danforth, 2012). Les jeunes femmes au cœur de ces romans ne sont pas dénuées de défauts mais elles sont aussi dotées de résilience ; elles affichent une indépendance farouche et refusent de suivre les conventions sociales normalisées par les histoires d'amour afin de comprendre véritablement qui elles sont et qui elles souhaitent devenir. De plus, ces nouvelles héroïnes évoluent dans des milieux familiers pour leur lectorat adolescent. Eleanor et Cam offrent ainsi des alternatives bienvenues aux personnages extrêmes qu'étaient Bella et Katniss. En effet, alors que la littérature pour jeunes adultes revendique une place plus importante dans le domaine des œuvres de fiction, des héroïnes comme Eleanor et Cam devraient permettre aux jeunes lectrices de gagner en confiance et en connaissance de soi.

## Mots-clés

émancipation, 'empowerment', genre, féminité, roman pour jeunes adultes

## Abstract

At least since the publication of *Twilight* (Stephanie Meyer, 2005) and *Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2008), discussions of heroines in young adult literature have focused largely on female leads who are fighting for survival against supernatural creatures or dystopian regimes. More recently, however, attention has been shifting away from such idealized heroines to more realistic role models such as the ones we meet in *Eleanor and Park* (Rainbow Rowell, 2013) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Emily Danforth, 2012). At the center of these novels are complex young women, flawed and resilient, whose fierce independence and refusal to be normalized by romance or social expectations result in a fuller sense of who they are and who they wish to become. Moreover, these new YA heroines inhabit familiar landscapes that adolescent readers are also learning to navigate. As such, Eleanor and Cam offer welcome alternatives to the extremes of Bella and Katniss. Indeed, as YA literature claims a more established place as a meaningful fictional genre, young readers could gain greater confidence and self-knowledge by encountering more heroines like Eleanor and Cam.

## Keywords

emancipation, empowerment, femininity, gender, YA novel

At least since the publication of *Twilight* (Stephanie Meyer, 2005) and *Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2008), discussions of young adult heroines have focused on female leads who are fighting for survival against supernatural creatures or dystopian regimes. Cultural critic Noah Berlatsky describes Katniss, the heroine of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, as "athletic, focused, responsible, and able to take care of herself. She's not especially interested in boys and doesn't have sex, or even really think about sex... She's also politically engaged... She is, in other words, the ideal second-wave feminist daughter: smart, fierce, independent, and sexually restrained."<sup>1</sup> Berlatsky's laudatory description of Katniss takes for granted that young female readers recognize Katniss as a role model. But Collins's young heroine, though an improvement over *Twilight*'s lackluster Bella, by feminist standards, is hardly a realistic alternative, for both heroines are relentlessly idealized. Indeed, the young female protagonist in many YA fantasy and dystopian novels is cast as an object of longing and a passive victim (*Twilight*) or a skeptic of romance and a superheroine-survivor (*The Hunger Games*).

These protagonists must confront immediate threats to their survival, which necessarily delays deeper questions about themselves and the worlds they inhabit. By contrast, realistic YA novels investigate a more gradual deepening of character, one that shows how unconventional appearances, seemingly catastrophic mistakes, and difficult soul-searching can lead to lasting understanding and self-approval. Heroines like Katniss may offer entertaining ways to process adolescent struggles at a distance. However, the heroines of realistic YA fiction offer their young readers a concentrated look at protagonists who share struggles similar to those they are in the process of experiencing themselves. *Eleanor and Park* (Rainbow Rowell, 2013) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Emily Danforth, 2012) offer realistic and reassuring alternatives to the extremes of Bella and Katniss, claiming a readership that wants greater realism and all that this genre affords. Part of this appeal stems from the fact that Eleanor and Cameron recognize themselves as fragmented, their identities not yet fully shaped. It is through this process of frank self-assessment that they gain considerable control over how they see themselves and what they are willing to sacrifice to move closer to who they want to be.

Eleanor Douglas and Cameron Post are strong, complex heroines who inhabit worlds that adolescent readers recognize but are still learning to navigate. Hence, it may well be salutary that such relative newcomers to YA literature are gradually becoming our teenage daughters' heroines. For, as Molly Wetta proclaims in her 2013 essay, "What We Talk About When We Talk About 'Strong' Female Heroes in YA Fiction": "We need to look beyond Katniss, Katsa, and Tris in order to see the obvious strengths that female characters in realistic YA fiction offer."<sup>2</sup> When we

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<sup>1</sup> Noah BERLATSKY, "'Twilight' vs. 'The Hunger Games': Why Do So Many Grown-ups Hate Bella?", *TheAtlantic.com*, November 15, 2011, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Molly WETTA, "What We Talk About When We Talk About 'Strong' Heroines in YA Fiction", *YALSA The Hub*, March 14, 2013, 1.

look beyond heroines who have supernatural powers or brandish weapons, we find equally strong young heroines who reside in more mundane settings yet nevertheless face comparably impossible odds. But these YA heroines do not simply offer compelling alternatives to idealized models; rather, they embody a surprising depth of character and insight into what it means to fit in, stand apart, and fight back. The first section of this essay introduces the recent shift beyond the idealized heroines of *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*; the second section explores the movement beyond YA dystopian novels to YA problem novels; the third and fourth sections analyze more closely the YA heroines of *Eleanor and Park* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*; and the final section considers how the movement beyond idealized heroines of YA dystopian novels can benefit future generations of young readers.

### **The Unlikely Superheroine of *Eleanor and Park***

The year is 1986. Sixteen-year-old Eleanor Douglas has just returned to Omaha to move back with her mother, her terrified younger siblings, and her abusive stepfather, who reigns over them all with verbal and physical threats of violence. What happened to make Eleanor leave the first time is never mentioned, but her role in the family as protector of her younger siblings is clear. She has solid opinions, a sharp wit, and an inability to fit in anywhere. Confident yet frequently self-conscious about her appearance, Eleanor vehemently hates the Sex Pistols and finds the lack of powerful females in comic books more than a little troubling. We learn this from her encounters with the novel's second narrator, Park Sheridan, a quiet half-Korean, half-Caucasian Goth kid who just wants to be left alone. The bond that develops between these two protagonists happens within the problem novel's landscape of complex issues, from distorted body image to domestic abuse. Park's presence in Eleanor's life gives her solace, but her choice to leave Omaha and Park behind marks a turning point in her self-development. This choice represents her reluctance to be saved, her ability to distinguish between what she can and cannot control, and her awareness of how she might begin to save herself.

*Eleanor and Park* presents a YA heroine who has been damaged and continues to face serious and everyday problems. Eleanor is flying solo: she is eager for love but unable to turn to adults for guidance and remorseful about what she associates with the adult world. Her survival ultimately depends on her ability to embrace parts of herself that others label unacceptable or even shameful. This is what allows her to remain who she is despite bullying, self-doubt, and the belief that she will end up alone. While *Eleanor and Park* is ostensibly a love story about two extremely timid outsiders, this is no typical teen romance. Eleanor's journey stands apart from her budding romance with Park. In her interactions with Park, Eleanor displays an ability to thrive in a self-made space that obliterates various kinds of difference. Because she embraces

who she is, Park learns to appreciate what others criticize. Their class and racial differences are not obliterated; rather, they are the means by which Eleanor and Park find self-acceptance despite threats of further isolation from family and friends. While novels such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Stephen Chbosky, 1999) celebrate the misfit and, more specifically, teens who find self-acceptance by meeting those who see and understand them, *Eleanor and Park* shows how embracing social, physical, sexual, and racial diversity can lead to fuller self-acceptance and awareness of the world beyond the self.

Eleanor and Park meet under less than ideal circumstances. Park first sees Eleanor on the school bus. He describes her bluntly and unforgivingly as:

Not just new—but big and awkward. With crazy hair, bright red on top of curly. And she was dressed like...like she *wanted* people to look at her. Or maybe she didn't get what a mess she was. She had on a plaid shirt, a man's shirt, with half a dozen weird necklaces hanging around her neck and scarves wrapped around her wrists. She reminded Park of a scarecrow or one of the trouble dolls his mom kept on her dresser. Like something that wouldn't survive in the wild.<sup>3</sup>

We soon learn that Eleanor's clothes are both her armor and her destruction. They are an effort to obscure her femininity in the way that Park, later in the novel, obscures his masculinity by wearing black eyeliner. These are their chosen gestures of self-identity as well as insecurity about how they can embrace their clear differences in subtle ways. When no one on the bus lets Eleanor sit down, Park shows some compassion by insisting "angrily" that she sits in the empty seat beside him. For the first nine chapters of the novel, they sit, side by side, in silence. Yet this shared isolation gradually makes the pair inseparable from their narratives, which also sit side by side throughout the novel.

Immediately after Park gets this first impression of Eleanor on the bus, the narrative shifts to Eleanor. She begins by considering a list of her current "options": a lack of friends, reliable parents, or a stable home life. Yet Eleanor is unable to talk about her difficulties at home or at school, where she is regularly shunned, humiliated, and bullied. Fortunately for them both, Park and Eleanor begin to communicate, if only silently at first, over comic books and then over music heard through shared headphones and Walkmans. When Park notices Eleanor reading his comic book, he moves it quietly and imperceptibly toward her. While neither acknowledges the larger shift this movement creates, both continue to overanalyze each movement, "hating" themselves for what they do or do not say for fear it will reveal a "weakness."<sup>4</sup> In this way, Park becomes intricately connected to Eleanor through their mutual self-consciousness and fear of exposure that they are irrevocably different than their peers. Park's lack of belonging, however, does not come from poverty, a broken home, or poor body image. Instead, his insecurities are rooted in ambivalence about his own mixed race and his reluctance to talk, dress, or act like the

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<sup>3</sup> Rainbow ROWELL, *Eleanor and Park*, New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2013, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 14.

popular kids. He alternates between a desire to be invisible and normal in some moments and, in others, to stand apart from the crowd.

Park and Eleanor reveal their insecurities most clearly in moments when they strive to appear unknowable to one another. One conversation in particular reveals Eleanor's strong self-assurance beneath anxieties about her social class and uncommon appearance. She and Park are debating the merits and disappointments of female superheroes. The case in point is *X-men*. Eleanor declares:

"It's all so sexist."

Park's eyes got wide. Sometimes she wondered if the shape of his eyes affected how he saw things. That was probably the most racist question of all time.

"The X-Men aren't sexist... They're a metaphor for acceptance; they've sworn to protect a world that hates and fears them."

"Yeah," she said, "but—"

"There's no *but*," he said, laughing.

"*But*," Eleanor insisted, "the girls are all so stereotypically girly and passive. Half of them just think really hard. Like *that's* their superpower, *thinking*. And Shadowcat's power is even worse—she disappears."

"She becomes intangible," Park said. "That's different."

"It's still something you could do in the middle of a tea party," Eleanor said.

"Not if you were holding hot tea. Plus, you're forgetting Storm."

"I'm not forgetting Storm. She controls the weather with her head; it's still just thinking. Which is about all she *could* do in those boots."<sup>5</sup>

Eleanor, unshaken by Park's astonishment or resolve, insists upon the need for more compelling female superheroes. Through this debate, they are also expressing a desire to see themselves within a group of superhero-misfits while admitting their inability to find themselves, even in a group composed entirely of outsiders.

Unlike Park, Eleanor's misfit status is directly tied to class consciousness and her sense of herself as socially and economically inferior. Physical and emotional hunger is especially crucial in expressing this self-consciousness. Park observes Eleanor closely as she reads aloud Emily Dickinson's poem "Hunger" in their English class. Her reading calls attention to her intelligence as well as her insecurities:

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

“I had been hungry all the years,” she read.  
 A few kids laughed. Jesus, Park thought, only Mr. Stessman would make a chubby girl read a poem about eating on her first day of class.  
 “Carry on, Eleanor,” Mr. Stessman said.  
 She started over, which Park thought was a terrible idea.  
 “I had been hungry all the years,” she said, louder this time.  
 “My noon had come, to dine,  
 I, trembling, drew the table near,  
 And touched the curious wine.  
 ‘T was this on tables I had seen,  
 When turning, hungry, lone,  
 I looked in windows, for the wealth  
 I could not hope to own.”  
 Mr. Stessman didn’t stop her, so she read the whole poem in that cool, defiant voice. The same voice she’d used on Tina.  
 “That was wonderful,” Mr. Stessman said when she was done. He was beaming.... “That’s a voice that arrives on a chariot drawn by dragons.”<sup>6</sup>

In this early scene of the novel, we learn what Park has yet to learn: that literal and metaphorical hunger distances Eleanor further from him. The shift from present to past tense hunger in Dickinson’s poem also suggests that even when one is fed with food, the memory of want lingers, making this hunger almost impossible to satisfy fully.

Eleanor’s reading of Dickinson’s “Hunger” reveals something fierce within herself that seems to shield her from ridicule and mere mortal needs. In Chapter 32, Eleanor confronts Park directly about hunger and wealth and other obstacles to their being together:

“Nobody gets enough,” she said. “Nobody gets what they need. When you [sic] always hungry, you get hungry in your head.” She tapped her forehead. “You know?”  
 Park wasn’t sure what to say.  
 “You don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t want you to know...I’m sorry.”<sup>7</sup>

When Eleanor reflects on her relationship with Park, she sees this inferiority as spatial as well as economic: “She would never belong in Park’s living room. She never felt like she belonged anywhere, except for when she was lying on her bed, pretending to be somewhere else.”<sup>8</sup>

Like Sammy, the male narrator of *A&P* (John Updike, 1961), Eleanor has a rich fantasy life and aspirations to escape her present life at home. Sammy, however, maintains a false sense of superiority over the people who move mechanically through the grocery store where he works. As he rings up their groceries, he sets them beneath himself, reducing them to automatons or dull “marrieds.” It is only with the entrance of the three girls in bathing suits, Queenie reigning over them, that Sammy expresses a desire to rise and escape his present circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Yet unlike Updike’s misguided hero, Eleanor is painfully realistic about her shortcomings. In fact, she cannot understand what Park sees in her. This insecurity is reflected in Eleanor’s inability to

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>9</sup> John UPDIKE, “A&P”, <http://www.tiger-town.com/whatnot/updike/>, 1-7.

identify with the heroines of classic children's literature:

If Eleanor were the hero of some book, like *The Boxcar Children* or something, she'd try. If she were Dicey Tillerman, she'd find a way. She'd be brave and noble, and she'd find a way. But she wasn't. Eleanor wasn't any of these things. She was just trying to get through the night.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Eleanor speaks directly to an all-consuming self-doubt that she will not measure up to other fictional characters or her more popular peers. In this way, she reveals how social class and verbal abuse intensify the self-doubt that results from more common teen angst and high school drama. Throughout the novel, Eleanor is incapable of disproving her own self-deprecating claim that “[w]hatever perversion caused him to like her was his problem.”<sup>11</sup>

*Eleanor and Park* navigates the difficult terrain of adolescence through unspoken struggles with gender, class, and racial inequalities. By giving voice to not one but two virtually silent characters in YA fiction, Rowell provides an example of two teens who find ways to embrace how they differ from their peers and connect physically and emotionally with each other. In his flattering review of *Eleanor and Park*, John Green observes the importance of class division as crucial to the novel's love story: “through the novel one comes to have a better understanding of how poverty interacts with abuse to marginalize and oppress... The world is the obstacle, as it always is when you're 16 and truly in love.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps *Eleanor and Park*, in addition to being a teenage love story, is also a story about the pain of being different, of combating loneliness, and of finding someone who accepts every bit of weirdness one is willing to reveal. Moreover, Eleanor and Park's evolving friendship and eventual love provide an alternative to the familiar John Green romance plots of geeky boy pining over Manic Pixie Dream Girls (MPDG). More importantly, Rowell's novel offers a blended, even androgynous version of teen love that allows its two protagonists to swap male and female roles while experimenting with and challenging gender stereotypes.

Eleanor and Park, then, are the quintessential couple of the YA problem novel. She is an awkward, self-conscious redhead from a broken home, he a quiet, half-Korean punk kid who simply wants to enjoy his music and be left alone. Theirs is an unlikely pairing, in no small part because of Park's mixed racial status in a homogeneous Omaha. But their love story is made more charming by the fact that Park accepts Eleanor's odd, masculine clothes as unquestioningly as she accepts his preference for wearing eyeliner. As their relationship progresses, the reader comes to understand that Eleanor has all of the attributes of the new YA heroine. Eleanor, as Molly Wetta describes her, is “a survivor—of abuse, poverty, and bullying.”<sup>13</sup> Her strength is more complicated than that of many YA heroines, in large part because it involves making herself

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, 294.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>12</sup> John GREEN, “Two Against the World: *Eleanor and Park*, by Rainbow Rowell”, *New York Times*, March 8, 2013, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Molly WETTA, “What We Talk About When We Talk About ‘Strong’ Heroines in YA Fiction”, *op. cit.*, 1.



vulnerable by facing her limitations directly. Eleanor is neither falling helplessly for a vampire nor running for her life. Rather, by rejecting the role of victim and embracing her faults with resolve, she demonstrates that she is capable not only of surviving on her own but also of protecting those around her. She refuses the title of victim by taking control of her life while she can, leaving behind her the legacy of abuse and the promise of romantic love. The final lines of this novel demonstrate her ability to survive without Park without conceding that her love for him has faltered. The ambiguity of the “three words” that Eleanor writes to Park on a postcard provides just enough evidence that the cycle of victimhood will end with Eleanor.

### **Self-Education and Self-Acceptance in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post***

Being a strong young adult heroine does not necessarily require that one survive domestic abuse or the death of both parents. Strength is often found in the subtler forms of self-acceptance that occur gradually, despite efforts by others to thwart this self-acceptance. The orphaned heroine of Danforth’s *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* becomes aware of her romantic desires for young women while living in a painfully small Montana town. Those around her, for the most part, condemn homosexuality as a choice that Cam can deny if she simply chooses to. Her religious Aunt Ruth sends her away to camp so she can be “cured” of her desires and live a “normal” life. Cam is wracked with guilt throughout most of the novel. When she first hears of her parents’ deaths, she experiences an overwhelming sense of relief that they would not learn her shameful secret (that she kissed a girl that very day). Soon after, Cam feels guilty for this selfish response but also comes to feel, in no small part, that she is responsible for their deaths.

After receiving the news, Cam retreats further into herself. She moves her parents’ TV into her room and rents videos on a continual basis, watching some—the rare ones that feature love stories between women—so frequently she becomes concerned the videotapes will break. And yet it is through these frequent viewings of films and her extreme retreat into herself that Cam learns to express a mature, future-oriented sense of herself as distinctly apart from her self- and present-centered peers:

But if renting all those movies had taught me anything more than how to lose myself in them, it was that you only actually have perfectly profound little moments like that in real life if you recognize them yourself, do all the fancy shot work and editing in your head, usually in the very seconds that whatever is happening is happening. And even if you do manage to do so, just about never does anyone else you’re with at the time experience that exact same kind of moment, and it’s impossible to explain it as it’s happening, and then the moment is over.<sup>14</sup>

Cam is able to see herself in a particular moment while at the same time recognizing just how

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<sup>14</sup> Emily DANFORTH, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, New York: Balzer and Bray, 2012, 132-33.

fleeting that moment is. In this way, watching movies is not simply an escape from a painful reality; rather, it becomes Cam's way of exploring other worlds and perspectives and seeing herself more clearly outside of her claustrophobic world.

Though unwilling inwardly to deny who she is, Cam still experiments with other identities. She also uses humor not only to flirt but also to disguise her desire for the young women with whom she flirts. For Cam, humor becomes an easy way to deflect potential judgment. Humor helps her avoid intense emotions that she does not understand or know how to articulate. For the first seven chapters of the novel, Cam does not verbally acknowledge her homosexuality. Though she is aware of her attraction for certain girls, when she hears her friend Jaime say it aloud, she is momentarily stunned. Jamie catches Cam staring longingly after Coley, the pretty cowgirl she has befriended. Despite her best efforts, Cam starts to cry when Jaime verbalizes her preference for dating girls. She then attempts to deflect the truth in order to assess whether she is safe. Once Cam discovers that Jaime is not judging her, she is relieved. But his reluctance to condemn her seems to have more to do with Jaime's holding out hope that Cam will be interested in him:

"If you don't know for sure, then what's the big thing about trying stuff out?" Jamie said, looking not at me but looking out at that statue, just like Hennitz. I still didn't have any of the right words. "It's more like maybe I do know and I'm still confused too, at the same time. Does that make sense? I mean, it's like how you noticed this thing about me tonight, you saw it, or you already knew it—it's there. But that doesn't mean it's not confusing or whatever."<sup>15</sup>

Cam does an impressive job of embracing those parts of herself she does not yet understand, parts of herself she has been taught to suppress and attempt to change. But Jaime does not accept this response, choosing instead to use this as an opportunity to kiss her. And though Cam "kissed him back, sort of," she remains honest with herself regarding the kiss, concluding that it was "interesting" in the way that "a fucked-up science experiment" is interesting.<sup>16</sup> She understands that what has happened is merely that—experimenting—and not what she actually wants or feels.

Even after her Aunt Ruth sends Cam off to camp, Cam finds ways to keep her remarkably mature and truthful sense of self intact. Finding herself among other misfits, Cam questions what she is learning. She understands that rejecting her past as somehow "incorrect" would mean rejecting those parts of herself that also best embodied who she was:

And when you're surrounded by a bunch of mostly strangers experiencing the same thing, unable to call home, tethered to routine on ranchland miles away from anybody who might have known you before, might have been able to recognize the *real you* if you told them you couldn't remember who she was, it's not really like being real at all. It's plastic living. It's

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 156-57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

living in a diorama. It's living the life of one of those prehistoric insects encased in amber: suspended, frozen, dead but not, you don't know for sure.<sup>17</sup>

This is a crucial moment for Cam because she is starting to see that she is responsible for and capable of shaping the person she will be after she leaves her hometown. Unlike Holden Caulfield, Cam is interested in what lies beyond the glass cases of the museum; she does not crave the suspended state between childhood and adulthood that these symbolize for Holden. Specifically, Cam begins to consider the fate of those “prehistoric insects” suspended within glass cases, unsure of what comes next for them or for her. By recognizing that she cannot reject or outrun her past, Cam begins to imagine a life outside the diorama in which she is no longer a trapped insect frozen in time but rather a whole person, in control of her past, present, and future. Throughout Danforth's novel, Cam is unwilling to accept what others believe blindly and often wholeheartedly—about her, about themselves, and about the world. She distinguishes clearly between “accepting” and “excepting,” explaining that she is far better at the latter, which involves only accepting that nothing is ever certain, not even the most “firmly held conviction or opinion.”<sup>18</sup> Cam believes there are countless worlds beyond what we can see or what Ruth imagines when she prays. Her partial understanding of this abundance is reflected in how she perceives herself as momentarily fragmented, a “ghost reflection” of her true self. She encounters this spectral part of herself in a deleted excerpt that Danforth includes on her website. In this deleted scene from the novel, Cam and her grandmother are emptying out her mother's office at the museum after her death.<sup>19</sup> Cam wanders off to see the Calamity Jane exhibit her mother curated shortly before her death. One passage her mother selected for this display is from Jane herself speaking about how it felt to dress like a man: “Up to this time, I had always worn the costume of my sex. When I joined Custer, I donned the uniform of a soldier. It was a bit awkward at first, but I soon got to be perfectly at home in men's clothes.”<sup>20</sup> In the image that accompanies these words, Jane is decked out in the men's chaps and coat from the 1870s and 80s, and she is laughing with men, unconcerned with their judgment or the judgment of Victorian women who find her lack of modesty and docility appalling. When she casts aside her female garments, Jane finds that she can also discard the passivity of her femaleness, carrying herself with the self-assurance that comes with the “costume” of a man.

At first, Cam observes the Calamity Jane exhibit without applying this lack of conformity to her own situation. While she is reading about how Jane learned to fit in wearing men's clothes and doing men's work, a group of loud high school boys passes by Cam and one asks her: “You the ghost of Calamity Jane or something?” When Cam does not answer, the boys continue

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>19</sup> Emily DANFORTH, “deleted scene”, *Cameron Post's Dollhouse*, *emdanforth.com*, September 30, 2015, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.

chattering to themselves about how Jane dresses like a “Duh-I-Ke.”<sup>21</sup> Once they are gone, Cam stares at her reflection in the glass cases of the museum, trying to find an image that matches the one she has of herself:

I kept trying to find my reflection in the cases—my still sun-bleached hair, pony-tailed, as always; my jeans with the holes in both knees. It was one of those partial reflections that you have to catch the right light, the right angle, to make out, and even then you’re just the echo version of yourself.<sup>22</sup>

In this moment, Cam finds she is unable to assert or defend herself in the face of such willful ignorance and male judgment. Her reflection, appropriately, appears to her as “partial,” an insufficient “echo” of the person she knows herself to be. She interprets the boys’ stereotyping “dyke” comment as “somehow like a curse and a penance,” something she must carry with her as something she attributes to both her homosexual desires and her parents’ sudden death.<sup>23</sup>

This deleted scene complements other scenes in the novel in which Cam experiences self-doubt when she witnesses discrimination directly or must explain herself to someone who may not be worthy of such explanation. Perhaps the most convincing evidence of Cam’s resilience in spite of self-doubt is the final chapter of the novel. Cam is with her friends, holding a candle and addressing her parents aloud, assuring them she no longer blames herself for their deaths. She also wants them to know she sees them, as well as her parents, as individuals. In this moment, she seems to realize that self-acceptance is an ongoing process that begins in adolescence and continues throughout one’s lifetime. Though she is not sure how her parents would have handled her homosexuality, she is grateful to have known them, even if she will always wish to have known them better. Once she is done with her speech, she swims, candle still in hand, with everything she has. At the end, she does not emerge from the water alone. Rather, she is welcomed by friends who support her, reminding her of the ways in which she must nourish herself and remain open to the possibilities of perspectives and choices not her own:

Then, one on either side, they walked me to the shore, which was black and endless. But there was a fire waiting. And there was a little meal laid out on a blanket. And there was a whole world beyond that shoreline, beyond the forest, beyond the knuckle mountains, beyond, beyond, beyond, not beneath the surface at all, but beyond and waiting.<sup>24</sup>

Like Eleanor, Cam continues to thrive in her harsh environment because she possesses a deeper awareness that her difference and her status as an outsider are temporary and redeemable with continued self-reflection and connection to those she trusts the most.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Emily DANFORTH, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, *op. cit.*, 470.

## Why Young Female Readers Need More Eleanors and Cams

It has been nearly five decades since young adult fiction became an independent literary genre and the adolescent a distinct subject of critical analysis. For at least three of these decades, literary analysis has centered primarily on dominant white male voices of adolescent fiction. In the wake of *Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger, 1951), *The Outsiders* (S.E. Hinton, 1967), written from the perspective of male narrator Holden Caulfield, focuses on 14-year-old Ponyboy, a sensitive, well-read gang member eager to understand the class divisions that threaten to destroy his all-male community. However, beginning around 2000, post-Harry Potter young adult novels feature more female narrators, many of whom possess superpowers and are destined to save the planet. Vampires, magicians, assassins, and other extra-realistic characters loom large in these novels, playing on the young readers' potential but also on their fears. Bella in *Twilight* (Stephanie Meyer, 2005), Clarissa in *The Mortal Instruments* (Cassandra Clare, 2007), and Katniss in *The Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2008) have emerged as the archetypal heroines of this brand of fiction.

Less fantastic counterparts to such heroines emerged as well in the YA "problem novel," which engaged a host of concerns confronting young lives – drugs, sex, divorce, depression, bullying, violence, death, and, more recently, homophobia, gender identification, and suicide. The protagonists of such novels – *Go Ask Alice* (Beatrice Sparks, 1971), for example<sup>25</sup> – are often extreme outsiders who lived in worlds that were harsher and more dramatically removed from their readers' everyday worlds. Even more subdued – and more realistic – heroines have found their way into YA literature by way of *Eleanor and Park* (Rainbow Rowell, 2013) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Emily Danforth, 2012), which offer realistic and reassuring alternatives to the extremes of Bella and Katniss.

The appearance of strong heroines in realistic YA novels suggests a welcome trend that will likely continue. In a 2011 interview with CNN.com, YA author Meg Cabott discusses her preference for "quirky" heroines with agency, including "an accidental princess, lightning-strike victim and a girl who sees dead people."<sup>26</sup> Her heroines appear average on the surface but may suddenly find that their situations are anything but ordinary. Cabot, who admits it is still relatively rare to find "relatable" young women as protagonists of YA novels, finds this new trend of "empowered heroines" both refreshing and hopeful:

I believe we're going to see empowered heroines, books with relatable characters and more hopeful stories. Maybe more characters that are outsiders, like themselves. I'm not saying all

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<sup>25</sup> Sheila EGOFF, *Thursday's Child: Trends and Patterns in Contemporary Children's Literature*, Chicago: American Library Association, 1981.

<sup>26</sup> Ashley STICKLAND, "Meg Cabott's Teen Escapism and Empowered Heroines", *CNN.com*, May 12, 2011.

teenagers are outsiders, but I think in every teenager, there's a little bit of a feeling, like all of us, of "where do I fit in?" because that's part of growing up.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps Cabot is suggesting one way in which we can move beyond a fantasy/dystopian versus problem/realistic YA binary. After all, "[h]er empowered heroines find themselves in sticky situations from the White House to the underworld while combating the normal pressures of being a teenager. They are fun, escapist first-person narratives with a relaxed style that draws readers in from page one."<sup>28</sup> In many ways, her heroines share the vulnerable charms of Eleanor and Cam while adding the appeals of mystery and suspense. They work against the need to choose and offer ways in which teen readers can find alternative female role models in these seemingly dissimilar genres.

Heroines who confront their vulnerabilities are becoming more common in YA fantasy as well as in more realistic problem novels. Their appearance offers an expansion of earlier YA novels that introduce female vulnerability and strength such as Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* (1990) and even as far back as Judy Blume's *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret* (1970). The vulnerable strength of realistic YA heroines raises compelling questions for YA readers and authors: what does the YA heroine look like beyond young adult fantasy and apocalypse? And what happens when we look for her within the murky terrain of the YA problem novel? Eleanor and Cam endure in the face of extreme self-doubt, but theirs is a much more personal triumph, a deliberate choice of self-acceptance over the acceptance of others. Though not necessarily revolutionary, their task may be just as daunting in the face of a near crippling awareness of their own flaws and otherness. Theirs is a deep and enduring self-knowledge that cannot be attained by characters who continue to pretend to be what those around her expect.

While we may no longer think about the young adult heroine as simply a choice between the supernatural and the realistic, passively feminine or independent and androgynous, remnants of these exaggerated female role models remain in popular YA novels that depict idealized heroines whose weaknesses become part of their power and their charm. This trend has begun to change as more YA novels embrace the vulnerable strength of everyday heroines. As Wetta puts it:

...let's celebrate the quiet(er) strength of realistic characters as well as the dramatic, death-defying strength of ... fantasy heroines. ... There's no universal way of being "strong," and a character's weaknesses are often what allows a reader to relate to him or her.<sup>29</sup>

If YA literature is to move beyond entertainment to a place of consequence in the lives of its teenaged readers, then we must, indeed, acknowledge the "quiet(er)" strength within the actual strengths and flaws of young adult heroines and readers. Eleanor and Cam are heroines who

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Molly WETTA, *op. cit.*, 1.

inhabit familiar landscapes of the YA “problem novel,” a genre that confronts deeply personal issues and illustrates how individuals can learn to see themselves beyond feelings of isolation and otherness. Rowell’s unapologetic portrayal of first love between two self-proclaimed outsiders illustrates something authentic rather than ideal, an ability to connect in a space that at once celebrates and obliterates economic, social, and racial difference. Similarly, Danforth shows how accepting one’s sexual identity can lead her heroine out of isolation and into a fuller recognition of herself in the present moment. Both heroines are repeatedly encouraged to change themselves, to be more like their seemingly perfect peers, and to stand out less than they do. Yet even when they are completely on their own, neither sacrifices who she is to please someone else; neither uses her love for another person as a means to escape herself and her choices for the future. In this way, *Eleanor and Park* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* present realistic and resilient heroines whose fierce independence and refusal to be normalized by romance or social expectations result in a fuller sense of who they are and who they wish to become.

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