Tomboys: Performing gender in popular fiction

Kelly Gardiner

La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

K.Gardiner@latrobe.edu.au (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8428-4594)

ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century, new characters exploded onto the pages of popular novels: forthright, self-reliant and self-aware girls who became known as tomboys. Like Jo March storming through the pages of *Little women*, these brave and boisterous young women charmed and astonished readers, and profoundly influenced generations of girls. This article examines the impact of the tomboy in literature, its confluence with other, older, archetypes such as the cross-dressing warrior maid, and its development alongside other proto-feminist heroines of the nineteenth century: the Female Gentleman and the Plucky Girl. The article interrogates not only the character traits of fictional tomboys, but also the narrative arcs and tropes with which they were often associated, such as the Tamed Tomboy, who, like Jo March, comes to learn the real meaning of womanhood, as defined through her mother and sisters, in marriage; and the Incorrigible Tomboy, like George in the *Famous five* books, who resists all efforts to be treated "like a girl". The article further explores the continued relevance of these famous nineteenth- and twentieth-century tomboys, whose performances of gender and sexuality echo in recent fiction for children and young adults through characters such as Katniss Everdeen in the *Hunger games* trilogy, the genderfluid Micah in Justine Larbelestier's *Liar*, or overtly queer heroines such as Kaede in Malinda Lo's *Huntress*. What has the tomboy in literature meant to twenty-first century understandings of gender performativity? And, importantly, what stories about gender – what possible lives – do these characters construct for the young women who read them?

Keywords: Fictional tomboys, gender performativity, popular fiction, sexuality, tomboy narrative.

Published by

Original research

Dis/Positions: Reflections on Gender, Sexuality, Race and Culture

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Those wild romping girls: tomboys in popular fiction for young adults

I am nine years old. Lying on my bed, in my pink room, with its pink walls and pink bedspread, reading. It's one of my mother's old hardbacks. She didn't have many books, growing up, and nor did I. But she had a few Enid Blyton adventures, and this book: *Little women*.

First published in 1868, it was one of many popular novels in which a new kind of character exploded onto the page: forthright, self-reliant and self-aware girls known as tomboys. Like Jo March storming through the pages of *Little women*, these brave and boisterous young women charmed and astonished readers, and profoundly influenced generations of "little women".

Jo gave voice to the feelings of millions of girls when she moaned, '[i]t's bad enough to be a girl anyway, when I like boys' games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy' (Alcott 1910:3).

Just like me.

I may not have lived in a house full of books, but I did live in a house surrounded by bush, calling out for all the usual tomboy activities: climbing trees, exploring, adventuring. Nobody ever tried to stop me, although they did paint my room pink and try to make me wear dresses sometimes. But they also gave us space, in which my brother and I made swords and bows from scrap timber, and as the oldest I always got to be Robin Hood.

I wasn't alone. Katy in another much-thumbed nineteenth-century book, *What Katy did*, 'tore her dress every day, hated sewing, and didn't care a button about being called good' (Coolidge 1887:7).

Just like me.

Katy longed for much more than the life set out for her. As she explained to her siblings,

> "I mean to *do* something grand. I don't know what, yet; but when I'm grown up I shall find out." … "Perhaps," she went on, "it will be rowing out in boats, and saving peoples" lives, like that girl in the book. Or perhaps I shall go and nurse in the hospital, like Miss Nightingale. Or else I'll head a crusade and ride on a white horse, with armor and a helmet on my head, and carry a sacred flag. Or if I don't do that, I'll paint pictures, or sing, or scalp – sculp – what is it? you know – make figures in marble. Anyhow it shall be *something*. And when Aunt Izzie

> sees it, and reads about me in the newspapers, she will say, "The dear child! I always knew she would turn out an ornament to the family" (Coolidge 1887:22; emphasis in original).

But then Katy fell off a swing, stopped having adventures and learnt through pain to be patient and good and to look after the children, while Jo March got married to that boring professor[1] and learned – you'll be astonished to hear – to be patient and good and to look after the children.

The books I read, the movies I watched, showed me what the world really expected me to be: Maid Marian – the Olivia de Havilland version, that is, in silk gown rather than Robin Hood's green tights and jaunty cap. The lesson was clear. Tomboys were allowed to climb trees up to a certain age, and then they had to calm down: to be tamed by marriage, by new clothes, even by dreadful accidents; by their mothers, by their peers, and by men. I want to trace that narrative, its meanings, impact and legacy.

Why?

Kelli M. Sellers's examination of the 1903 novel *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* reminds us of the gendered nature of the act of reading, and the impact of feminist or proto-feminist texts on young women. She writes,

> [b]ooks, like girlhood, then, create what Sally Mitchell calls a "provisional free space" that allows safe experimentation. Girls can 'try on a certain role' as they would try on a costume, and become a new character for a short time without consequences … girl readers imagined new modes of living by reading and then fulfilled their fantasies in life, becoming stronger, more independent women (Sellers 2012:121).

So I wonder about the history of that reading – about all those girls, like me, reading books about other girls – and whether we can trace lines of influence, on writers and readers, through popular literature, from *Little women* to the *Hunger games* trilogy and beyond. This article focuses on some of the key fictional tomboys of the past and surveys a range of recent characters who have captured the imaginations of many young adult readers. It argues that the tomboy should be positioned in its own literary lineage, with deep roots in ancient accounts of warrior women, and through an identifiable character arc in the stories of recent centuries. What is it about the tomboy figure that has made these books sell in their millions, translated into dozens of languages, and kept them in print decades and even centuries after their publication? How do those lines of enormous influence and impact lead into new and hugely popular tomboy narratives for readers now, written and read under the bright light of feminism?

Although often overlooked in analyses of popular fiction, I suggest that the tomboy is as influential a narrative as the romantic heroine or plucky girl,[2] and that its literary lineage is derived from an altogether different and often more subversive sphere. The ancestry of the tomboy, as a literary form of female masculinity, began with women warriors described by Herodotus and others in antiquity. Emma Donoghue (2010) argues that classical and early modern literature firmly embedded and combined two female character types in literature and, by extension, in the popular imagination: the Amazon, a noble warrior woman, usually defending either her people or her family, and the Female Bridegroom – a female wanderer dressed as a man, who is accidentally betrothed to another woman. These two character types are the women most likely to be associated with hero quest narratives in early modern literature, and may have later developed into recognisable nineteenth century character types such as the Female Gentleman. The tomboy, then, is a modern version of an ancient archetype, the masculine woman, remodelled for the young readers of the nineteenth century, and evolving into powerful young heroines in fiction for young readers today. So I wonder what stories about gender – what "new modes of living" – these characters construct, especially for the young women who read them.

The tomboy narrative

The word 'tomboy' was first applied to rowdy young men (*Oxford English dictionary* cited by Abate 2008:xiii), but by the beginning of the seventeenth century was used to describe young women: a hint that by then, in life as well as in literature and on the stage, young women were confounding gender. According to *The Oxford English dictionary*, a tomboy was either a 'bold or immodest woman' (in use by 1579) or, by 1592, 'a girl who behaves like a spirited or boisterous boy; a wild romping girl; a hoyden' (Burchfield 1961:121). *The Oxford English dictionary* also notes that 'hoyden' is probably derived from 'heathen'.

One of the most boisterous was Moll Cutpurse (Mary Frith, 1584-1659), immortalised on stage and later in fiction, and described in the *Newgate Calendar*,

> [s]he was above all breeding and instruction. She was a very tomrig or hoyden, and delighted only in boys' play and pastime, not minding or companying with the girls. Many a bang and blow this hoyting procured her, but she was not so to be tamed, or taken off from her rude inclinations. She could not endure that sedentary life of sewing or stitching; a sampler was as grievous to her as a winding sheet; and on her needle, bodkin and thimble she could not think quietly, wishing them changed into sword and dagger for a bout at cudgels (Ex-Classics 2009).

A pickpocket and later highwaywoman, Moll astonished and appalled Jacobean London with her escapades and appearance. She was 'not so to be tamed', even by the criminal justice system, and crowds flocked to see her adventures enacted on stage (by male actors – a doubling of the gender performance) in two plays in two years: *The Madde Pranckes of Mery Mall of the Bankside, with Her Walks in Man's Apparel and to What Purpose* by John Day in 1610 (the text of which is now lost), and *The Roaring Girle* by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker in 1611. She even attended a performance of *The Roaring Girle* in men's clothes, with sword, and sang a song for the crowd. 'To be roaring was in itself subversive,' suggests Helen Wilcox (2013:144), noting that in the play, 'Moll has a very special characteristic, "two shadows", which not only implies her double gender but also hints at devilish practices of magic or witchcraft'. Real and imagined, Moll Cutpurse represented those two definitions of the early tomboy: subversive gender performance, and heathen practice. In the two hundred years between the first performance of *The Roaring Girle* and the publication of Jane Austen's novels, the tomboy was redefined in light of a changing awareness of childhood and of gender. While not all boisterous, subversive young women wore men's clothes, and they were seen as embodying male characteristics.

By the nineteenth century, Charlotte M. Yonge, conservative British author of hugely popular books including *The daisy chain, or, aspirations*, could say that she thought of tomboyism as 'a wholesome delight in rushing about at full speed, playing at active games, climbing trees, rowing boats, making dirt-pies, and the like' (cited by Wadsworth 2001:40). In other words, by the time Jo March erupted onto the page, the world was familiar with the concept of the girl or young woman who performs gender in ways traditionally seen as masculine – perhaps even in ways outside the western Enlightenment definition of civilisation. Tomboys were wild, they were outrageous by definition, they were defiant and heroic and uncontrollable – and also wholesome fun.

But the tomboy narrative was also traditionally one of control. In fiction and in life, tomboys faced pressure to conform to the very constraints against which they rebelled, positioning them in a complex series of relationships with families, institutions, and readers. The life stories of real tomboys and the fictional adventures of young women like Jo March reflected the cycle of often idyllic childhood, overshadowed by an inevitable coming-of-age process, which led to womanhood and marriage. More recently, a new narrative of tomboy chic tells young women that the tomboy is a transitory costume to be worn for a while, like comfortable 'boyfriend' jeans (Skerski 2011). What had been an identity is now a commodity – a fashion option for your adolescent phase. Barbara Creed (cited by Grosz & Probyn 1995:95) claims that '[t]he liminal journey of the tomboy – one of the few rites of passage stories available to women in the cinema – is a narrative of the forging of the proper female identity'.

And so, to the other part of the story in which tomboys must be tamed – *Little women* must become *Good wives*.[3] Tomboys are all well and good, until they get their periods.

Jack Halberstam (1998:6) suggests that tomboy behaviour is merely tolerated (and not always even that) up to pre-pubescence, but only within the context of 'blossoming womanhood', and not tolerated at all if it extends into adolescence,

> [v]ery often it is read as a sign of independence and self-motivation, and tomboyism may even be encouraged to the extent that it remains comfortably linked to a stable sense of a girl identity. Tomboyism is punished, however, when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification (taking a boy's name or refusing girl clothing of any type) and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence.

This taming narrative leaves no space for female masculinity continuing beyond puberty, and approval may be swiftly revoked if it turns out that the story is actually a transgender narrative. It is – or has been – a narrative which offers girls and young women some temporary privileges of masculinity while still fostering traditional womanhood; Anna Kolos (2014:2) goes so far as to argue that tomboyism actually 'sustains the binary gender distinction by rejecting femininity in favour of appropriating various prerogatives of masculinity'. Since the term first came into vogue, tomboyism has received certain forms of approval because it performs traits thought to be masculine and therefore inherently superior – so it seems perfectly sensible for girls to want to present themselves as the superior gender, until they can pretend no longer. It may even offer protection in a hostile world. Laura Lane-Steel (2011:481) has documented the use of tomboy characteristics as a protective identity, specifically for black lesbians in South Carolina, as it enables young women to 'strategically construct and perform their masculinity in ways that shield them from sexism, racism, and homophobia both in and out of their Black community'.

Karen Quimby (2003:1), however, suggests that the tomboy does not simply perform a form of masculinity, but also offers a profound questioning of notions of gender and sexuality,

> [t]he tomboy, by definition, points up that such categories as male and female, or masculine and feminine, are indeterminate and unstable. The tomboy, in other words, exemplifies that the notion of gender identity is not anchored to any secure, incontestable foundations. … By refusing to learn and enact femininity, the tomboy destabilizes gender as a 'natural' construct.
>
> Moreover, because some tomboys refuse to perform femininity over a lifetime, preferring a variously male-identified expression both physical and psychic, they expose the assumption that such tomboyism is temporary and safely confined to childhood.

I now explore some of these tensions by surveying a few key literary representations of the tomboy story, and their impact on the young women who read them.

Hoydens and whirlwinds

> No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine. … She was fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket … she had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper, was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny; she was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house (Austen 1981:817).

Northanger Abbey's Catherine Morland is one of Jane Austen's youngest protagonists, and arguably one of the first tomboys in English literature (the novel was published posthumously in 1817). In the first pages of the book, Catherine grows out of her love of cricket and baseball, is 'almost pretty' and discovers novels, but she tells us that tomboys existed in Austen's world, and sets the scene for those who came later.

The young slave Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's cabin* (published 1851-1852) upends gender roles as well as expectations around race and faith. As Michelle Ann Abate (2008:35) has argued, in stories from the United States, the tomboy is heavily racialised,

> [a]s her name suggests, the young black girl is literally and figuratively topsy-turvy. Nearly every aspect of her physical appearance, personal temperament, and daily behavior violates the heavily raced and classed notions of what was "womanly" and 'feminine' during this era. Rather than possessing long feminine locks, for instance, Topsy has a "short and unkempt mane" … Moreover, rather than displaying the feminine traits of spiritual piety and familial respect, Topsy is "heathenish".

In the decades after the US Civil War, a series of wildly popular books for girls featured avowedly tomboy heroines: Gypsey Breynton, created by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (in an eponymous series, the first of which was published in 1866); Jo March, created by Louisa May Alcott (1868); and Susan Coolidge's Katy Carr (1872). The specific idea of the tomboy that developed in the nineteenth century was embodied in these popular fictional heroines, who were good-hearted, impulsive, courageous young women, temporarily disturbing the equilibrium of their households and gender norms.

This trend was part of a rapid expansion of publishing, and especially of literature for children in English, and the incredible popularity of the *bildungsroman* or coming-of-age story as a form. Tomboys also appeared in fiction for boys and for adults, such as Henry James's *Watch and ward*, featuring young Nora Lambert, of whom another character says,

> "I can't think of her as a girl … she seems to me a boy. She climbs trees, she scales fences, she keeps rabbits, she straddles upon your old mare. I found her this morning wading in the pond. She is growing up a hoyden; you ought to give her more civilising influences than she enjoys hereabouts; you ought to engage a governess, or send her to school. It is well enough now; but, my poor fellow, what will you do when she is twenty?" (James 1878:37).

Nora, like Topsy, is a heathen – 'a brand snatched from the burning' (James 1878:29) – who must be converted to conventional faith as well as to womanhood.

In colonies of the then British Empire, the narrative was slightly different. White girls from the bush, like Sybylla in Australian author Miles Franklin's *My brilliant career* (first published in 1901 but written years earlier), were unconventional girls rebelling against the drudgery and limitations of rural life and developed as responses to the cultural demands of a modern nationalist colonising society. As Michelle Smith (2014:3) notes,

> [t]he healthy and attractive Australian Girl was not necessarily defined as a threat to the gendered or sexual order and was not demonised in the periodical press. Indeed, rather than being lambasted by men, the Australian Girl was accommodated in burgeoning nationalism and in national mythologies … the Australian Girl was both a counterpart of, and contrast to, figures such as the Lone Hand, the iconic nationalist bushman figure who represented the older pastoral economy.

Franklin began writing the novel when she was 16, and perhaps we can hear her own voice when Sybylla describes her youthful self as 'a romp, a hoyden, a boisterous tomboy, a whirlwind' (Franklin 1965:196). Like Laura in Henry Handel Richardson's *The getting of wisdom*, Sybylla is rare among nineteenth-century heroines for remaining untamed by marriage or circumstance at the end of the novel – one reason she and her creator are remembered today in feminist writing and publishing.[4]

For there was little doubt that one day, hell-raising young (white) hoydens would become good wives and mothers – and participate in the enterprise of Empire and colonisation. In 1886, Edward Salmon (cited by Wadsworth 2006:59) declared, in an article entitled 'What Girls Read',

> [b]oys' literature of a sound kind ought to build up men. Girls' literature ought to help to build up women. If in choosing the books that boys shall read it is necessary to remember that we are choosing mental food for the future chiefs of a great race, it is equally important not to forget in choosing books for girls that we are choosing mental food for the future wives and mothers of that race.

Many fictional tomboys, such as Sybylla, were portrayed as strong from labouring on the farm, as expert horse-riders and as being capable in the bush, reflecting the reality of many girls' lives and the rhetoric of nation-building, as 'it is the necessity of adventurous actions or rough work in extraordinary circumstances in imperial locations that

makes them acceptable for these fictional girls to perform' (Smith 2011:106). One figure written against this imperial expectation is, arguably, Rebekah in Olive Schreiner's unfinished and posthumously published *From man to man* (1927). Rebekah is described as a tomboy as a small child, but grows into motherhood and adoptive motherhood as a New Woman, and an emblem of Schreiner's hope for a new South Africa.

Most of the tomboy *bildungsroman* narratives tell a tale of hardship, defiance, crisis or misadventure, leading to learning and acceptance, epitomised for many readers by the story of Jo March and her sisters in *Little women*. Each of the sisters has their own quest, but Jo is the discontented, 'topsy-turvy', creative, gangly colt, with 'big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it' (Alcott 1910:9). As Anne Boyd Rioux (2018:[sp]) notes, '[w]hat does it mean that this venerated story of girlhood centers on a girl who doesn't want to be one at all?'. Jo's character is tested throughout – by her sister, Amy's, accident, caused by Jo's tearaway temper, the death of her beloved Beth, and the sacrifice of her hair to raise money for her mother. Jo's haircut is a transition that makes her even more boyish on a physical level, but is a key marker of her taming – a step on her Pilgrim's Progress towards *Good wives*, and an example of the ways in which gender is used to support 'defining institutions … [such as] compulsory heterosexuality' (Butler 2006:xxxi). Jo is painfully aware that the world of *Little women* is constricted and requires restraint and submission to marriage. In contrast, her male friend, Laurie, can travel, study and be independent. Jo struggles to juggle the demands of family and society with her own desire for freedom and a creative life. She struggles most, though, with her own passions,

> Jo's rebellion against conventional femininity is inextricably linked to her anger, which is made into the key to Jo's personality and the special fault that she must conquer on her Bunyanesque journey towards self-improvement … Jo's own description of her anger characterizes it as "savage" and sadistic, and she fears it will make her do something "dreadful" (Monnet 2009:89).

Jo contrasts her own fury and heathenish behaviour with that of her mother, Marmee, who reveals her struggles with her own temper. Marmee is the feminine ideal, the role model of the tamed hoyden. She is Jo's future. But Jo does not go gently into purse-lipped silence. Anne Scott MacLeod (1995:24-25) compares Jo to two other key figures from girls' literature from the US, namely *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Anne of Green Gables*,

> [a]s the girls grow older, their personalities become less emphatic. They never rebel and never yearn for what they cannot have; indeed, they never even recognise that there is work in the world for which they are suited by nature but from which they are prevented by social convention … Jo March knew very well what she

> mourned: the intact family of her childhood and the freedom to behave according to her nature rather than to a prescribed code for her sex. And Jo, within the strictures of nineteenth-century behaviour (and of nineteenth-century children's books) was rebellious and resentful at her loss.

Although some critics have argued that Jo's version of female masculinity continues into the later books and that her married life, household and school are so unconventional as to be subversive, Joanne Brown and Nancy St Clair (2002:15) point out that even Jo's language changes from 'boyish slang' to 'ladylike' until she becomes like her sisters and mother, and by the end of the series 'is but a trace of the lively girl' she once was. For while the possibilities embodied by tomboys are part of the appeal, perhaps they are too dangerous and suspiciously queer to be allowed to go untamed – or too angry. Some early fictional tomboys were severely punished, even by feminist authors, perhaps to indicate how narrow life choices truly were. Judy Woolcot in Ethel Turner's *Seven little Australians* (1873) was killed off in her youth, thereby scarring generations of readers for life, while What Katy actually did was hurt her back and be confined to bed until her tomboy phase passed.

The New Girl

The explosion of youthful tomboys in the mid-nineteenth century was part of the emergence of a more diverse range of fictional female characters, such as scheming crones and plucky but virtuous girls, such as Mrs Clennam and Amy in *Little Dorrit*. This helped create space later, in the *fin-de-siècle*, when authors such as Olive Schreiner, Miles Franklin and George Egerton were defining the New Woman in fiction.[5] Divorce and property laws were changing in many countries, a powerful Queen was on the British throne, and barriers to women's education, employment and legal recognition were gradually being dismantled – at least for some (usually white) middle-class women. It was also what Sarah Bilston (2004) has dubbed 'the awkward age' in fiction for women and girls, where the increasing number of female authors struggled to balance representation of womanhood or nation-building with ideas of gender rebellion, independence and creativity – and indeed their own lived experience. The ideal child of earlier didactic tracts gave way to more complex, and sometimes much naughtier, girls (Foster & Simons 1995:7).

The child, Lyndall, in Schreiner's *The story of an African farm* is sent away to boarding school, returning years later – pregnant but a 'manly woman' (Parkin-Gounelas 1991:103). Lyndall has been called 'unmistakably a prototype New Woman' (Ledger 1997:2) and is fiercely feminist – 'I am not in so great a hurry to put my neck beneath any man's foot' (Schreiner 1986:184). Still, she has few options, and dies too young

on the farm where she once ran free. For while the New Woman novels explored the impact of certain freedoms and notions of gender, in most representations, 'women's lives are presented as inherently problematic, and unhappiness is the norm. Whatever path they choose, whether they conform to or break with convention, women are likely to be thwarted and frustrated' (Pykett 1992:148). Still, the New Woman opened up possibilities for the New Girl alongside the tomboy trope – the rebellious daughter and the plucky heroine are more optimistic versions of the New Woman – and the changes taking place in the world gave New Girls, such as Sybylla Melvyn or Laura Tweedle Rambotham, more options for their adulthood. They might take up a profession, or ride a bicycle, or write a book, or become an amateur detective.

The smart, educated and independent 'Female Gentlemen' (Schaub 2013) appeared in Sensation and mystery stories in the guise of women such as Marion Holcombe in *The woman in white* and Sherlock Holmes's adversary, Irene Adler. Conan Doyle described Irene Adler as having 'the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men' (Conan Doyle 2005:18). Like their ancestors, the 'female bridegroom' figures of early modern romances and opera, Female Gentlemen embodied attributes seen as masculine, such as rationality, courage, intelligence and honour, but they were adult, untamed tomboys; the type of woman Jo March might have become.

This was not a narrative of what we now understand as transgender – it was a stark representation of the binary and the idea that only men have such qualities and are therefore interesting enough to write about. If women were to have adventures, they had to be positioned as heroes – a female version of the default male hero. There are many of these in literature through the ages: the warrior woman, the female wanderer dressed as a man for safety, the lady detective, and the cross-dressing pirate. These are characters who take on a traditionally male role and subvert gender expectations for both readers and characters, as Irene Adler did by outsmarting Sherlock Holmes.

To many readers and writers, it seemed that only boys had adventures, in stories and in life. So to have an adventure, you must be a boy or aspire to be like a boy. Or, perhaps, have a boy trapped somewhere inside you. Even Pippi Longstocking was once described as being 'a boy in disguise' (Pinsent 2013:25). It is no coincidence then that, like Jo March, several of the most influential young female characters went by boys' names, particularly in the twentieth century. Enid Blyton alone created Bill, Darrell, Bobby, Henry, Jo – a tribute to Alcott – and of course George in *The famous five*, modelled on Blyton herself,

> "I'm George," said the girl. "I shall only answer if you call me George. I hate being a girl. I won't be. I don't like doing the things that girls do. I like doing the things that boys do. I can climb better than any boy, and swim faster too. I can sail a boat as well as any fisher-boy on this coast" (Blyton 1942:19).

George is not *like* a boy. She's better than one. In a later volume, Dick says to her,

> "[j]olly girlish-looking boy you are, that's all I can say." George flared up at once. "Don't be mean! I'm not girlish-looking. I've far more freckles than you have, for one thing, and better eyebrows. And I can make my voice go deep" (Blyton 1947:64).

As problematic as the phenomenally popular Blyton books are in other ways, including their racism, they were adventure stories – mysteries, usually – in which male, female, and tomboy characters all had parts to play. George, like Jo March, is often shown to be angry, and with good cause. Her cousin, Julian, constantly tries to assert his authority, and insists that adventures belong to boys. George ignores him. Her power comes from her capability, her anger, and her utter inability to surrender to society (Rudd 1995). And she never does.

A book of one's own: girls reading tomboys

It is impossible to over-estimate the cultural impact of popular novels of the nineteenth century – books were accessible for the first time in incredible numbers to the growing number of people across many classes, countries and languages. People were literate for the first time, and popular novels undeniably had an indirect impact on people who could not read them. Many of these novels featured girls and women who provided examples of lives that many already led, beyond the plot of romance and marriage – domestic realism focused on women and girls who worked, suffered, and who defied social expectations.

They also, just like Katy, longed for something else, something other. Texts such as *Little women* and L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of new moon* imagined a world in which a young woman could live a creative life and look beyond the roles and behaviours laid down for her. And readers loved them,[6]

> [t]he preoccupation with self that is characteristic of adolescents makes them particularly receptive to fiction. They tend to identify strongly with a story's characters, share their dilemma, and participate in the choices that the characters make, keenly aware of the values that their actions imply (Brown & St Clair 2002:9).

In *Little women*, Alcott captured this *zeitgeist* so perfectly that the identification between reader, writer and character survives generations. As Anne Scott MacLeod (1995:15)

writes, 'Alcott retraced and also reshaped the patterns of her own life; truth and wish were bound together … As every reader recognizes, Jo March is the author, the author is Jo March, and so is every girl that reads the book'.

That magical thinking process of truth and wish on the part of the author reflects the reader's experience of immersion in the text, in the character of Jo, and so in the author as represented by Jo. In 1883 Alcott said, just as Jo might have done, 'I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body' (Monnet 2009:146). Jo, the author/character, is the artistic spirit who writes and performs plays, falls into a 'vortex' (Alcott 1910:316) where nothing matters but her writing, and later (secretly) publishes pot-boilers of the very sort that Alcott wrote under a pseudonym. And it was this creative independence, as well as her boisterous, boyish manners, that was adored by an increasingly diverse range of readers, from Maxine Hong Kingston to bell hooks to Susan Sontag (Rioux 2018).

The essayist and fiction writer Cynthia Ozick (1984:303) recalled in her memoir of growing up as the child of immigrant parents, *A drugstore in winter*,

> I read *Little Women* a thousand times. Ten thousand. I am no longer incognito, even to myself. I am Jo in her "vortex"; not Jo exactly, but some Jo-of-the-future. I am under an enchantment.

African American writer Ann Petry (cited by Kerber, Kessler-Harris & Sklar 1995:260) remembers *Little women* as the first book she read on her own as a child,

> I couldn't stop reading because I had encountered Jo March. I felt as though I was part of Jo and she was part of me. I, too, was a tomboy and a misfit and kept a secret diary … She was a would-be writer and so was I.

Perhaps most famously, Simone de Beauvoir (cited by Sicherman 2010:28) wrote in *Memoirs of a dutiful daughter*,

> [i]n *Little Women* Jo was superior to her sisters, who were either more virtuous or more beautiful than she, because of her passion for knowledge and the vigour of her thinking; her superiority was as outstanding as that of certain adults and guaranteed that she would have an unusual life: she was marked by fate. I, too, felt I was entitled to consider my taste in reading and my scholastic successes as tokens of a personal superiority which would be borne out by the future. I became in my own eyes a character out of a novel.

That power of connection with the character has still not diminished. 'I, personally, am Jo March,' novelist Barbara Kingsolver wrote in *High tide in Tucson* (Kingsolver 2011:44). Alberghene and Clarke (2014:xxxv) acknowledge 'a characteristic manoeuvre of generations of *Little Women*'s readers: the desire to appropriate the text, to make it one's own' – the flipside of the author writing herself into the character. But as young

women read texts the way they want to – read themselves into the story – they go over and over the first sections of *Little women* and many abandon the story of the March family at the moment of Jo's containment, just as they skip those tedious chapters in which Katy is brainwashed into the Victorian school of saintly infirmity. Alcott's consciously 'perverse' marriage plot in *Little women* forced young readers to change the way they read the text to meet their own emotional needs; just as young queers always have to read beyond texts or into the margins to see themselves. Quimby (2003:4) claims that many readers simply cannot make sense of Jo's conversion from a little woman to a good wife: 'the conclusion [to *Little women*] is so unsatisfying and incoherent that most readers reject it in favor of the far more queer middle of Jo's plot'.

And what of those readers? Many of the prototypical tomboys in fiction lived privileged lives that allowed a little subversion. In real life, things were very different in the age of the New Woman and fearless tomboy. Of course, women and girls have always worked – on farms, in trades, in factories and domestic service, in what we now call hospitality and retail – but these were rarely represented in fiction and were not seen as professions. And at the same time as Jo March was shedding tears over cutting her hair, many women worked because they were given no choice – as domestic workers, as forced labourers, and as slaves. Features that define the tomboy in some spheres – such as wearing male clothing or working for a living – were merely facts of life for girls living on farms (Abate 2008).

But the tomboy experience was more widespread than it appeared in fiction. Memoirs of girls growing up in the same era as Jo March record markedly similar childhoods, and the same process of taming before marriage,

> [m]any American women could and did look back to their childhood years as a period of physical and psychic freedom unmatched by anything in their later life … many American families allowed their little girls to live nearly as unfettered and vigorous an outdoor life as their brothers (MacLeod 1995:6-7).

Many, as we have seen, also look back on the books they read in childhood with longing – as readers of my generation do today,

> [b]y far my favourite children's stories, though, were two books, *My Naughty Little Sister* and another called *Ramona the Pest* which was all about the adventures of a girl who constantly got into trouble, who couldn't help herself from messing things up and causing a stir and making a fuss. She was opinionated and defiant and risk-taking and I loved her. I definitely wanted to be her. She didn't wear dresses — I supposed she would definitely be labelled a tomboy but that wouldn't have meant anything to me, I just thought she was cool (Robinson 2010:29).

New generations

Recent decades have witnessed another explosion in publishing for children, and specifically for teenagers and young adults, including series of mysteries featuring amateur detectives such as the tomboy Trixie Belden (published between 1948 and 1986), blockbuster speculative and historical fiction, and edgier urban contemporary novels. Marnina Gonick (cited by Connors 2014:137) identifies two narratives about girls as subjects that developed in the 1990s. The first is 'Reviving Ophelia', which positions young women as fragile and inherently vulnerable, damsels in distress, derived, I suggest, from the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House. The second is 'Girl Power' which, she says, 'represents a "new girl": assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of a passive femininity' (Gonick cited by Connors 2014:137). While this concept of 'Girl Power' is derived from the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman model, I suggest that the tomboy exists as another distinct and common third type, reflecting an ancient archetypal fiction of female masculinity, adapted to the aspirations of new generations of young women and leading readers on to the kick-ass heroines of young adult novels today.

The character types of the tomboy and the new girl often go together: fictional tomboys and other powerful girls need a heroine, just like any other hero. She might be a cousin, like Helen in *What Katy did* or later Anne in *The famous five*, a sister like Beth in *Little women*, or someone who believed in her, as Little Eva believed in Topsy. The damsel in distress still exists as a counterpoint to the tomboy, often needing to be rescued or to teach a lesson to the heroine – in some recent texts, the damsel no longer has to die for the lesson to be learned and is likely to be a spiritual guide to the heroine.

Malindo Lo's queer fantasy novel, *Huntress* (2011), features a young, intelligent, female martial arts expert, Kaede, who understands that strength is about more than fighting (although there is also excellent fighting in the novel). Her partner is the mystical seer, Taisin. Lo (2012) has written that her novels *Ash* and *Huntress* are,

> [b]oth set in secondary fantasy worlds where I have purposely expunged homophobia and (mostly) sexism from those societies. Because of that, the girls in those books are not weighted down with the expectations and traditions that an American girl in the twenty-first century is burdened with. I took great joy in turning those traditions upside down.

It is no surprise that speculative fiction enables these narratives. In recent decades, young readers have followed the adventures of female knights in Tamora Pierce's *Protector of the small* (2007) and *Lioness* (2009) series, or Lyra in Philip Pullman's *His dark materials* (2001) trilogy who travels between universes, negotiates with polar bears, and saves hundreds of children from Nicole Kidman.[7]

On screen and in print, *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) fighter Princess Leia has grown into a general in the Resistance, and her vital role has been handed on to a new tomboy and Jedi knight in training: Rey. Audience favourite Arya Stark, in George R.R. Martin's *Songs of fire and ice* (1996 and ongoing - televised as *Game of Thrones*) cycle is a direct descendent of all the young heroines in historical fiction who cross-dress when travelling or try to pass as boys – as did many women in the past – such as several versions of Maid Marion, Kit in Geoffrey Trease's *Cue for treason* (1965), young pirates such as Mary Faber in L.M. Meyer's *Bloody Jack* (2004), and more recently, Alison in Jesse Blackadder's *The raven's heart* (2011) and Isabella in my own *Act of faith* (Gardiner 2011).

Disguise is also critical to superhero stories, such as *Supergirl* (Berlanti 2015), recently revived on television with a new character – Supergirl's adoptive sister, Alex Danvers, an adult tomboy whose queer coming-out storyline caused a sensation in 2017. The show and its print predecessors (first published in 1959), like *Jessica Jones* (in comics since 2001 and on screen from 2015), explore questions of power, responsibility and strength. The positioning of female characters – tomboys or not, superheroes or not – as *unusually* strong, or *uncharacteristically* strong, is still constant in commentary about what is popularly and annoyingly called the "strong female character" in fiction and media for young adults today. Strength – physical, psychological or emotional – is still construed as being uncharacteristic of young women, as indeed is being the centre of a narrative (Hamilton *et al.* 2006).

Katniss Everdeen, in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger games* trilogy (2008), is physically strong and undoubtedly brave. But to survive, she must also appear to be beautiful and vulnerable. Katniss is transformed by stylists into an acceptable version of femininity and makes a series of decisions about how to play the deadly game: decisions both empower and disempower her. Sean Connors (2014:141) suggests that Katniss can be read 'as a metaphor for the damage that patriarchal institutions inflict on young females'. I suggest that young women read her in sophisticated ways: as a symbol of resistance, the risks of that resistance, and the price young women pay for both living under and confronting patriarchy.[8]

Katniss stands up for the oppressed citizens of the dystopian Panem and eventually leads them in a rebellion. But, at the end of the trilogy, she is profoundly damaged and has settled for an approximation of family life presented, still, as bleak. As for the New Woman, there is no happy ending. The screen version, on the contrary, is all butterflies and flowers and happy families with Peeta, who has always loved her. This tamed cinematic Katniss is even – I can barely write the words – in a floral frock. That version mirrors scenes in older texts, such as *Cue for treason*, in which the narrator, Peter, watches the now-tamed and more appropriately feminine Kit with their children.

One protagonist who is never tamed by gender expectations is the ultimate lone wolf, Micah, in Justine Larbelestier's *Liar*. The tomboy's change into another dimension when her period starts is explored metaphorically – and hilariously, when she tries to reveal the truth to a teacher,

> "There *is* something wrong with my periods! I turn into a wolf!" Now I'm shouting.
>
> Yayeko puts her hands up. "There's nothing wrong with being a girl, Micah.""What?" I'm spluttering. I sit down. "Of course there isn't. I didn't say there was."
>
> "I remember when you pretended to be a boy, Micah. … I know things have been hard for you but you don't have to take it out on your own body. You have to stop supressing the girl parts of yourself. Is that why you keep your hair so short? Why you never wear skirts or dresses?" (Larbelestier 2009:313, emphasis in original).

Micah's change reveals her inherent wildness, and the decision about whether or not it should be tamed is hers. The decision to tame her inner wolf is what ensures her independence – she runs, keeps running, but is no longer pursued by her own demons.[9]

Tomboy hearts

This all matters deeply because generations of girls and young women have felt as if tomboy was a definition of gender that they could perform, that modelled independence and courage and mastery – a definition that said "there are other ways to be".

It might offer you protection, it might enable you to seek out other gender or sexual identities. You might be a famous detective. Or queer. Or, yes, a boy.

It matters, too, because generations of girls have had the tomboy trained or scrubbed or beaten or blackmailed out of them. Maybe it is really a phase in some lives – or perhaps it enables a spirit of adventure that never quite leaves you.

It matters because we know how much we are influenced by the stories we read or see or hear. The tomboy tells young readers that while they may access the benefits of performing masculinity, it is still masculinity that matters the most, while the taming narrative tells them that those benefits might only be bestowed temporarily.

So it matters greatly that from that remarkable literary lineage we can now read tales of new tomboys – who may not even be defined by that term – and characters who operate at newly fluid gender boundaries. These characters may be trans or clearly nonbinary, and open up spaces for stories such as Alex Gino's transgender protagonist in *George* (2015) and Ivan Coyote's (2016:115) memoir, *Tomboy survival guide*,

> [y]ou don't have to look a certain way to be a tomboy. Don't let anyone tell you that, ever, and please don't find that here in my words. Tomboy thrums in your heart. It's in your head. It's what's holding your spine in place. It can't be hidden by a haircut. It's not about nail polish or not. It's running right now in your veins. If it is in you, you already know. Tomboy blood is so much bigger than the outside of you.

It matters because those fictional tomboys reflect the real lives of girls, nonbinary kids, and young women in many communities; the pressures and dangers with which they live, and the solace they find in reading stories that speak to the truth of their experience.

Just like me.

Notes

1. In a letter to Elizabeth Powell dated 20 March 1869, Louisa May Alcott wrote: 'Jo should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody, that I didn't dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her' (Alcott 1995:124–25).

2. Rioux (2018) claims that Little women is arguably the most influential book ever written by an American woman.

3. *Good wives* was the name given to the second volume of *Little women* in the UK and (then) British Empire.

4. One of Australia's important feminist publishing collectives was called Sybylla Press, and the national award for writing by women is the Stella Prize, after Stella Miles Franklin (and in response to years of male-dominated shortlists for the national writing award, the Miles Franklin).

5. Many of these women used male or androgynous pen names – a tactic famously adopted by the Brontë sisters and George Eliot decades earlier. Alcott published several novels as A.M. Barnard, while Schreiner first published *The story of an African farm* under the name Ralph Iron.

6. The first edition of *Little women* was published by Roberts Brothers in September 1868 and sold out immediately. By the time *Jo's boys* was published in 1871, its initial print run was 38 000 copies (Showalter in Alcott 2005:1073-4).

7. Kidman appeared as the evil Mrs Coulter in *The Golden Compass*, a 2007 film version of the first book in the trilogy, *The northern lights* (1995).

8. This is a narrative that has become even more urgent in the current political climate in the US, in which Katniss's salute of defiance is often used on social media as an indicator of resistance to right-wing forces. The salute was banned during 2014 protests in Thailand and students seen performing it were arrested. The film version of the third book in the trilogy, *Mockingjay*, was also banned (Mydans 2014).

9. Or not. Micah is a liar, and there are several possible readings of the book and several possible endings. She may not even be a werewolf. But she is definitely a tomboy.

REFERENCES

Abate, MA. 2008. *Tomboys: A literary and cultural history*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Alberghene, JM & Clark, BL. 2014. *Little women and the feminist imagination: Criticism, controversy, personal essays*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis.

Alcott, LM. 1995. *The selected letters of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by J Myerson, D Shealy & MB Stern. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Alcott, LM. 1910 [1868]. *Little women*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.

Alcott, LM. 2005. *Little women, little men and Jo's boys*. Edited by Elaine Showalter. New York: Library of America.

Austen, J. 1981. *Northanger abbey, her complete novels*. New York: Avenel.

Berlanti, G. 2015. Executive producer. *Supergirl*. Warner Bros.

Bilston, S. 2004. *The awkward age in women's popular fiction, 1850-1900: Girls and the transition to womanhood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Blackadder, J. 2011. *The raven's heart.* Sydney: HarperCollins.

Blyton, E. 1942. *Five on a treasure island*. London: Hodder & Staughton.

Blyton, E. 1947. *Five on Kirrin Island again*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Brown, J & St Clair, N. 2002. *Declarations of independence: Empowered girls in young adult literature, 1990-2001*. London: Scarecrow Press.

Burchfield, Robert (ed). 1961. *Oxford English dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Butler, J. 2006 [1990]. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Edited by Linda J Nicholson. New York: Routledge.

Collins, S. 2008. *The hunger games*. New York: Scholastic.

Conan DA. 2005. *The new annotated Sherlock Holmes*. New York: WW Norton.

Connors, SP. 2014. *The politics of Panem: Challenging genres.* Rotterdam: SensePublishers.

Coolidge, S. 1887. *What Katy did*. Boston: Roberts Brothers.

Coyote, I. 2016. *Tomboy survival guide*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Donoghue, E. 2010. *Inseparable: Desire between women in literature*. New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Foster, S & Simons, J. 1995. *What Katy read: Feminist re-readings of 'classic' stories for girls.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Franklin, M. 1965 [1901]. *My brilliant career.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson.

Gardiner, K. 2011. *Act of faith*. Sydney: HarperCollins.

Gino, A. 2015. *George*. New York: Scholastic Incorporated.

Grosz, EA & Probyn, E. 1995. *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Halberstam, J. 1998. *Female masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hamilton, MC, Anderson, D, Broaddus, M & Young, K. 2006. Gender stereotyping and under-representation of female characters in 200 popular children's picture books: A twenty-first century update. *Sex Roles* 55(11):757-765.

James, H. 1878 [1871]. *Watch and ward*. Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Co.

Kerber, LK, Kessler-Harris, A & Sklar, KK. 1995. *U.S. history as women's history: New feminist essays.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Kingsolver, B. 2011. *High tide in Tucson*. London: Faber & Faber.

Kołos, A. 2014. Tomboyism in fashion and contemporary popular culture, in *The contested and the poetic: Gender and the body*, edited by A Stone. Oxford: InterDisciplinary Press:3-22.

Lane-Steele, L. 2011. Studs and protest-hypermasculinity: The tomboyism within black lesbian female masculinity. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15(4):480-492.

Larbalestier, J. 2009. *Liar*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Ledger, S. 1997. *The New Woman: Fiction and feminism at the fin de siècle.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Lo, M. 2011. *Huntress*. New York: Little, Brown Book Group.

Lo, M. 2012. *Being conscious about gender*. [O]. Available: http://www.malindalo.com/2012/01/being-conscious-about-gender/. Accessed 17 April 2017.

Lucas, G. 1977. Director. *Star Wars*. Twentieth Century Fox.

MacLeod, AS. 1995. *American childhood: Essays on children's literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.* Athens GA: University of Georgia Press.

Martin, GRR. 1996. *A Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam Books.

Meyer, LA. 2004. *Bloody Jack: Being an account of the curious adventures of Mary 'Jacky' Faber, ship's boy.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Monnet, AS. 2009. Louisa May Alcott's many masks: An encounter between feminism and queer theory. *SPELL: Writing American Women: Text, Gender, Performance*. 23: 83-106.

Mydans, S. 2014. *Thai protesters are detained after using "Hunger Games" salute.* [O]. Available: https://www.myendnoteweb.com/EndNoteWeb.html?cat=myrefs&. Accessed 20 April 2017.

Ex-Classics web site,. 2009. *Newgate Calendar: Mary Frith otherwise Moll Cutpurse*. [O]. Available:
http://www.exclassics.com/newgate/ng25.htm.
Accessed 20 May 2017.

Ozick, C. 1984. A drugstore in winter, in *Art and ardor,* edited by C Ozick. New York: Knopf:225-240.

Parkin-Gounelas, R. 1991. *Fictions of the female self: Charlotte Brontë, Olive Schreiner, Katherine Mansfield.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pierce, T. 2007. *First test: Book 1 of the protector of the small quartet.* New York: Random House Children's Books.

Pierce, T. 2009. *Alanna: The first adventure.* New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Pinsent, P. 2013. *Children's literature and the politics of equality.* Oxford: Taylor & Francis.

Pullman, P. 2001. *His dark materials*. London: Scholastic.

Pykett, L. 1992. *The 'improper' feminine: The women's sensation novel and the New Woman writing.* New York: Routledge.

Quimby, K. 2003. The story of Jo: Literary tomboys, Little Women, and the sexual-textual politics of narrative desire. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1(1):1-22.

Rioux, AB. 2018. *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The story of Little Women and why it still matters*. London: WW Norton.

Robinson, K. 2010. Tomboys and Sissy Girls: Exploring girls' power, agency and female relationships in childhood through the memories of women. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 35(1):24-31.

Rudd, D. 1995. Five have a gender-ful time: Blyton, sexism, and the infamous five. *Children's Literature in Education* 26(3):185-196.

Schaub, M. 2013. *Middlebrow feminism in classic British detective fiction: The female gentleman*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schreiner, O & Cronwright-Schreiner, SC. 1927. *From man to man; or, perhaps only —.* New York: Harper & Brothers.

Schreiner, O. 1986. *The story of an African farm.* Edited by D Jacobson. London: Penguin Books Limited.

Sellers, KM. 2012. Tossing the pink parasol: *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, the New Woman, and progressive era reform. *Children's Literature* 40:108-130.

Sicherman, B. 2010. *Well-read lives: How books inspired a generation of American women.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Skerski, J. 2011. Tomboy chic: Re-fashioning gender rebellion. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15(4):466-479.

Smith, MJ. 2014. The 'Australian Girl' and the domestic ideal in colonial women's fiction, in *Domestic fiction in colonial Australia and New Zealand*, edited by T Wagner. New York: Pickering & Chatto:75-89.

Smith, MJ. 2011. *Empire in British girls' literature and culture imperial girls, 1880-1915.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Trease, G & Flax, Z. 1965. *Cue for treason*. London: Puffin Books.

Turner, E. 1873. *Seven little Australians*. London: Ward, Lock & Company.

Wadsworth, SJF. 2006. *In the company of books: Literature and its 'classes' in nineteenth-century America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Wadsworth, SJF. 2001. Louisa May Alcott, William T. Adams, and the Rise of Gender-Specific Series Books. *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25(1):17-46.

Wilcox, H. 2013. *1611: Authority, gender and the word in Early Modern England.* New Jersey: Wiley.