

Spring 2014

What Experience Can't Tell: How to Show Reality in Young Adult Fiction, A Female Warrior's Story

Jessica A. Walker
Hamline University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/dhp>

Recommended Citation

Walker, Jessica A., "What Experience Can't Tell: How to Show Reality in Young Adult Fiction, A Female Warrior's Story" (2014).
Departmental Honors Projects. Paper 13.

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Hamline. It has been accepted for inclusion in Departmental Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Hamline. For more information, please contact jneilson01@hamline.edu.

What Experience Can't Tell: How to Show Reality in Young Adult Fiction, A Female
Warrior's Story

Jessica Walker

An Honors Thesis
Submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements
For graduation with honors in Creative Writing
From Hamline University

01 May 2014

I am an American Soldier. I am a war veteran, awarded the Combat Action Badge. I experienced hostile fire and helplessness at the hands of war. I carried my buddy on a stretcher through the whipping sand and slid her into a Blackhawk. I achieved excellence and never quit. I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills. I am an expert, and I am a professional. I am all of this and more. I am Female.

I am not in any way less because I am a female and small. Apparently, however, many hold this sentiment, since, as a female soldier, I receive thousands of emails from girls asking for guidance, asking me how to be “strong.” They comb through their lives and the Internet for answers to important life and identity questions, and they find me. They say I’m the only person they could find to ask these questions.

They were unable to find anything *anywhere*? What about the literature these girls are reading? With all the YA novels being published, the new emphasis on female warriors, aren’t there authentic role models for these girls?

As of January 24, 2013, General Dempsey and Secretary Panetta “announced the end of the direct ground combat exclusion rule for female service members” (see Appendix A: Women in Ground Combat). It has become a reality for women not only to serve in the military but to be given the same opportunities as males. It is a complex issue with varying rifts and opinions, but despite its controversial appeal, it doesn’t seem to have rippled into other aspects of American life.

Having spent the past few months reading and studying young adult literature, I have concluded that there’s a significant lack of female warrior representation in YA literature. Specifically, a warrior representation that resembles our modern day military, or at least a

representation that properly corresponds to trials female warriors actually face in a primarily male dominated field.

Why Does This Matter?

When I was growing up, I had no heroes to admire. Mulan and Pocahontas had dragons and talking animals and problems that, while interesting, were removed from my own reality. I watched the Mighty Morphin Power rangers; however, I dismissed the pink and yellow ones as weak (perhaps because they were girls) and avidly tracked the cool green power ranger. Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera sang and danced their way across the screen, and I felt disconnected. Michelle Kwan won the gold medal in the Olympics, and I was proud. But that was it. I wanted, needed, more.

Eventually, I found these female warriors in fiction, specifically, in young adult literature I was reading. I buried myself in stories of girls fighting as knights and talking to dragons, girls who had dreams and chased after them, despite what society wanted of them. They proved to the world that they could do more.

Looking at young adult literature today, I see that it has gone far, even from when I was a teenager. It reflects a world brimming with convictions and showcases protagonists growing into formidable potentiality. Veronica Roth, Suzanne Collins, Kristin Cashore, Tamora Pierce, and many others are leading the way with their strong and lifelike female warriors.

Our society wants to read about a character full of complexity and humanity; we want to feel for the characters on the page, and we want to feel emboldened because of them. I am no different. Even before I shipped off for Basic Training, I read Pierce's *The Protector of the Small* quartet to bolster my courage. The series is about a girl who wants to be a knight and how she goes about making her dream a reality; she experiences trials and tribulations in the form of her

comrades, her gender, and war, yet she strives through it all, brave and determined. It helped me, a lot.

Unfortunately, though, the reality when I entered the military was so much worse, which left me feeling that our young adult literature had let me down in some way. It made me wonder if the literature, other than giving me courage, could also have prepared me for the realities of our world. Despite the overwhelming amount of literature highlighting well-rounded and strong female characters, we're still missing much-needed elements of female strength. We're also missing the significance of an unfortunate gender reality. And to top it all off, we writers are sometimes so in love with making complex characters with real weaknesses that sometimes our characters are weak in the wrong ways.

Analyzing Popular YA Literature with Female Warriors: Do They Fall Short?

I have chosen to study four mainstay authors who have written stories with sufficiently strong female warriors: Veronica Roth, Suzanne Collins, Kristen Cashore, and Tamora Pierce. These four authors have greatly affected the youth of our society and have aided in the acceleration of female independence, confidence, and self-awareness. These authors have also influenced me, as a warrior and as a female, in a number of ways.

Their literature can be taken as a societal conversation concerning our subconscious expectations of female potential. Unfortunately, it seems that our expectations are shrouded by our need for human and complex characters. We view these complexities in limited ways and thus weaken the untapped potential that females possess.

The Divergent Trilogy by Veronica Roth (1st person, present tense)

Veronica Roth wrote the *Divergent* trilogy about a faction-structured society and how one female wild card can make a difference. Roth's protagonist, Tris, is strong. She makes a difficult decision that affects her and her family, and she constantly pushes herself to be brave. Hers is a story about fear and choice. Many of our youth consider Tris to be a brave hero worthy of respect, and I agree. To a point.

It is true that Tris is a valid representation of the varying multiplicity of the female gender; she isn't physically strong or a natural at martial skills, but she is courageous and determined to do what is right and necessary. It is important for females to know that they can work on their physical weaknesses, and it's equally necessary for females to witness other females showing courage and an undaunted spirit.

The problem I see with Tris, as a representative for female warriors, is in the lack of physical strength. It's an unfortunate reality that biologically, females have less physical potential than males, but hard work can greatly narrow the gap between genders. In anything other than physical strength, Tris is strong. Unfortunately, though, she has very little physical ability. For example, Tris is required to learn how to fire a pistol, but when she wraps her hands around the handle, she thinks that it's "heavy and hard to lift away from [her] body," which is an observation that highlights Tris's extremely weak upper body strength (Roth 78). Pistols can weigh anywhere from one pound, loaded, to ten pounds, loaded. In addition, the recoil for each pistol is different, which, in addition to the weight, is the next challenge Tris must master. Regrettably, though, Tris responds to the pistol in the same way an unready female could respond to a rifle's recoil: "The recoil sends [her] hands back, toward [her] nose" (78). She stumbles and presses her hand to the wall behind her, searching for balance. A handgun, no

matter its weight, does not cause many females to physically stumble backwards. She is even more abysmally horrible in her first combat training.

As the story continues, Tris, regrettably, never works on her pitifully weak physical strength and, instead, throws herself into those things she *can* do, which entail acts of adrenaline-based bravery and falling in love with a male trainer. An example of this is in Tris's decision to climb a Ferris wheel to seek higher ground. She is dizzy from the height, and her "hands ache from holding the rungs, and [her] legs are shaking," but then she realizes it isn't the height that is scaring her, since "the height makes [her] feel alive with energy, every organ and vessel and muscle in [her] body singling at the same pitch" (143). Instead, it's the male trainer that makes her "feel like [she's] about to fall. Or turn to liquid. Or burst into flame. [Her] hand almost misses the next rung" (143).

Even though Tris is climbing the Ferris wheel to succeed in her mission, the male trainer easily distracts her. And it is this distraction and her focus on acts of adrenaline-based bravery that keep her from training her body into a stronger force. To me, from a warrior's perspective, Tris's characterization comes across as shallow, since, as a warrior, she should work hard to improve her physical ability so it doesn't counterbalance her greater strengths. As a female character, this inability to work on her physical strength and potential is a glaring weakness counterproductive for a female warrior.

The Hunger Games Trilogy by Suzanne Collins (1st person, present tense)

Suzanne Collins wrote the *Hunger Games* trilogy, which is about Katniss, a pragmatic hunter from a poor District, who must fight in the Hunger Games per the Capitol's law. She becomes the symbol of hope for rebellion against the Capitol. She has exemplary hunting and survival skills, but she is emotionally stunted.

As writers, we want to build interesting and striking characters, but, at the same time, avoid creating stereotypical characters. A character like Katniss *seems* like a breath of fresh air, but, regrettably, she is nothing more than a new stereotype. She becomes a product of a particular kind of feminism: a category that demands women to shed femininity and don the mantle of masculinity. Unfortunately, in a male-centric culture, females are weak no matter their strengths, and even the strongest of the strong may still be the weakest of the men. A female is never allowed to forget this. She is weak. She is always weak because she is not male. Her very identity is the obstacle to strength.

Katniss, then, is a reaction to the sexually empowered women of romance novels. A stereotypical woman from a romance novel achieves power through her sexuality. Katniss has *no* feminine charm or romantic cunning, which is one of my main critiques of her as a character: she has little or no empathy for those around her. Instead, she clod hops over everyone's emotions without ever understanding what she's doing. An example of this is during the night before she is required to fight in the Hunger Games. She and Peeta, the guy who loves her, are talking on the roof about the following day. Peeta is hoping for a death that shows he is more than a piece in the Games, but Katniss tells him that is exactly what he, and everyone is, just a piece, owned by the Capitol. Then Peeta locks his "blue eyes on [Katniss'] and demands 'what else [is he] allowed to care about at this point'" (Collins 142)? It is at this emotionally intense line that we realize the depths of his feelings for Katniss. This is the foundation of his determination to protect her in the Games. But Katniss, oblivious as ever, takes "a step back" saying "care about... staying alive." Peeta, not given what he wants from her, smiles at her, "sad and mocking. 'Okay. Thanks for the tip, sweetheart,' he says" (142).

Since Katniss is so strong, it's hard to think that anything is wrong with her extreme inability to understand on an emotional level. After all, the weakness shows her as a round character. But when I think about it further, I don't like it. Why does Katniss have to be so severely stripped of the emotional qualities that many consider to be a natural trait of womanhood? To me, it's as if in order to be strong warriors, we must be more like men, logical and pragmatic, without the fetters of emotions dragging us down.

This acceptance of feminist stereotypes and the expectation we have, writers and readers alike, to experience complex characters have created barriers for true female warrior representation. In a way, our drive to create rounded characters has hurt the female warrior's characterization. Like Katniss, we tend to pair physical strength with emotional weakness. From a strict characterization standpoint, this pairing seems adequate, even more than adequate because Katniss is believable and utterly frustrating to the more emotionally mature reader.

Even from a warrior standpoint, Katniss's emotional weakness can be legitimate. After all, I've known plenty of soldiers who were not emotionally stable. As a warrior, I can also appreciate and understand varying differences in physical and emotional strength. However, I resent seeing these differences in a female warrior in young adult literature.

However, the very existence of Katniss's physical strengths and her emotional weakness sends a subliminal message to our youth that in order to be a strong female warrior we must sacrifice our identities as women. In order to be strong, we must be like men: physically and mentally fit, and not subject to emotion. It's not realistic, and even in fiction, we shouldn't have to settle for either physical strength or mental strength. A warrior can be strong mentally *and* physically, in varying degrees, and still have weaknesses in order to be considered a round character. After all, a warrior is meant to be relied on, and must stand tall as a protector; warriors

must be as strong as they can be in every facet of their identities. It may seem idealistic, but it's exactly what America's warriors are expected to be.

Graceling by Kristin Cashore (3rd person, past tense)

Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* is about a girl named Katsa who is graced in the art of killing. Her uncle, King Randa, uses Katsa as a tool to instill fear in those who would oppose him. He treats her as little more than an attack dog, which isolates Katsa from her humanity and creates an inescapable feeling of loneliness and self-loathing. An example would be when she's lying outside on the ground, thinking of her life until now. She thinks "she [isn't] normal. A girl Graced with killing, a royal thug... she [isn't] natural" (Cashore 32-33).

Katsa thinking she isn't normal is even repeated on page 95, white space before and after the statement:

"She was not normal"

Katsa is so physically strong that she is unbeatable by women and men alike. Her weakness is her inability to realize that she is more than just a killer; she allows herself to be defined by her uncle, and thus limits the potential growth of her identity. Essentially, Katsa, like Collins' Katniss, becomes emotionally stunted, only able to hone her physical skills as a killer. She sees herself as a blunt tool to be used, without thought, without valor, and without validated emotions.

However, what makes Katsa different from Katniss is her determination to change for the better. Katsa refuses to be made a tool for murder and fights for her autonomy. The first time she discovers a small amount of control over her life, she decides she will never relinquish it (33), which is the first step in her mental growth. Her physical ability makes her strong, but it's her choices that truly define her: the choice to make her own choices (30), and the choice to save

people in need of saving (27), the choice to allow people to care for her (62), the choice to rebel against King Randa (133), and the choice to explore who she really is and exile herself from Randa's kingdom (170). And even though she is physically strong, she doesn't languish in her strength, and despite her prowess, she continuously strives to learn more skills, physically and mentally.

As a warrior, Katsa is a character to look up to. Unfortunately, though, she *starts out* physically strong. We only know her at the pinnacle of her physical prowess. The rest of the story is watching her mature and learn more about herself. It's safe to assume that the majority of the readership for *Graceling* is not going to be made up of professional women fighters who are better than any male of the same profession, which makes this a story that can light a spark but not necessarily provide assistance to a questioning young woman. Not that fiction *must* do so, but it's still an element that is lacking in our young adult literature featuring female warriors.

These types of strong but weak protagonists exist and flourish in the young adult genre, and while each contains unique, round characters and real examples of female strengths, attributes, and problems, they fall short of the more dangerous realities of working in a male-dominant field.

Tamora Pierce's Girl Power

The most effective of these authors, in my opinion, is Tamora Pierce, who has been consistently publishing strong female characters since the 90s. She is an anchor for "female power" literature and has given many young women the confidence and self-awareness to be brave, to live to the fullest, and to be wholly female.

Since Pierce's stories all feature female warriors of varying abilities and talents, I have chosen four female protagonists to focus on. I believe these female warriors are necessary pieces

to the puzzle of female multiplicity and will distinctly add depth to this discussion concerning proper representation of female warriors in young adult literature.

Alanna the Lioness by Tamora Pierce

Alanna is small, stubborn, hotheaded, and a hugely gifted girl with magical abilities. She wants to be a knight, but girls are not allowed in the King's military. So, she disguises herself as a boy and starts her training as a page. This is a story about a girl who must risk everything and go against the norms of her society to fulfill her dreams. Alanna works hard to bridge the physical gap between her and the other male trainees. She stays true to her convictions by moving up the ranks from page to squire, disguised as a boy, and becomes a knight. She uses all of her time with her lessons and uses extra time to work on her fighting skills so she can be "as good as, if not better than, the boys" (*Alanna: The First Adventure* 212). Alanna must deal with the pressures of training for combat, and her stubborn will makes the impossible possible, which is exemplified not only in the king's acceptance but also in her peers' acceptance of Alanna as the Kingdom's first female knight. In this way, she changes her world. The king lifts the ban that kept females from joining the King's military, and thus Alanna's actions changed the future of her kingdom's military. These changes, per Pierce's style, is reflected in her other Tortall kingdom novels, as they are written in a chronological style starting from Alanna to Keladry, and so on.

Keladry, Protector of the Small by Tamora Pierce

Kel, inspired by Alanna, wants to be a knight and protect the weak. Unlike Alanna, Keladry is tall and has the potential to be as thick-armed as most men. She is utterly determined and good to the core, and her stubbornness rivals Alanna's. Kel's experience is unique because she becomes a page as a female and must withstand the hazing and bullying that occur as a result

of being the first female to try becoming a knight. She undertakes a lot of training and pushes herself harder than everyone else so that she can improve her muscular strength and stamina. Despite being the target for hazing, she protects others from overly zealous bullies. If that means a fistfight, she'll do it. It's easy to want to work hard for oneself and to only focus on self-success, but Kel goes beyond herself and looks out for others.

This innate expectation is what sets her apart as a person of great potential and strong morals. Even amongst her peers, Kel's rational thinking and emotional maturity make her stand out. For example, Kel and her peers are taken on a patrol to their training camp. While traveling to the camp, it begins to rain in a heavy downpour. After several hours of this, the boys start to grumble and complain, one even saying that, "This *isn't* necessary. It's not like we're on a mission. Why can't we find a village to hole up in until this stops?" (Pierce, *First Test* 188). The training master hears this and puts the boys on the spot, asking them about what they think. They all complain, counting the various reasons to stop, whether for the horses or for ease of travel. Then he turns to Kel and prods her, wondering if the girl would also like a nice, warm place to sit. Instead, she tells him that he is the warrior in charge, and that if she ever questioned him in battle, he could put her in chains, so why should he let them question him now? "Enemies," she says, "could be out to jump us right here, and you wouldn't hear them because you'd be talking to me" (189). She is emotionally mature, mentally determined, and focuses on improving her physical strength. In this way, she is a well-balanced warrior.

Aly, Trickster's Choice by Tamora Pierce

Aly is the daughter of Alanna who doesn't have a place among her well-established and famous family members. She's intensely smart, determined to make her own way, and can't help but plan ahead. One day, though, she gets kidnapped by slavers and sold to nobles in another

country. Aly's skills are special, as she is very much her father's daughter who is their country's spymaster. Aly also wants to be a spy, but her parents don't want that kind of life for her. After she becomes a slave, she sees this as a chance to prove to her parents that she has the skills necessary to be an exemplary spy.

She's physically fit, maintains her fitness, and always works to strengthen her knowledge skillset and surroundings. She's willing to adapt to change and better herself (she adamantly remembers her mistakes and learns from them). She has a magic skill called the Sight, which allows her to see a truth or clarity of a thing, person or object. She doesn't rely on this skill much, however, as she enjoys making her own luck with her own mind and physical prowess. Like Kel, Aly is stubborn, but she has a flexible mind that allows her to see many avenues of possibilities. While "we see four or five paths...[Aly sees] twenty" (*Trickster's Choice* 241). She looks deeper than what can be seen on the surface and works hard to achieve the successful result.

Aly is a tactician and a strategist, and she has the physical skills to back them up. Like Kel, she also maintains a healthy balance between her physical, emotional, and mental skills. In addition, she is convincingly female, so much so, that she leaves a string of hopeful suitors in her wake. Her physical, emotional, and mental strength as a female warrior are well balanced; she is a strong character. The author shows Aly's strength in long passages and short descriptive prose. At one point, Aly fights five people at once, landing breathtaking blows against three of them before help arrives. They are people she mustn't kill because they are not enemies but people whom Aly means to recruit as allies. At the end, she even gives pointers to a fallen foe who had tossed his knife from one hand to the other. " 'It was ever so lovely to meet you,' she says to him

with a polite smile. ‘Let’s do it again. Don’t let me see that cheap brawler’s trick a second time... any decent fighter will take you when you don’t have hold of your weapon’ ” (221).

But any strong person or character can make mistakes. Aly’s mistakes are natural ones that anyone of her caliber can do as they are human mistakes. For example, a man named Bronau kills a beloved father of the daughters Aly is charged to protect. Injured, Aly jumps for “Bronau’s back, grabbing for his chin with blood-slicked fingers. Her hand [slips]. Instead she [hooks] her fingers in his nostrils and [pulls], then [stabs] blindly. Her dagger [scrapes] bone, not flesh. She [got] his jaw by mistake” (385). In the thick of the moment, it’s difficult to remember what one’s state of dress is. The tears, the bruises, and the blood-slicked fingers are all forgotten. An almost thoughtless tactic like wiping blood off one’s hands before using them is an advanced method that can only be truly learned through experience. Unfortunately, Aly learns it at the expense of those she must protect. This type of weakness is just what I’m looking for in my own character. It is a weakness rooted in simple mistake that can have dire consequences. After all, the choices we make in the present, right or wrong, may have dire consequences in our future. My character, Feliz, will have the same type of costly learning experiences and will make simple mistakes that any normal human could make in the heat of the moment. These are the weaknesses that will make her more human. I believe they can be more realistic and more complex than any typical emotional or physical weakness often given to characters to round them out.

Pierce’s Bands of Merry Men versus Reality’s Bands of Jeering Men

My one point of contention with Pierce’s representation of female warriors and their lives has to do with the men closely tied with the protagonists. They are good men who, for the most part, act well in the world. It’s an unfortunate reality that in the warrior or military community,

good men don't always have good actions or intentions. I believe this tendency in Pierce's books is for the sake of the story. It'd be terribly hard and depressing (and really no fun at all) to have a protagonist who never finds anyone to ally herself with to fight the tyranny of evil. If there are no allies, what's the point of the story? We need stories in which the protagonist meets and impresses the right sort of people who can push her to become stronger and, at the same time, learns to trust and rely on her comrades.

However, it is also true that reality is harsher. It's not an everyday occurrence to have the luck of finding like-minded people in a place like the military. This tough reality shouldn't be skirted around. If our youth can come across these cruel issues in literature, they will be better prepared to face them in reality. Think of it as a type of imagery training.

My intention as a writer is to create a more realistic and complex character who reflects the female warriors of today and the obstacles they face. It's possible to create a female warrior who is physically strong, mentally tough, and emotionally stable. Realistically, a warrior knows to balance all of these things; it is not an idealistic endeavor. Female warriors are highly aware of weakness and spend their time honing their own weaknesses to be compatible with their strengths.

As writers, though, we also need to be aware of the complexity of humanity, the roundness of characters we thirst for. As such, I hope to emphasize issues and weakness within my characters that are gender-neutral. For example, a man or woman can have trouble with substance abuse and personality quirks like perfectionism, impatience, intolerance, and lack of confidence (Katsa), yet still be considered round. Nothing as dramatic as drastically stilted emotions like Katniss' is necessary to make a round character.

Modern-Day Warrior Meets Young Adult Literature Warrior

Young adult literature does not yet offer female warriors who are adequate role models for girls wanting to enter the military. Nor does the life of a woman in today's military ever show up on the page. It's strange because mainstream fiction has a craving for war heroes, and even the children's genre has an entire section of superheroes and GI Joes. I believe this may have to do with the definitions of strength that, outside of the military, I ascribe to. Here's how some reviewers of YA literature see the woman warrior:

In my opinion, strong heroines are dynamic: they struggle, and through those struggles, they change. They are agents of action, rather than passive or reactive. Female characters can fall in love and still be strong. They can be bold or reserved. They can be feminine or they can be tomboys. There is no one way of being strong, just as there is no one way to be a girl. When we talk about what it means to be a strong heroine in young adult fiction, let's make room for all the ways girls can exhibit their strength (Wetta).

The young adult books I've read seem to ascribe to Wetta's definition of strength, as it is true that females have a wide range of attributes. Normally, I'd agree that there is no one way to be strong, "just as there is no one way to be a girl" (Wetta). However, from the military standpoint, this definition of strength is useless. In the military, there is no room for the multiplicity of females and their capabilities, and there's definitely no room for the many ways females exhibit strength. After all, a warrior *must* be able to carry anything, run forever, shoot the best, think the fastest, and stay focused. If a female can't carry anything or can't run forever, then the military deems her unfit and incomplete as a warrior.

I also believe this has something to do with the gatekeepers, the parents who screen the stories their teenagers are reading. In a digital world where parents are concerned with the over-saturation of violence, it makes sense that they would prefer young adult literature to be wholesome and useful. I believe we shouldn't underrate the power of living vicariously through others, make-believe or not. Many of my own mistakes were realized while I traversed through fictional worlds with my favorite characters. I became aware of my own immature tendencies, and, as a result, I learned from literature. As such, I've learned to never undervalue the potential of fiction's life lessons.

Modern Day Military and Its Dangerous Reality: Navigating Potential Pitfalls

The military has been a male-centric field for so long that it's a place a woman must conform to instead of change. It's easy enough to look up to the extraordinary female warriors of the past (i.e., Joan of Arc, Zenobia, and Boudicca), or even fictionalized characters in media (Xena the Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, etc.) and believe it's possible to surpass men in battle; however, the reality is much more daunting. After all, in the centuries since the earliest known female warrior, there have been countless famous male warriors, and fictional male warriors, easily swamping the trifling aggregate of female warriors.

Though strong female warriors exist. Extraordinary past female warriors proved it's possible to effectively fight alongside men. Even our popularized media has taken on the idea of female warriors as "a hybrid of lethal charm, dexterous strength and keen intelligence" ("Theme: Women Warriors"). Indeed, according to RT Book Reviews "the emergence of the female warrior in media is believed to be "an exciting step forward for society to take," as it seems to be a message of empowerment for all females to remember the ability to fight for what they believe in: "whether we are mothers, daughters, sisters, girlfriends, or wives, we can also fight for what

we think is right” (“Theme: Women Warriors”). While this seems to be a healthy mindset to aspire and follow, I believe it also smells of sexism. We can *also* fight? Anyone should be able to fight for what they believe in. The key, though, seems to be the *ability* to fight despite gender.

It’s common knowledge that females have a weaker physical foundation and if poorly trained can be susceptible to more injury than males (see Appendix A: Women in Ground Combat). In addition, it’s not particularly practical to fight every battle one comes across in a hostile environment like the military. A female warrior must learn to choose her battles with wisdom. She must never forget that, as a female in the military, she is in the minority and an object of easy criticism. There is a time and a place to tote female multiplicity as strength, but unfortunately military perspective holds physical strength as the principal necessity. It is an unfavorable reality that females don’t naturally possess the inherent physical aptitude of the male gender.

That being said, I firmly believe that females can train their bodies to keep up with men, and, if they persevere, can slowly rise through the ranks to the top. However, it’s also an unfortunate reality that women warriors are not Xena the Warrior Princess (“Theme: Women Warriors”). Sometimes, women warriors must be subservient to the physical prowess of male warriors. Even the women who, over the centuries and around the world, fought to preserve their lands may have never experienced the harsh experiences women warriors must face in the military (“Theme: Women Warriors”).

Military life is harsh. The expectations on service members are heavy and necessary burdens. The goal is always to better oneself and to push towards a healthy mental, physical, and emotional balance. We must always pursue our best potential, so we can be ready for anything the future may throw at us. While it’s nice to consider strength as something “more than physical

prowess or fighting skills” and that there is “no universal way of being ‘strong’” (Wetta), there is still, again, the physical barrier that women warriors must strive to overcome.

A warrior lives in a physically rigorous reality and expects the environment to be challenging and unforgiving. The goal is never to accept defeat and to strive for the betterment and safety of one’s country. A warrior knows such a life demands everything, and the warrior is able and willing to sacrifice all for others. We are to always believe and follow the values set before us and to live every second of our lives with honor.

Women have not been a part of this hard world for very long, and everyone, men and women alike, seem to still be experiencing the culture shock of this change.

Still, with the lifting of the ban excluding women from ground combat, it looks like women warriors are here to stay. For years, females have been enduring the isolation, hazing, and crude remarks from male comrades, and they’ll be doing so for years to come. Female warriors understand that they have to prove themselves to be worthy of the title of warrior with every step, every day, all the time. And still the woman warrior may not be truly considered a warrior, at least, not like the males are warriors.

Tools for Fighting the Good Fight: Categories for a Realistic Woman Warrior

Why is it when we consider warriors, we don’t automatically picture a woman? Because warriors are physically tough and resilient: they can be relied on to carry heavy burdens. Women, however, do not have these natural physical capabilities. Though, if trained properly, a woman can create a strong physical foundation that can not only keep up with the male warriors but can also contain the potential to lead the way.

Physical Strength

A truly realistic woman warrior must share similar qualities with male warriors. No matter her body structure, she must train to be physically tough. Males still hold greater potential for physical strength. The global differences between males and females are vast. Overall body size, muscle mass, bone density, heart and lung size, oxygen intake, body temperature, and sweat-gland function are all differences that give males a decided advantage in physical strength, endurance, and heat tolerance (Champman). In addition, due to the stress female warriors place on their bodies, higher attrition rates due to stress fractures become a small but debilitating weakness that can more than halve female warriors' physical effectiveness. According to *Time Magazine*, "Military women incur stress fractures at double the rate of their male colleagues" (Thompson). Since stress fractures are created by unaccustomed force without time for recovery, it's as if females are attempting feats of strength too quickly and training counterproductive to their body structure.

Just as Wetta said, "There is no one way to be a girl," there is also no one way to reach optimal physical fitness. It is important for any warrior to properly measure his or her muscle capability and potential. If a warrior's bone density is slim, then he or she should take deliberate care in training and train according to his or her body structure. From the foundation up, a warrior should be carefully crafted. I believe that a female should be twice as careful. She should focus her training on each muscle group, and she should pay extra attention to her natural weaknesses: upper body strength and endurance. But with hard work and attentiveness to both her strength training and physical health, a female can build the solid foundation that will support her into future hardships.

Mental Strength

With only physical strength, a female cannot even hope to be a strong warrior. I believe that in order to be a realistic female warrior in literature, she must have the potential for great mental strength. Too many times, if a female warrior is physically strong, she is emotionally or mentally weak. To create a realistic warrior is to honor the countless female warriors who succeeded because they ensured their strength physically *and* mentally. After all, a successful warrior is not merely physically dominant but also psychologically imposing.

Female warriors must be determined, disciplined, and adaptable in order to consistently endure the mental difficulty of being female in a male-centric culture. Since females have lesser physical prowess to aid on the warrior's path, they must be mentally active and motivated in order to bridge the gap. By keeping the mind in a razor sharp, at-ready, state, the female warrior can create a proper plan to become a formidable warrior.

My Young Adult Militaristic Novel: Battle Lines

Like other writers, I want my character, Feliz, to be awesome. I also want Feliz to show our youth what current literature lacks: a realistic warrior that any female can aspire to. Feliz will experience the physical boundaries that every female warrior has to face. She will struggle and fall, but she won't give up. She will always attempt to look forward and better herself. She will fail. She will succeed. And, eventually, she'll be a hero.

Feliz is like many young females: she is idealistic and fiercely wants to make a difference. She wants to be a strong warrior and will experience the depths of strength along the way. In the first 60 pages, it's glaringly obvious that Feliz's weakness is not mental or physical but of mindset. She's fervent, believing in the realities within her small world, and she has accepted the propaganda and lies of her country as truth. It's a weakness of age and lack of experience. But

she's determined, motivated, and willing to work hard and endure. She is intelligent and able to increase her physical capabilities. Her world is vast, complex, and harsh, and she'll have a choice to tackle it head on or shy away. She will make mistakes on her road to become better and stronger. Her weaknesses will be normal feelings that we all feel from day-to-day, and she will not be extremely emotionally stunted like so many modern day physically strong female characters. Feliz will showcase how to become a strong female warrior and how to live life without regret.

Conclusion

There is a significant lack of young adult fiction highlighting strong and emotionally rich female warriors. As writers we strive to create round and complex characters. In warfare, if a woman warrior is not strong mentally, physically, and emotionally, she will not survive in such a rigorous environment.

Young adult fiction should provide a more authentic picture of military life, even military settings that are highly fictionalized. The characters in these settings act as role models of what it means to be a strong female. It's important to prepare for the very real possibility that friends won't necessarily come to one's aid, and that if one smiles, it doesn't always make things better. True strength—mentally, physically, and emotionally—comes from strong work and a belief in oneself. Literature, especially fiction, is a perfect medium to gain the attention of our youth and to encourage them with authentic models of female courage and strength.

My mission is to give girls truly strong women warriors on the page. One of the ways I will do this is through the characterization of a modern-day warrior that I know through experience. Young adult literature helped to get me through my own military training. It gave me the motivation, courage, and self-assurance that I could have what it takes to be an amazing

warrior. However, young adult literature also let me down. It didn't prepare me for the harsh reality of the military. It's real life, after all. There are so many young women who want to serve their countries, but they're not adequately prepared. They read fiction stories to find answers. If we can capture these girls at the teen level, we can guide them in their search for answers. As a writer, I want to provide the wisdom that isn't out there yet. I want to fill the gap.

Works Cited

- Cashore, Kristin. *Graceling*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2008. Print.
- Champman, Anne W. *Mixed-Gender Basic Training: The U.S. Army Experience, 1973–2004*. Fort Monroe: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2008. *U.S. Army: TRADOC*. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. London: Scholastic, 2009. Print.
- Pierce, Tamora. *Alanna: The First Adventure*. New York: Simon Pulse, 1983. Print.
- Pierce, Tamora. *First Test*. New York: Random House, 2004. Print.
- Pierce, Tamora. *Page*. New York: Random House, 2000. Print.
- Perce, Tamora. *Trickster's Choice*. New York: Random House, 2003. Print.
- Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. New York: Katherine Tegen, 2012. Print.
- "Theme: Women Warriors." *RT Book Reviews Magazine*. (n.d.) Web. 23 Mar. 2014.
- Thompson, Mark. "Women in Combat: Vive a Différence." *Time.com: Battleland*. Time 25 Jan. 2013. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.
- Walker, Jessica A. *Appendix A: Women in Combat*. 02 May 2013. Research Essay. Hamline University, Saint Paul.
- Wetta, Molly. "What We Talk About When We Talk About 'Strong' Heroines in Young Adult Fiction" *YALSA, The Hub*. 13 Mar. 2013. Web. 25 Mar. 2014.

Appendix A:

Women in Ground Combat: A Complex Issue

“... Gen. Dempsey and I [Secretary Panetta] are pleased to announce that we are eliminating the direct ground combat exclusion rule for women and we are moving forward with a plan to eliminate all unnecessary gender-based barriers to service... Our purpose is to ensure that the mission is carried out by the best qualified and the most capable service members, regardless of gender and regardless of creed and beliefs. If members of our military can meet the qualifications for a job -- and let me be clear, I'm not talking about reducing the qualifications for the job -- if they can meet the qualifications for the job, then they should have the right to serve, regardless of creed or color or gender or sexual orientation” (Secretary of Defense).

On January 24, 2013, Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta and Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey “announced the end of the direct ground combat exclusion rule for female service members” (Roulo). This decision to allow females to serve in direct ground combat has created two clear sides: those who support having females in combat and those who don't. It's a complicated issue that has been around for ages. The question used to be whether or not America's women should be allowed in the military. Then the question became whether or not women should be allowed in combat. Now, as of January 24, 2013, women are allowed to be in direct ground combat and are given the chance to work in jobs that were formerly closed to them. With this new occurrence, all of the old questions are returning. Should women be allowed in combat? Can women handle the physical intensity of these combat-related jobs? Can women handle the consequences of combat? Can women and men remain professional in combat situations? Won't this just encourage more cases of sexual assault? Can women emotionally and mentally handle the difficulties of combat? All of these questions have a basis in one line of thought: this is an issue of gender. Unfortunately, this topic of females serving in combat roles is more complex than gender; it's also concerned with ability. Can females handle combat physically, emotionally, and relationally?

Indeed, this is a complex issue that poses many hurdles for the female service member, but it's an issue that will pave the way for a uniquely diverse military. Panetta and Dempsey believe that no matter the gender, as long as a service member is qualified, s/he should be allowed to serve in any job regardless of its potential danger (Secretary of Defense). This decision emphasizes the importance of ability and qualifications of a service member rather than gender. However, Panetta and Dempsey go a step further in their announcement on 24 January. They outline their plan for a strong female presence in these combat-related jobs. This is where the problem arises.

At this point, it becomes not so much a "by ability" initiative, but instead a quota system that is based on who someone is, not what she is capable of doing. By requiring each branch to have a strong female presence, Panetta and Dempsey risk lowering combat effectiveness if women can't reach the standards. Though they are careful to communicate multiple times that they intend to set clear standards of performance for everyone, they still say that they want to make sure there are "a sufficient number of females entering the career field" (Secretary of Defense...). Though this is a subtle insertion, it's cause for concern. What if a large percentage of females can't meet the standards and an insufficient number of females are entering the career fields? Will the military lower its standards and thus become less concerned with ability and more concerned with quotas and numbers? This momentous decision to allow females to serve in direct ground combat shouldn't be confused as an issue concerning female rights. Instead it should bring to light a question of a female's ability in combat; if she can't succeed under strict standards, she's a danger to herself and her comrades. It may be imperative to allow females the chance to serve in combat related jobs but it's just as crucial to maintain strict standards regardless of gender. Females should be allowed this opportunity not because of gender but

because of ability. If a female can accomplish her job mentally and physically, and she can meet the standards that have been set, then she should be allowed to serve in a combat related role. If she can't, then she can't. It's as simple as that. The military shouldn't force the branches to fill these positions with females just because of their gender. These positions should only be filled if the service member meets qualification standards. True gender neutrality is in the focus of ability not gender. As long as standards are met, anyone may enter.

It's not only an issue of gender and standards as it is an issue of physical ability and health. Once a female qualifies for a combat-related position, how does her body hold up under the stress of carrying a full load gear? According to *Time Magazine*, "Military women incur stress fractures at double the rate of their male colleagues" (Thompson). A report for Congress states that due to the average female's weak upper body strength, unit cohesion decreases. In addition, due to the stress females place on their bodies, higher attrition rates due to stress fractures have been reported (Burrelli).

Others also believe that "no matter how much physical conditioning women [undertake], the physical differences in upper-body strength alone [make] them unsuitable to face the crucible of combat" (Champman). There are also those who believe that females' physical ability threatens combat effectiveness. According to Champman, they have said that "body composition and cardiorespiratory factors generally [favor] men. [These critics argue] that overall size, muscle mass, bone mass, heart and lung size, oxygen intake, body temperature, and sweat-gland function [give] men a decided advantage in physical strength, endurance, and heat tolerance." More specifically, can a female carry a 100-pound rucksack plus body armor and weapons and still be able to move with agility and, if need be, drag a likewise, and much larger, burdened male soldier out of harm's way? This question isn't easily answered. Some critics say no, it's

impossible. Others, though, say that if there's not enough strength there's still ingenuity and intelligence. Another service member can drag the injured away while the female provides cover fire or medical aide. Every service member has a skill and as is taught in the military, every member is part of a team. It's normal to fill in for another teammates weaknesses; all humans have them, after all. One must wonder, though, if it comes down to it, in a worst-case scenario, can a female drag or carry a heavier comrade to safety? If she can't, then she endangers the mission and her comrades' lives (including her own).

Regardless of whether or not a female may endanger others on mission, there's also an often overlooked issue concerning the difference in social norms among female and male military members. Females are a minority group in the military, which also causes difficulties to rise as a result. Instead of America not being ready for the trauma of women in combat, Americans should instead take a look at dynamics between men and women in the military. No matter how one looks at it, relationships and social behavior are different based on gender. In American society, males are supposed to be strong and capable, masculine. Women are taught to be supportive and pretty, feminine. In the advent of feminism, women are suddenly being portrayed and expected to be strong and capable like men. As the years go on, the lines have blurred for women. Are females supposed to be like men? Just as good as men? Or are women capable of doing the same as men? Either way, the fact that there's such a movement for women (and not men) shows a clear difference between males and females; this difference is very much alive in the military.

The military was originally a place only for the sons of America. It was a place that used to be utterly closed to America's females. Even now, in the year 2013, despite the fact that females have been working in the military for "more than two centuries of American history,"

it's an environment that still feels ruggedly male (Roulo). What is it that makes it feel this way? The answer to this question is rooted in the military's purpose. The very function of the military can be answered in its training. A service member must successfully complete initial entry training and specific job training in order to be considered an accepted member with military benefits. This training will include such things as physical fitness tests and weaponry tests so that these members can be ready for any war-like eventuality. So, in this sense, at the very basic of the military's purpose, these members are learning the skills needed to protect the homeland and combat potential threats, which is a job that used to be purely masculine. Females, coming into the military, are walking into a role that, with its need for great physical strength and stamina, used to be considered a male's role in society.

This is the stigma females must conquer in the military. With their skills, women must repeatedly prove themselves to be capable service members. If a female struggles for a moment, physically or emotionally, many males in the military have a similar fallback answer in an umbrella term called, "PMS," and thus with this term, males quickly downgrade a female's ability. In these moments, a male can question a female's ability to do her job effectively; one can even conclude that it's because of her faculties as a female that she's struggling. Though this is simply a general example, many female service members have experienced this type of degradation. It's unfair and it's upsetting, but verbal provocation such as this is common in the military; unfortunately, too, it seems to have some basis in fact. According to WebMD, "Bloating, swelling of arms or legs, and breast tenderness [and] feeling overly emotional, experiencing depression, anger and irritability, or having anxiety and social withdrawal" are some physical and emotional symptoms that can plague females as a result of the menstrual cycle ("Women's Health"). While there's no doubt that females are susceptible to some physical

and emotional discomfort, does this really decide whether or not they can be useful in ground combat? According to a female combat veteran, named Jude Eden, it does. In her article, “The Problems of Women in Combat—From a Female Combat Vet,” she states that “No one wants to talk about the fact that in the days before a woman’s cycle, she loses half her strength, to say nothing of the emotional ups and downs that affect judgment” (Eden). She ends the article by saying that “women have many wonderful strengths, and there is certainly a lot of work for women to do in the military. But all the problems that come with men and women working together are compounded in the war zone, destroying the cohesion necessary to fight bloody, hellish war” (Eden). Jude Eden is not alone in her belief; Gregory S. Newbold, an infantryman for 32 years, also believes that “sexual dynamics will exist and can affect morale [and that it may be] manageable in other environments, but not in close combat” (Newbold). Both Eden and Newbold believe that humans cannot deny their sexual nature: “Despite best efforts...by sincere leaders to control the issue,” Newbold says, “human instincts remain strong...harassment will be corrosive, and cohesion will be the victim,” and Eden says the same, “When preparing for battle, the last thing on your mind should be sex; but you put men and women in close quarters together, and human nature is what it is. It doesn’t matter what the rules are.” The very idea that humans are slaves to their instincts is a typical belief; one could argue that it’s a fallback belief for lazy minds. After all, it faintly stinks of the old saying, “boys will be boys,” which excuses males of their untamed and lecherous leanings. Doesn’t the ability to reason differentiate humans from animals? Doesn’t this ability allow humans the capability to change? Either humans are slaves to their instincts or they have the capability to go against them; it’s either one or the other, it can’t be both.

As with anything involving sexuality, there's a power struggle. In the military, sexual harassment and sexual assault are persistent issues. General Dempsey believes the disparity between the men as warriors and women "as something else" has established an environment that leads to sexual harassment and sexual assault (Mulrine). With the lifting of the ban, many US officers hope that it will diminish the amount of sexual assault with the military's ranks. General Dempsey believes that if people are treated equally then those people will also treat others equally. Anu Bagwati, who used to be a company commander, believes that there's a link between the "legalized discrimination against women" and unequal treatment in the military. Baghwati also says that a female's "constant reminder by [her] peers that [she's] not as strong, [nor as] competent, [isn't] based on...actual, but... perceived performance" (Mulrine). To change such perceptions, General Dempsey and others believe the lifting of the ban will pave the way for creating equality in the military. Though some may argue that this move "could actually make women more vulnerable to sexual assault," Anne Coughlin, a professor at University of Virginia School of Law, doesn't believe this to be true. She states that, "in a culture where there's a hierarchy and all of the people that have power over women are men...a culture...to abuse...power" is created (Mulrine). Instead of sexual assault being a gender issue, it has been argued that it's a predator problem, and the ban is the military's first monumental step to make a difference in encouraging equality and opposing harassment and assault.

This move by the military is a smart one. Reports say, "Women make up approximately 15 percent, or nearly 202,400, of the U.S. military's 1.4 million active personnel. Over the course of the past decade, more than 280,000 women have deployed in support of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Office of...). It's common knowledge that female service members have been fighting in these non-linear operations for the last decade. For the last ten years, female

military members “have demonstrated courage, skill and patriotism” (Roulo). In that time, 152 female service members have died serving in Iraq and Afghanistan (Roulo). Just how many in the last decade who have been emotionally injured due to combat is unclear. According to Time Magazine, PTSD levels [are] similar” between female and male. Research has noted, “Male troops [drink] more, and females [have] greater difficulty adjusting once back home” (Thompson). It’s important to note, though, that males secrete more serotonin than females, which allows men to be able to better fight depression and mental stress. Whether or not this means females are less equipped to deal with combat stress is unclear, but there will definitely be groups who argue this point. Still, one must acknowledge that, as of yet, in no military document or research has anyone found that females can’t handle combat on an emotional level.

Even so, the cost for both female and male service members is great. In order to bridge the gap between genders, something drastic needs to change. It’s not all about ability. It’s about perceptions and social norms concerning gender roles. Despite the landslide of the piece meal facts against them, female service members have proven their worth in the last decade of war. “They have demonstrated courage and skill and patriotism...[and] have faced the reality of combat, proven their willingness to fight, and, yes, to die to defend their fellow Americans” (Secretary of Defense...). To Panetta and Dempsey, it’s clear that women “have become an integral part of [the country’s] ability to perform [its] mission” (Secretary of Defense...). No matter what, though, whether America is ready or not, females are already fighting, and if females want to fight in ground combat (as many have already done), then that is their prerogative and their decisive sacrifice. After all, no matter one’s gender, one should be allowed to protect and defend the pride of one’s country. As General Dempsey says, “The more we can treat people equally, the more likely they are to treat each other equally.”

Works Cited

- Burrelli, David F. *Women in Combat: Issues for Congress*. Rep. Congressional Research Service, 13 Dec. 2012. Web. 11 Apr. 2013.
- Champman, Anne W. *Mixed-Gender Basic Training: The U.S. Army Experience, 1973–2004*. Fort Monroe: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2008. *U.S. Army: TRADOC*. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.
- Eden, Jude. "The Problems Of Women In Combat – From A Female Combat Vet." *The Western Center for Journalism*. Western Journalism, 26 Jan. 2013. Web. 16 Apr. 2013.
- Herbert, Melissa A. *Camouflage Isn't Only For Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military*. New York City: New York UP, 1998. Print.
- Mulrine, Anna. "Women in Combat Units: Could It Reduce Sexual Assault in the Military?" *The Christian Science Monitor* 25 Jan. 2013, USA sec.: 1-2. Print.
- Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs). U.S. Department of Defense. *Defense Department Rescinds Direct Combat Exclusion Rule; Services to Expand Integration of Women into Previously Restricted Occupations and Units*. *Defense.gov: News Release*. U.S. Department of Defense, 24 Jan. 2013. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.
- Roulo, Claudette. "Defense Department Expands Women's Combat Role." *American Forces Press Service*. U.S. Department of Defense, 24 Jan. 2013. Web. 11 Apr. 2013.
- Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. U.S. Department of Defense. *Press Briefing by Secretary Panetta and General Dempsey from the Pentagon*. *U.S. Department of Defense*. U.S. Department of Defense, 24 Jan. 2013. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.
- Thompson, Mark. "Women in Combat: Vive a Différence." *Time.com: Battleland*. Time, 25 Jan.

2013. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

United States. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness). *Report to Congress on the Review of Laws, Policies and Regulations Restricting the Service of Female Members in the U.S. Armed Forces*. Rep. Department of Defense, Feb. 2012.

Web. 11 Apr. 2013.

"Women's Health." *Estrogen and Women's Emotions*. Ed. Todd Nivin. WebMD, 31 May 2012.

Web. 21 Apr. 2013.