A Rising Generation: Women in Power in Young Adult Novels

Jo Cassidy. *Good Girls Stay Quiet*. Monster Ivy Publishing, 2018. 338 pp. Paperback: $12.50. ISBN: 978-1948095112.

Emily R. King. *Before the Broken Star*. New York: Skyscape, 2019. 300 pp. Paperback: $8.49. ISBN: 978-1542043762.

Julie Berry. *Lovely War*. New York: Viking, 2019. 480 pp. Paperback: $10.99. ISBN: 978-0451469939.

Reviewed by Katherine Cowley

In August 2019, a study by *The Bookseller* showed that in the United Kingdom, "children's books account for just 4.9% of review space, despite making up a third of the market."[1] While no such study has been done about young adult literature by Mormon authors, the results would likely be skewed in a similar manner. Often, when Mormon authors—especially Mormon women—say they write young adult fiction, they and their work are instantly dismissed. ("So you write silly vampire stories?" is a common refrain.)

Teenage girls often have little power in their lives. Both secular and religious communities circumscribe what they can do and what they can dream of becoming. Philosopher Micah Tillman suggests that when we dismiss young adult novels, we often justify it by claiming the works are "defective or inferior," yet what we are truly demonstrating is that we "dislike young adults" and find the teenage experience and

1. Kiera O'Brien, "Books in the Media: Children's Books Account for 4.9% of Review Space," *The Bookseller,* Aug. 16, 2019, https://www.thebookseller.com/news/book-reviews-childrens-books-in-media-sally-rooney-1067336.

perspective "repulsive."[2] We trivialize young women and mock their lack of power when we look down on the literature that could empower them.

Good Girls Stay Quiet by Jo Cassidy is a fast-paced YA thriller. The main character is fifteen-year-old Cora Snow, a girl who was kidnapped as a young child and for over a decade has been held captive by "Daddy," a man who is extremely physically and emotionally (though not sexually) abusive. While at school, Cora carefully follows Daddy's rules: stay quiet and don't make friends. Her only outlet is her journal, where she testifies of her life and tells the truth of her experience rather than performing her normal, life-saving pretense of being a happy, good, submissive girl.

When Cora's journal is stolen, she attempts to get it back, and in the process she must seek power in ways that parallel common teenage experiences: artistic independence, which leads to financial independence; freedom of movement (sneaking out of her prison-like bedroom in the middle of the night); freedom of communication (a hidden burner phone); freedom to have friends; and freedom to use her own body outside of prescribed norms (Daddy has taught her to never talk to, touch, or kiss boys). The most heartbreaking parts of the novel are not the scenes in which her kidnapper beats, starves, and imprisons her, but rather the scenes where Cora believes his lies, believes she should be powerless, and believes she has brought all her pains upon herself. Ultimately, no man or woman can save Cora—she has to liberate herself by sharing her voice and her truth to the world.

Before the Broken Star by Emily R. King is a YA fantasy adventure novel set in an alternate world. From the surface it seems like there is relative equality between the sexes: women may not be in the military, but they do engage in prize-fighting, and of the two main power-holding antagonists in the book, one is female (the Queen) and the other is

2. Micah Tillman, "Why People Hate YA Novels," Nov. 4, 2016, https://micahtillman.com/why-people-hate-ya-novels/.

male (the Admiral). Yet power is wielded as a sword (both literally and figuratively) throughout the story, and removing power or choice from others is a common tool used to gain power.

The main character, Everley Donovan, grows up in tragedy; her entire family was assassinated by the famous admiral Killian Markham. She herself was stabbed through the heart and saved only by the installation of an artificial, clockwork heart. Everley defies the advice of others and intentionally gives up her freedom in order to be sent with a group of criminal women to a penal colony so that she can take revenge on her family's murderer. Not only does she sacrifice freedom to achieve her goal, but others restrict her choices as well: those around her assume that Everley does not have the perspective, knowledge, or abilities to control her future, and they fear where her chosen path will lead.

A common trope in fantasy novels is that the main character gains power by accessing and mastering some sort of magical power. This is not the case in *Before the Broken Star*; while Everley eventually wields some limited magical influence, she mostly gains power through sharing and withholding truths, building friendships and networks, storytelling, sword fighting, negotiating power structures, and protecting those without power. She must overcome her fear of becoming close to others and stop hiding the things that make her distinctive, as well as learn to see beyond her own perspective and admit her own fallibility.

As she grows in power, Everley moves from chains to a leadership position on a dangerous island quest. Yet time and time again, she is faced with key questions: Can you stop a monster without becoming monstrous? Can you become powerful without harming others? Can you make change without becoming what you are trying to destroy? As Everley wields power, she risks everything she holds dear, but she also opens up a world of new possibilities.

Lovely War is a stunning work of young adult historical fiction by award-winning author Julie Berry. It is partly a love story, as it follows two young couples during the Great War through love, tragedy,

racism, and liberation. Yet it is also a commentary on storytelling and the relevance—nay, necessity—of traditionally female approaches to storytelling.

Lovely War employs an innovative point of view, framing the historical narrative with a tale of Greek deities during the First World War: Hephaestus has used a magic golden net to capture his unfaithful wife Aphrodite, goddess of love, and her lover Ares, god of war. Hephaestus puts them on trial and Aphrodite immediately seizes control of the situation by unabashedly admitting her guilt and then accusing her husband: "You think my work is stupid." (Hephaestus admits—albeit only to the reader—that he finds her focus on human relationships "inconsequential.") Aphrodite's defense is to tell two love stories, which leads to great protests by the imprisoned Ares, who has no interest in love letters, kisses, or descriptive details. Hephaestus agrees to listen, in part because his interest has been piqued and in part because he wants to differentiate himself from his wife's lover. And so Aphrodite begins her tale, focusing first on her main female protagonist before bringing in the other characters. In the process she enlists Ares to tell short stories about her characters in the context of war; Apollo to tell stories of poetry, music, and plague; and Hades to tell stories of death. Each godly narrator brings a different set of perspectives and priorities to the central story.

Even as Ares, Hades, and Apollo add their own parts to the story, Aphrodite controls the narrative: this is *her* story, not theirs. It is a story that is often dismissed: in the thousands of years that she has spent with her husband and her lover, neither of them have ever taken the opportunity to understand her, to appreciate her as an individual, or to see her as she is. Through her detailed, nuanced retelling of four World War I journeys, Aphrodite will not let the other gods—or us, as her readers—dismiss her tale as "just a love story." This *female* narrative is what creates meaning through war and death. Making the predominant storyteller viewpoint that of a goddess is particularly interesting

from a Mormon perspective as we come to understand the necessity of making Heavenly Mother not just another component but an *essential* component of our doctrine and worship.

Good Girls Stay Quiet, *Before the Broken Star*, and *Lovely War* are three excellent examples of Mormon women creating innovative narratives about women and power. Being willing to move beyond a focus on adult literary fiction and exploring popular genre literature written specifically for young women and girls allows us to appreciate the empowering work being done for a rising generation of women.

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Tipping the Scales: LDS Women and Power in Recent Scholarship

Charlotte Hansen Terry

How history is framed and whose stories are told by an institution reveals much about its paradigms and priorities. From a survey of the past few years of history and Mormon studies materials published about (and even by) the Church, it seems the scales of gender representation are gradually tipping toward a better balance. This recent scholarship relies on important foundations laid by contributors like