

Heroines in Recent American Bestsellers

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Critics of popular fiction by and about women generally agree on two points. First, heroines are limited by their sex to acceptably "feminine" patterns of behavior. Second, heroines occupy roles in society in which they observe but do not direct history. An analysis of the top ten bestsellers of January 2, 1983, however, shows a significant number of exceptions to these two guidelines. The heroines of seven of these books either act in non-feminine roles, or perform acts of historical significance, or both. A comparison of common scholarly opinion with these recent novels suggests changes in popular fiction and the popular imagination regarding women.

Over the years, women in bestsellers have been depicted as lovers, wives, mothers, and victims—and not much else. Katherine Fishburn, in an essay titled "Women in Popular Culture," summarizes this trend:

The descendants of Charlotte Temple [heroine of a famous American sentimental novel of 1791] are alive and well and appearing in the immensely popular gothic and Harlequin romances, which sell in such large numbers that they have their own sections in many bookstores. The image of women in these escape fantasies, as in other popular genres such as detective and science fiction, is less than positive. With...[few exceptions], popular fiction continues the tradition of portraying women as helpless, mindless creatures. If they are major characters in the romances, they are but booty to be won, princesses to be rescued, or companions to be tolerated in science fiction.¹

The second view is expressed succinctly by Lillian S. Robinson in her book *Sex, Class, and Culture*: "Literature belongs to women, history to men." She writes that popular historical novels, "written by women, for women, and with women at their center" make it clear that,

apart from a few remarkable figures—chiefly queens who reigned in their own right—the principal women in history were the mistresses, wives, mothers, and daughters of famous men. The events these novels chronicle about women's lives—love, marriage, adultery, childbirth—reinforce the idea that female history is essentially sexual, the stuff of literature, in fact, not of "real,

solemn history."²

When an inquiry is conducted upon novels written from the late 1960s to 1980, a period characterized by women's liberation in other areas, heroines remain in significantly subordinate or non-historical roles. After a few notable successes such as Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1971), the novel of women's liberation foundered because the movement soon developed a conflict with its fictionalists. John Sutherland, in *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1970s*, summarizes the situation:

What happened to polemical or enlightened "women's fiction" in the 1970s is what one perceives happening to the "Tendenz Roman" or "social-problem novel" in other periods. In a few years the aspirations of the protest movement are too articulate, too urgent and too self-important to be contained within the limitations of mere fiction. Even the documentary novel is insufficiently documentary for the movement's needs, and is repudiated as false consciousness.³

Romances, which dominated the fiction market for women in the 1970s, combined three elements: "[t]raditional, masochistic attitudes; "hot" romantic mode; historical settings."⁴ The only innovation was the forthright depiction of sex (and female humiliation) in a new development of the genre referred to as "hot ones" or "bodice rippers."

In his discussion of recent serious women's literature, Frederick R. Karl describes heroines who fully comprehend the inequities suffered by women in the American social and economic systems. With a single exception, however, these protagonists do not take non-feminine, historical roles.

For most of the other writers, there is the sense of "licking their wounds," refusing achievement because it is so tainted by masculine values. This way is another form of death, since achievement in the larger world, in any mode, is the sole way the cycle of doom can be broken. It is at least as important as self-fulfillment in love. The nature of the love bond may be male or female, but it cannot be the end of the journey; and yet our novels of the sixties and seventies repeat that theme: love, bonds, common sympathies are fulfillment. If for men they clearly are not, why should they be for women? The authors cannot argue that since women are such cripples they are incapable of larger fulfillment, for their characters have broken free.⁵

The one exception is the heroine of Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1976), but the conclusion of the novel merely sees her poised to enter the world of human

conflict and struggle, not successfully involved in that world.

The two rules earlier invoked—that heroines are confined to sexual roles and are found at the margins of history—do not hold true for the *New York Times'* top ten bestselling hardcover novels of January 2, 1983. While almost all the women portrayed in the ten books have a sexual side, which makes them dependent upon a man's love for self-esteem, these women also function independently as inventors, executives, politicians, artists, and original thinkers of great importance. While such a small, chronologically limited sample gives no proof of an overall trend, it does alert readers to the possibility that a new American woman may be emerging, both in popular literature and in the popular imagination.

The ten books, all published in 1982, are

1. *Space*, James A. Michener (New York: Random House).
2. *2010: Odyssey Two*, Arthur C. Clarke (New York: Ballantine).
3. *E. T. The Extra-Terrestrial Storybook*, William Kotzwinkle (New York: Putnam's).
4. *The Valley of Horses*, Jean M. Auel (New York: Crown).
5. *Mistral's Daughter*, Judith Krantz (New York: Crown).
6. *Foundation's Edge*, Isaac Asimov (Garden City, NY: Doubleday).
7. *Master of the Game*, Sidney Sheldon (New York: Morrow).
8. *Different Seasons*, Stephen King (New York: Viking).
9. *Life, the Universe and Everything*, Douglas Adams (New York: Harmony).
10. *Deadeye Dick*, Kurt Vonnegut (New York: Delacorte).

Further citations of these books will be given with page numbers in parentheses following quotations.

Of the ten books under discussion, three present challenges to the idea that heroines are not confined to sexual, non-historical roles. They are *The E. T. Storybook*, *Different Seasons*, and *Deadeye Dick*. *E. T.* (not *The E. T. Storybook*) is William Kotzwinkle's adaptation of Melissa Mathison's screenplay for Steven Spielberg's film. *The Storybook* is a carefully edited combination of 12,000 words from the book and 50 photographs from the film, a decidedly unoriginal production. Like the other works, the *Storybook* tells how a lovable alien is stranded on Earth when his research spaceship flies off before he can reboard it. He stumbles to a suburban home where he is cared for by three children until the spaceship returns and he rescued. The sole woman in the book, discounting a five-year-old girl, is the divorced mother of the three children. She dreams of a life with excitement and romance, but is chiefly concerned with raising her

children and working at her job so she can support them. This is a traditional female role. Even her divorce is a convention which has been approved in popular literature for decades.

History is in the hands of men, specifically the scientists trying to capture E. T. The divorced mother, named Mary, must go off to work each day, furnishing an environment with little adult intervention where E. T.'s presence will not be detected until necessary to the action. This traditional view of women may be explained by the film's attempt to satisfy a broad, conservative audience. Furthermore, this is a children's book, and mothers in children's books may be good or bad, but they must clearly be mothers. Thus Mary nurtures and loves her children. *E. T.* represents an anomaly: a children's book on the bestseller lists because it happened to be hardbound and found a ready Christmas season market.

Different Seasons, by the vastly popular author of horror stories, Stephen King, presents a similar case. Although the four novellas in this volume are not typical horror tales, with sexual roles limited by the demands of the genre, the stories have little place for women. The first is about a prison break at a men's prison; the second describes the corruption of an all-American teenager who is fascinated by Nazi atrocities—and has the misfortune to meet a fugitive Nazi war criminal. The third tale, called "The Body," describes an overnight hike four teenage boys take in order to find the body of a dead classmate. In the final story, "The Breathing Method," a pregnant woman's body continues breathing and gives birth twenty minutes after her head has been severed in a traffic accident. The frame for the story is an all-male story-telling session. Women do not emerge from traditional roles in these stories, but neither are there any heroines.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Deadeye Dick* presents a more serious challenge to my claim of new roles for women in bestsellers. Vonnegut is a recognized author of serious literature, one who writes sensitively about the sufferings of human beings. All the powerful figures in this book are men, and women are assigned the roles of sex object, loving wife, victim of drug use, and nurturing mother. However, positive female roles finally serve as models for all human behavior, by women and men.

Deadeye Dick is the story of a boy with a wealthy father who lives in a small Ohio town. When the boy, Rudy Waltz, kills a woman and her unborn child in a shooting accident, the family loses its money. Rudy decides then never to become deeply attached to anyone or anything. La-

ter he become a pharmacist and an unsuccessful playwright. He observes the failure of many hometown friends, cares for his dying parents, and by luck escapes the death of all the people in his town in an accidental neutron bomb explosion.

Men in this book do the socially important things—Rudy a playwright, his father an artist, his brother president of NBC, one of the three largest television broadcasting companies. Rudy's mother is a failure whose history ended with her marriage. If there is a heroine in this book, it is Celia Hildreth, "A girl at the bottom of the social order, . . . but who, nonetheless, was one of the prettiest young women anybody had ever seen" (40). Later Rudy sees an adult Celia as she works in a hospital during a blizzard. She was, Rudy says, "in my eyes, anyway, an idealized representative of compassionate, long-suffering women of all ages everywhere. . ." (163). When Celia appears last in the book, her beauty and mind have been destroyed by drug abuse, and half her teeth have fallen out. The narrator later comments that American women are dissatisfied because their lives, when considered as narratives, have "little story and too much epilogue" (216).

One fact qualifies Vonnegut/Rudy's sexist view of the world—he doesn't believe that the work of the men is any more significant than that of the women, and often men's work is a good deal more destructive. One rich industrialist, for example, makes deadly weapons. Rudy, his father, and brother are all failures. Another failed man Rudy mentions often is Adolph Hitler, once a friend of his father. Rudy Waltz finds his place in life, not by asserting his masculinity, but by becoming "neuter": "to be enthusiastic about nothing, to be as unmotivated as possible, in fact, so that I would never again hurt anyone" (112).

Rudy becomes cook and housemaid to his parents after they have lost their money. Rudy narrates from a hotel in Haiti where he is half owner and cook. Scattered throughout the book are a dozen or so recipes. The recipes contribute to the general feeling that the most important human activity is sustaining life. Thus, while Vonnegut does not free women from sexual roles or allow them to enter the process of history, he disavows any value in men's activities, concluding with: "Want to know something? We are still in the dark ages. The Dark Ages—they haven't ended yet" (240). To balance men's failures, he holds up the womanly activities of childbearing, sustaining, and comforting.

Life, the Universe and Everything is a small, satirical science fiction adventure about the only man who survives Earth's total destruction. He

roams the galaxy looking for the truth about life, the universe, and everything. On the way, he is instrumental in saving the universe from destruction twice. Finally he decides that all places are the same, so he settles on a peaceful planet where he can think, relax, and fly using mental power. The book is the conclusion of a trilogy by Douglas Adams which has gained a wide cult following among university students in both England and the United States.

Only one woman appears in a speaking role. She is named Trillian and is the only other human survivor of Earth's destruction. Part of a group of five which attempts to save the universe, only she can analyze the situation and suggest a remedy. The various male characters are seen as unwilling or unable to be heroes. When three men are considering how to save the universe, one says that they will fail: "'The point is,' he said, 'that people like you and me...are just dilettantes, eccentrics, layabouts if you like. ...We're not obsessed by anything, you see.... And that's the deciding factor. We can't win against obsession. They care, we don't. They win'" (107-108).

As the four men and one woman approach the planet of the aliens who want to destroy the universe, Arthur, the central male character, says: "Terribly impotent feeling, isn't it ?" (171). He is ignored. The woman Trillian frowns. Later, when they are captured by a group of the aliens, Trillian takes one of the aliens aside to speak with him. Adams writes: "The [aliens] were abdicating to this strange, quiet girl who alone in this Universe of dark confusion seemed to know what she was doing" (185).

Sometimes the males are brave, but they do not understand the situation well enough to control it. They are "astonished and bewildered by the whole thing" (196). Although men hold positions of prestige and authority in this book, it is the woman Trillian who can meet the crisis with intelligent action. Arthur ends the book much as Rudy does in *Deadeye Dick*. He has retreated from hectic events in the galaxy and lives on his peaceful planet—just as Rudy has retreated to Haiti.

Space, James Michener's number one bestseller, presents brave men who act and lead, but the book also praises women and shows one who affects history and assumes a position of power. *Space* is a fictionalized account of the American space program from the recruitment of German scientists after World War II to the Space Shuttle flights of 1982. The heroes are the astronauts—and the scientists and politicians who create the space program. The structure of the book gives attention, if not

power, to women. The first section, "Four Men," details events in the lives of the four main characters, but the next section, "Four Women," depicts their wives, showing the women's backgrounds and how they interact with their husbands.

On the whole, these women are given secondary, non-historical roles. Even though the wives make history possible, they don't create it or decide upon it. The significant exception is Penny Pope, an intelligent but poor girl who knows quite well what she wants. She marries a man who later becomes an astronaut. While her husband is a young naval pilot, Penny declines to live on a Navy base and instead takes a law degree. She becomes an advisor to an influential senator, and works on the space research committee. When Americans land on the moon, she is proud: "Penny's faithful shepherding of her committee had kept the vast project on track. She had helped supervise the spending of some \$ 23,000, 000,000" (413). Later, when the American government decides to stop funding moon flights, Penny organizes the campaign which results in a final moon landing. Near the end of the book, she decides to run for the United States Senate, and she is described as "a handsome, strong-willed lawyer of fifty-five, well versed in the ways of Washington" (591). Her husband approves the decision.

The other women in the book have personal distinctions, even if only a few have independent careers. Michener depicts women primarily in supportive roles, but he shows them to be capable of assuming the most important positions in society. Michener charts social change during the thirty-eight year span of the novel in order to add authenticity and timeliness to his narrative. One of the social trends he reveals is the increasing participation of women in public affairs.

Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction adventure, *2010: Odyssey Two*, does not show society in a process of change, but the women in his story are assigned important roles. The book is a sequel to the novel and film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and it solves many of the puzzles presented in the earlier work. In brief summary, Soviet and American scientists discover that an important space vehicle circling the planet Jupiter will soon crash into that giant planet. They send a joint expedition to examine the vehicle and a vast black monolith which orbits the planet. The two-kilometer long slab is a device placed by a galactic super-race to monitor Earth's evolution. After the crew examines the ship and the monolith, they prepare to return. At that time, however, the monolith is activated by the unseen aliens. It descends to the surface of Jupiter and, through a

process of growth and division, adds so much mass to the planet that Jupiter collapses and turns into a small star, making colonization of Jupiter's moons from Earth possible.

The main character is an American scientist, Dr. Heywood Floyd. Dr. Floyd's wife resents his leaving on the Jupiter mission because he will be absent from her and their son for two years. When Dr. Floyd talks about his wife, he indicates that typically "feminine" women don't appeal to him: "She's never really understood why I have to leave Earth, and in a way I don't think she'll ever forgive me. Some women believe that love isn't the only thing, but *everything*" (93). Later, Dr. Floyd's wife divorces him.

Held up in positive contrast to her are women with professions. Even a minor character is praised for competence. Clarke writes: "Betty Fernandez was tough; she was also intelligent, and though she had been a housewife for a dozen year, she had not forgotten her training as an electronics serviceperson" (162). The central female characters are found on the expedition's ship, however, which has a Russian crew and two-nation scientific staff. Both the ship's commander, Captain Tanya Orlova, and the ship's physician, Dr. Katerina Rudenko, are women, as is the ship's nutritional expert.

Clarke devotes more attention to action than characterization, but he makes it clear that these three women are competent professionals whose emotional lives are only a component of their historical roles.

Women in Isaac Asimov's science fiction adventure assume even higher positions. *Foundation's Edge* describes the collision of three galactic superpowers: the First Foundation is a technological empire which controls a good portion of the galaxy and has no serious challenger to its physical force. The Second Foundation is a secret group of human beings whose power is based on a single planet. They have mastered great mental skills, and can control the actions of normal people through psychic power. A third group is found on a planet whose entire population is combined in a single telepathic network—they possess unimaginable mental powers. The story develops around the conflict of these three superpowers. In the end the third power—the psychic inhabitants of the planet Gaia—exercises authority over the First and Second Foundations, and plans to lead the galaxy gradually toward peace and ecological balance.

One significant factor in the government of each group is the strength of women. The head of the Executive Council of the First Foundation is

Mayor Harla Branno, a woman in her fifties, who "had a capacity for making quiet decisions and sticking by them as long as she was convinced that she was right" (5). Asimov goes on to give Harla Branno a number of undesirable features as well, but her competence and power are never questioned. The Second Foundation, located on the planet Trantor, is governed by a twelve-member Council of Speakers. The First Speaker, their leader, is a man, but the speaker most likely to succeed him is Delora Delarmi, a woman with an acute mind and subtle political ability.

Both these women are confronted by young men who challenge their authority—and both young men are sent away from the centers of power on dangerous missions. The young man from the Second Foundation is sent off with a common woman supposed to be vastly inferior to him in intellect. She proves to be one of the Gaians, the super-mentals, and has been guiding the man she travels with. When the young man from the First Foundation reaches Gaia, he is greeted and led about by a young woman—who actually is a robot. In addition, the person best known for a single heroic act in the history of the Second Foundation is a woman, Bayta Darell, who stopped a mighty galactic conqueror.

Life, the Universe and Everything, *2010: Odyssey Two*, and *Foundation's Edge* contradict Katherine Fishburn's position that popular fiction relegates women to emotional, sexual roles, and contradict Lillian S. Robinson's assertion that women are excluded from historical roles in popular fiction. I suggest that in current science fiction women administrators create a secure or at least constant environment within which the sometimes headstrong male heroes can pursue their adventures. The adventures may be intended to impress (as Arthur tries to impress Trillian), or to prove professional status (seen when Dr. Floyd interacts with the Russian spaceship captain), or to rebel against (as in *Foundation's Edge*), but woman may be seen as the judge of achievement in science fiction as well as a source of guidance and center of power.

Each of the three final books under consideration has an independent and powerful woman as the central figure. However, the portrait of the wealthy corporate director in Sidney Sheldon's *Master of the Game* is an equivocal one. Kate Blackwell controls an empire, but she has paid a great price in human suffering. As readers of the bestselling social melodrama will recognize, this formula allows the author to present forbidden but exciting behavior because the sins will ultimately be punished.

The adventure begins when Kate's father is cheated out of a rich diamond mine in South Africa and almost killed. He revenges himself

by making the daughter of his enemy pregnant and then ruining the man financially. Later he marries the daughter, whose second child is Kate. Kate grows up and becomes head of the family business, which is by now a wealthy conglomerate. It has "steel mills, cattle ranches, a shipping line and, of course, the foundation of the family fortune: diamonds and gold, zinc and platinum, mined every hour around the clock..." (201). She uses her wealth to manipulate the people she loves, however, and often earns their hatred.

The book concludes after her ninetieth birthday, when she decides not to try to force her eight-year-old great-grandson into heading the conglomerate. By this time she is in America and receives praise from the governor of her state as "One of the most remarkable women in the history of this nation. Kate Blackwell's endowments to hundreds of charitable causes around the world are legendary. The Blackwell Foundation has contributed to the health and well-being of people in more than fifty countries" (15). She has not merely given away the wealth earned by others, though. She took charge of the business after her future husband instructed her: "Business is a game...played for fantastic stakes, and you're in competition with experts. If you want to win, you have to learn to be a master of the game" (202).

Kate suffers when her manipulations earn her the hatred of her own son. She is likewise disappointed when one granddaughter proves to be cruel and vicious. Furthermore, there are several women in the book who are complete slaves to their men. Regardless, the woman at the center of *Master of the Game* is a powerful capitalist delighted with power and with herself.

The next book, *Mistral's Daughter*, presents as many traditional images of women as it shows them outside emotional roles and inside history. In this third novel by Judith Krantz, the women are successful in business, but the business is modeling and operating a modeling agency. The women assert their emotional independence from men, but all of them win faithful lovers. Yet the book does show the new heroine—a woman who maintains a sphere of activity independent of her man, and who establishes an emotional relationship in which the partners are equal.

Mistral's Daughter is 531 pages long and not easily summarized. The book details the lives of an illegitimate French Jewish girl, her illegitimate daughter, and her illegitimate granddaughter. The first woman, Maggie Lunel, is the lover of the French artist Julien Mistral in 1926. When he deserts her, Maggie becomes the lover of a wealthy American, whose

child she bears. Maggie comes to America, her lover dies, and she starts a tremendously successful modeling agency. Her daughter Teddy becomes the world's foremost fashion model, falls in love with Julien Mistral in 1953, bears him a daughter, and dies in an accident. The child, named Fauve after the Fauvist artists of the early twentieth century, is raised by Maggie and visits her father during summers. The girl begins to study art, but becomes a highly successful assistant to her grandmother after she becomes angry with Mistral. Later the daughter forgives him, and resumes her artistic career.

Maggie and her granddaughter Fauve both fall in love, are hurt, and then put their careers in front of their love affairs. They both end up with husband, but on their own terms. This contradicts the Harlequin Romance sequence of infatuation, independent loneliness, and then surrender of independence. Maggie has good reason to treasure her freedom. After she has lost Mistral and her rich American, she rebels against the lot of women in society: "Foolish women," she thinks, "childlike women, victimized women, stupid, *inexcusably, criminally stupid* women who believed in their men, those careless men who took what they wanted..." (156). "She would never believe in a man again, Maggie knew in her soul, and as the knowledge flowed into her she felt warmed, strengthened and oddly alert" (158).

Having worked as an artist's model and a fashion model, she feels competent to establish her own agency, in direct competition with the John Powers Agency—run by a man. She succeeds, and when she takes a wealthy lover she decides *not* to marry him. They keep their separate apartments and remain true to each other until Maggie allows him to marry her more than three decades later. She keeps working, and her husband admits that she is more interesting because she has her own career and her own personality.

Fauve's romance is more typical of the Harlequin formula. She meets an older man when she is sixteen. They fall in love, but she stays away from him until she feels absolute trust, seven years later. Even then, she insists on her private life, unlike the Harlequin heroine who devotes herself to her man: "There are two things I hope for in life," Fauve tells her lover, "and neither one of them will be right without the other. I want to be your wife and I want to try to paint..." (531). These women are not so near to centers of power as Kate Blackwell in *Master of the Game*, but they have power over their own lives. In spite of the fairy-tale atmosphere of *Mistral's Daughter*, the new, independent heroine of popular fiction is emphatically present.

Throughout the years, women have not been prominent in the sciences. Jean Auel finds a way to compensate for the proportionally small number of significant contributions in recorded history. *The Valley of Horses* goes back 30,000 years to Cro-Magnon Europe, and shows a Stone Age woman who discovers the culture-shaping techniques of starting fire with iron and flint and domesticating horses. *The Valley of Horses* tells the story of Ayla, a Cro-Magnon woman forced out of a Neanderthal community, who strikes out on her own to find people like herself. She establishes a base in a cave in a valley of wild horses, where she develops revolutionary skills in hunting, housekeeping, and medicine. She hunts on horseback, learns how to craft new weapons and start fire with flint, and uses a fine wood sliver and animal sinews to suture a wounded Cro-Magnon man she rescues.

Not only is Ayla in the exact center of pre-history, the period is depicted as one in which women play a culturally central role. Cro-Magnon women can be medicine women and priests; in fact the religion of the time is based on a worship of the Great Earth Mother. (As evidence for this speculation, Auel notes the proliferation of carved stone and bone female effigies produced during this period.) The love act is called the "Mother's Gift," and rituals surrounding sex serve to establish women as individuals who deserve respect and gratification. Ayla herself begs for the love of her man, but he approaches her as a servant, not as a master. Furthermore, Ayla establishes herself through her historically significant actions. She can love and sustain a man, but at the same time she can create as an independent agent.

In all the ten books considered, women assume the traditional roles of lover, wife, and mother. But seven of the books show women as competent leaders, original inventors, and creative artists of the first order. The new popular heroine is willing to work hard to achieve her historical goals. She reaches out for a man's love but wants to preserve her creative freedom.

Images in popular literature do not correspond with social developments. However, these images reflect the behavior which is deemed acceptable by the popular imagination. These seven books do not confirm a movement, but they certainly suggest a strong trend. We may well expect to see future heroines in popular American literature in other than "feminine" roles, and closer to centers of historical power.

NOTES

¹ Katherine Fishburn, "Women in Popular Culture," in *Handbook of American Popular Culture*, M. Thomas Inge (Ed.), (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1980), Vol. II, p. 367.

² Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 200.

³ John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1980s* (London, Boston and Henley: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 84.

⁴ Sutherland, *Bestsellers*, p. 85.

⁵ Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions 1940-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 424-25.