Panel 4: American Girls

Dawn Sardella-Ayres and Ashley Reese, Girls’ Literature as Genre: American and Canadian Girls’ Lit in Discussion

In this presentation, we will discuss how classic works of American and Canadian girls’ texts can be grouped together as a distinct genre, the North American girls’ Bildungsroman, through which we might explore unique ideologies of space, place, heritage, gender, and social structures. We argue that the girls’ Bildungsroman is a text or series of texts in which the heroine is portrayed constructing and developing, or engaging in acts which construct/develop, a gendered identity within her social and domestic environment. In the simplest of terms, we posit that the girls’ Bildungsroman is one in which the heroine (or potentially, more than one heroine) learns her place in society, as a woman. This encompasses her physical, psychological, and moral coming of age.

One key facet of this genre is that secondary female figures often guide the heroines as they come of age and integrate into their communities. These figures include a mother or mother-like women, a sister or sister-like friends, or an arch-enemy foil. These females guide or influence the heroine, providing inspiration either by embodiment or by contrast. Interestingly, since many of the Bildungsromane primary characters cannot transgress social boundaries, the secondary characters end up demonstrating alternative options, worst-case scenarios, or idealized examples of women’s social roles. By examining the ways in which girls and girlhood have been presented, defined, and performed in popular and enduring works of literature about and for them, it is possible to raise new questions about what it means to be a girl today.

Dawn Sardella-Ayres received her PhD from the University of Cambridge in 2016. She completed a 2019 tenure as the Ofstad Guest Scholar at Truman State University, teaching a course on girls’ literature and the girls’ Bildungsroman in the United States and Canada. Sardella-Ayres has published on Alcott, Montgomery, Johnston, and Wilder, and researches issues related to gender and race performativity, as well as the Kunstlerroman, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth century girls’ texts. An article on her critical work on girls’ literature as genre will appear in a forthcoming issue of Girlhood Studies in 2020.

Ashley Reese is a Learning and Development Coordinator with the Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence (ATLE) at the University of South Florida. Her current book project is “The Rise of Girls’ Literature” (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Her research focuses on both pedagogy and gender in turn-of-the-century American girls’ literature.

Claudia Mills, Defense of a Mid-20th-Century Portrait of Happy, Harmonious Girlhood: The Betsy-Tacy Series of Maud Hart Lovelace

As well-documented by Dawn Sardella-Ayres, building on work by Jerry Griswold, North American girls’ Bildungsromane have tended to share certain features: the heroine experiences double oppression as both female and child, is “othered” in some way relative to her peers, and
undergoes rites of transition to young ladyhood that often involve a “taming” that transforms her in ways that sacrifice much of the reason why readers identified with her in the first place.

One mid-century North American girl’s Bildungsroman, however, shares none of these features. The autobiographical *Betsy-Tacy* series of Maud Hart Lovelace, with ten titles published in the 1940s and early 1950s, presents the gradual maturation of a girl who is raised in one of the happiest families in children’s literature, comfortably middle-class, popular with girls and boys alike, thoroughly reveling in her femininity, and consistently supported by parents, siblings, and peers in her aspirations as an emerging writer. In a striking departure from other series that trace their protagonist’s growth and development from childhood through to adult married life, such as the *Little Women* trilogy and *Anne of Green Gables* series, Lovelace’s protagonist maintains the same exuberant identity even in the final volume in the series, despite her many intervening life changes.

Although it can be difficult to sustain reader interest in stories of happy girlhood in a harmonious family (see Brian Attebery’s work on the family story as genre), I argue that it is beneficial to be able to provide young female readers with the model of a protagonist who is able to reconcile a clearly feminine identity with committed professional striving, to maintain intensely close female friendships while also being intensely interested in heterosexual romance, and to pursue creative ambitions without sacrificing other valued life goods.

*Claudia Mills*, who received her Ph.D. from Princeton University, is Associate Professor Emerita of Philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder and a faculty member in the Graduate Programs in Children’s Literature at Hollins University. The author of almost 60 books for young readers, including *Zero Tolerance*, *Write This Down*, and *Vera Vance, Comics Star*, she has published numerous articles on children’s literature, including work on Louisa May Alcott, Maud Hart Lovelace, Betty MacDonald, Rosamond du Jardin, and Eleanor Estes. Her book *Ethics and Children’s Literature* won the 2016 Edited Book Award from the Children’s Literature Association.

*Ya’ara Notea, The Mythic Everyday of the Frontier in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* Series*

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* series (1932–1943) is the most enduring and influential representation of pioneer life in the American West. For eight decades, the series has played a significant role in the propagation and reinforcement of American frontier ideology, and scholars have identified its traces throughout American culture, education and politics (see for instance: Fellman, 2008). This talk suggests that Little House’s lasting cultural resonance is due to its particular version of the West. I argue that this rendition, which has become synonymous with the American frontier, is possible only because Wilder writes the frontier via girlhood.

Employing critical and historical frameworks in a close literary analysis, I propose that by creating a girl’s West, Little House is capable of fusing overarching national narrative and individual everyday experience, bringing the worlds of the American frontier to life. Laura’s story enables this merge of the mythic and the quotidian as it captures both the adventurous ideal of the West (which Laura learns from Pa) and the mundane realities of the domestic (which she must practice with Ma); both expansion and settlement, culminating in continuity through
procreation. Laura’s own development, I suggest, embodies the process of settling the West in its supposed entirety, from self-subsistent survival on indigenous land to communal consumerism in a bustling town.

Reading the novels through what I term “the mythic everyday” illuminates the manner in which, through Laura, the series rewrites the origin story of the West, mediating American colonialism and the development of capitalism on the frontier. Little House thus sutures up inherent contradictions of frontier ideology and forecloses the violent consequences of settler colonialism in the West.

Ya’ara Notea is a PhD student at King’s College London, researching 20th century popular American girls’ fiction. She has previously published on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s portrayal of female coming-of-age.

Melanie J. Fishbane, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy: Discovering the Jewish Girl in Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women

At the beginning of Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women, the novel’s most popular and beloved heroine, Jo March, grumbles: “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents” (11). This Christian-centred opening steepes the novel in what scholars, such as Anne Phillips and Shannon Murray, have argued is Alcott’s feminist adaptation of her father’s favourite book, John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress. However, in “Discovering Louisa May Alcott’s Jewish History on Portuguese Tour,” Eve LaPlante writes that Alcott was often told her darker features were most likely because of her Sephardic Jewish roots. According to LaPlante, Abigail May Alcott’s paternal ancestors were Portuguese Jews who immigrated to England at the end of the fourteenth century. While Alcott never wrote about this in her fiction, and though the family was proud of this heritage, Emily Schneider suggests that the Jewish characters in Little Women are “meek” and stereotypical. This might have shown Alcott’s unintended bias towards Jewish people. As well, there are two references to German immigrants, the Hummels and Professor Bhaer – the latter being featured in an article by Sadie Stein about his potential Jewishness. If one considers the role of the midrash in Jewish theology, as a collection of stories that expands on details and characters not fully described in the Torah, and how contemporary rabbis and scholars are taking the male-authored/male-centred text and putting it through a feminist lens, then how might we reimagine the connection between Little Women and The Pilgrim’s Progress? As well, as how can “the girls” (Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy) be imagined through a Jewish lens? This paper will explore this connection, while also analyzing how Alcott’s understanding of the nineteenth century Jewish experience might have influenced her writing.

Melanie J. Fishbane holds an M.F.A. from the Vermont College of Fine Arts and an M.A. from Concordia University. Her work has been published in L.M. Montgomery's Rainbow Valleys: The Ontario Years 1911-1942 and Reconsidering Laura Ingalls Wilder: Little House and Beyond. Her YA novel, Maud: A Novel Inspired by the Life of L.M. Montgomery was shortlisted for the Vine Awards for the best in Canadian Jewish Literature.