Panel 7: Empowered Girlhood?

Nicola Burke, I Like a Girl Who Can Eat: Female Hunger, Food and Desire in the Supernatural Romance

In mainstream discourse on the genre, the contemporary Young Adult (YA) supernatural romance is frequently dismissed as one dimensional and low quality; literature that reproduces traditional and conservative ideologies of gender and sexuality for an undiscerning adolescent female audience. In this paper I contest this dismissal, arguing that the genre contains complex and contradictory representations of femininity and female sexuality, and that these representations expose and rehearse ambivalence surrounding adolescent girls and girlhood in the early twenty-first century. Drawing on the growing disciplines of both romance and YA studies, I conduct this contestation through a genre study of the contemporary supernatural romance, as well as close reading and analysis of Maggie Stiefvater’s (2009–2014) Wolves of Mercy Falls series (Shiver, Linger, Forever and Sinner). I argue that ambivalence and complexity are present in the texts, as seen through representations of female hunger, food and feasting and scent and the sense of smell within the series. Furthermore, the presence of the supernatural allows these representations to act as unique sites for cultural criticism and negotiation. Representations of aromatic scents within the texts, for example, work to reproduce normative conventions of femininity while simultaneously allowing for the positive representation of female sexual desire and pleasure. Conversely, malodorous scents and the act of scent-marking reinforce well-established contemporary fears surrounding female sexual activity and the notion of the monstrous feminine. Similarly, scenes of female gustatory hunger and feasting attempt to negotiate the engrained diet culture and repression of adolescent female sexual desire within contemporary society, through the symbolic associations of food with sexuality and sexual activity. Female hunger and appetite (both sexual and gustatory) are at once encouraged and praised, and presented as dangerous and in need of restriction, emphasising the still-rigid boundaries surrounding adolescent girls and girlhood. In conducting this research, I not only analyse the contemporary ambivalence surrounding adolescent girls but emphasise the importance of popular literature as a site in which these attitudes and anxieties can be explored, resisted and reproduced.

Nicola Burke is a PhD candidate and academic at Western Sydney University, in Sydney, Australia. She works in the school of Humanities and Communication Arts teaching social and cultural analysis, children’s literature and culture, and literary studies. Her research focuses on representations of adolescent girls and girlhood within contemporary YA fiction, with a specific focus on the romance genre. She is graduating with her PhD (Mills and Fur: Feminism and Femininity in the Supernatural Romance), focusing on the adolescent girl and girlhood in contemporary YA supernatural romance retellings of Little Red Riding Hood, in December 2020.
Dona Pursall, Britain's First Supergirl? Pansy Potter Comic Strips as a Model for Girlhood

“[The Beano gave us a superheroine] in 1938, forty years ahead of [Britain's] Sex Equality Act. She was ‘Pansy Potter, The Strongman's Daughter,’ Britain’s answer to Wonder Woman.” (Christopher Murray paraphrasing Denis Gifford in The British Superhero (2017) p. 61)

Through platitudes of high praise such as this, the status of this hugely popular icon of a tough little girl has remained idealised but unexplored for over 80 years. This paper complicates Gifford’s comparison to Wonder Woman, suggesting that Pansy’s ambitions were not those of a powerful and independent freedom fighter, but rather to limit her strength, to conform and seek acceptance within the expectations of society. Whilst recognising how she powerfully advocated for the independence of young girls, this study simultaneously explores the ways in which the character reinforced codes of cultural submission for females at the time. Moreover, as the daughter of a strongman, Pansy’s agency is related to circus ‘otherness,’ a physical identity positively associated with breaking against conformity. However, despite her potential, Pansy strives to embody as a ‘normal’ girl, submissive and contained.

Britain in 1938 was preparing for war, and that year saw the establishment of the Women’s Land Army, Air Raid Protection, and Women’s Auxiliary Air Force. This was a time in which women were being asked to step forward and serve their country physically through manual labour and through self-sacrifice. In reconsidering Pansy through this contextual prism, this paper problematizes the comic strip. Through a close analysis of the physicality of the character, the construction of humour, and the socio-political context, selected Pansy strips from 1938 to 1950 will be unpacked, highlighting how complex negotiation of empowered girlhood and constrained self-hood played out. Through interrogation of this one specific character, this paper wishes to engage with wider questions of how girls were represented, idealised and addressed as reader of comics ‘for boys and girls’ (marketing phrasing used by D. C. Thomson publication The Beano and other comics of this type).

Dona Pursall is a PhD student of Cultural Studies, currently embraced within a wider European project seeking to piece together an intercultural history of children in comics: https://www.comics.ugent.be/

Dona’s research explores children, childhood, imagination and culture within the history of humorous comics within the context of social unrest and political change. As a teacher with over fifteen years of classroom experience Dona is especially interested in children’s reading experience. Her Master’s degree explored young adult readers and notions of identity and consumerism within vampire fiction. She recently published an article on the history of British children’s comics and naughtiness on the Henry Jenkins weblog: http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2019/11/17/on-the-beano-naughty-national-icons-and-a-history-of-misbehavior-part-1-of-3-by-dona-pursall.

Sara Kokkonen, The Popular and Contradictory Heroine Tiina in Finnish Girls’ Literature

Finnish girls’ literature represents pictures of both ideal girls and those who cross the normative boundaries. According to Myry Voipio (2015) the collision of didacticism and emancipation is built into the genre. It produces contradictory features in novels and girl characters. In my
presentation, I explore the most popular girl character in the history of Finnish girls’ books. Anni Polva wrote a 29-part series about girl named Tiina in 1956–1986. The Tiina-books were targeted at girls, aged 8–12 years. I study the contradictory girl description of this popular girls’ series.

Tiina’s character has the classical elements of the tomboy. She fights against the boys, climbs in the trees, is very athletic and her masculine traits are valued, especially by the boys. Tiina breaks the conventional norms and expectations of the girlhood showing that girls can do equally well as the boys. On the other hand, Tiina represents the ideal girl of good properties according to the conventions of the classic girls’ literature. She is a protector of animals, weaker or poor people such as children and elders. She is an honest and decent heroine who is superior to other girls in the fiction as well as in real life. Tiina became the role model over the generations to many Finnish girl readers. Finnish girls even founded clubs called Tiina-clubs. The idea was that for lying or swearing one had to pay the penalty and the money went to charity.

The world of Tiina books is old-fashioned from the perspective of the modern reader. The series began in the 1950’s and ended in the 1980’s. Although the society is changing radically at that time, it doesn’t show much in the books’ timeline. In the manners of series books, the protagonist does not age much in the series. Despite the Tiina books being very popular during the whole appearance, literary critics did not appreciate the books and the author. Girls’ series can offer their readers the greater independence or freedom and sense of power. However, the norms breaking Tiina series emphasises simultaneously differences between gender and presents traditional gender role models in patriarchal context.

**Sara Kokkonen** is a doctoral student at the University of Turku, Faculty of Education, Finland. Her doctoral thesis investigates particularly Finnish girls’ literature. Her research interests are classic girls’ books and reading experiences.