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From Green Gables to Shangri-L.A.: Uncovering the Path of Feminism in Adolescent Literature

by Colleen Daniher

L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* traces the story of the imaginative orphan Anne Shirley, who gets sent by mistake to live at Green Gables when the Cuthberts (elderly siblings Matthew and Marilla) request an orphan boy to help with their farm in Avonlea, Prince Edward Island. While there is some talk of sending her back to the orphanage, the Cuthberts ultimately decide to keep Anne, and through the course of the novel, her adventures are recounted from the ages of 11 to 16, as she goes to school, makes friends and enemies, and finally, looks forward to adulthood.

In Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat*, the title character is a punk princess living in Los Angeles, or "Shangri-L.A." as she likes to call it. At the beginning of the novel, the teenage Weetzie meets Dirk in class, "the best-looking guy in school", who soon becomes her best friend (Block 4). Early on, Dirk tells Weetzie that he is gay. In a send-up of fairy-tale/myth conventions, when a magic lamp belonging to Dirk's grandmother Fifi finds its way into Weetzie's hands, a series of events is set into motion that ends in Weetzie and Dirk's inheritance of Fifi's beach cottage, as well as the addition of the respective romantic partners for Weetzie and Dirk: Duck, and My Secret Agent Lover Man. The four form a family that eventually grows to include two daughters, Coyotee and Witch Baby.

We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high--and low

-Alice Walker (157)

In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", Alice Walker points out that sometimes, the hardest things to see are the very familiarities which have existed right in front of us all along. For Walker, the oversight of the wealth of female creativity embedded in her own African-American culture calls into question not only how we define "art", but also how we look for it. In acknowledgment of the hegemonic discourse of "canonic" art, Walker outlines the critical need for the individual to see creativity with a different eye, and thus recognize art in the most unlikely places-- including and beginning with one's own backyard. It is in this spirit of revisionism and re-visitation that this essay turns to the familiar but often dismissed field of adolescent literature in order to unearth two important feminist figures: L.M. Montgomery's *Anne Shirley* and Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat*. While the two historically and culturally disparate characters seem to share little in common,[1] the medium for their respective fictional existences-- adolescent literature-- links them together in a tradition that forges their connection to feminism. For adolescent fiction shares with women a history of under-

appreciation and devaluation in the artistic/academic world; an oversight that Robert Lecker points out can be traced in the genre's lack of anthologized representation: "Did anthologists [...] consider children's literature unworthy of inclusion? [...] Despite their enormous popularity in their time, recent literary histories tend to treat these writers as though they didn't exist" (as qtd in Gammel and Epperly 4). Furthermore, adolescent fiction and women can be linked by the sheer dominance of women writers within the genre, starting in the 19th Century with the rise of "popular fiction" in the form of the Novel. As critics Irene Gammel and Elizabeth Epperly explain, this type of fiction was confined to the same private sphere that women have traditionally been confined to for years: "popular literature is seen to have a low-level value of entertainment and escape, ultimately serving personal rather than public needs" (4). And yet, close reading of Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and Block's *Weetzie Bat* show that these texts provide a wealth of commentary on a very public issue indeed-- the politics of institutional power. Roberta Seelinger Trites describes it like this:

In the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class [...] (Trites 3)

In recognition of adolescent literature as a discourse of power, I will argue for the reconsideration of the genre as a forum for serious feminist discussion, and respectively recover and introduce the misunderstood Anne Shirley and the still relatively unknown Weetzie Bat as important feminist heroines, worthy of consideration by women of all ages. The feminist potential of both these figures lies in their self-identification as artists, in their deconstruction of traditional ideologies of the family, and in the strong strain of activism that pervades both texts.

The issue of identity establishes itself as a primary focus of any work of adolescent fiction; as Trites points out, "YA novels evolved historically from the Bildungsroman", a genre that, in its simplest understanding, traces the development or growth of the protagonist in its narrative. While Trites is also quick to reject the label Bildungsroman in favour of Entwicklungsroman[2] when speaking of female protagonists, the fact remains that both of these terms underscore the critical issue of the coming-into-selfhood that any adolescent narrative concerns itself with. In *Anne of Green Gables* and *Weetzie Bat*, identity is certainly a core issue

-- Anne struggles with both her "missing" biological identity as an orphan, and her mis-identification as a boy: "You would cry too, if you were an orphan and had come to a place you thought was going to be home and found that they didn't want you because you weren't a boy" (Montgomery 24). Anne is thus defined by what she is not. Weetzie, though not an orphan, has as much trouble defining herself at the beginning of the book as Anne-- when Dirk asks her where she got her name from, she repeats the moniker uncomprehendingly and replies: "How do I know? Crazy parents, I guess" (Block 18). For both, these identities-- "orphan", "boy", and even "Weetzie"-- are ones that have been arbitrarily given to Anne and Weetzie, not chosen or even understood by them.

However, both protagonists manage to transcend these confusing identity-labels by constructing their own identities through art. In Montgomery's text, Anne's verbal creativity is called to attention time and time again; from her penchant for naming things, to the formation of the 'Story Club', to her elocutionary talents as an older teen, Anne is a master wordsmith, and it is through the art of words that Anne builds her own identity. In her first meeting with Marilla, Anne identifies herself as "Cordelia", and then later, as "Anne spelled with an e" (Montgomery 24-5). Anne effectively tries to re-write her own identity just as she does the very landscapes that surround her (e.g. Barry's pond becomes "The Lake of Shining Waters", "The Avenue" is changed into "The White Way of Delight, etc.). While "Cordelia" doesn't quite catch on, a second self-naming is more successful-- "You're only Anne of Green Gables [...]. But it's a million times nicer to be Anne of Green Gables than Anne of nowhere in particular, isn't it?" (60), she asks her reflection, after acknowledging the impossibility of becoming Lady Cordelia. In constructing her own identity through the art of her words, Anne espouses several ideologies closely linked to post-structural /postmodern feminism-- she subscribes to a constructivist rather than essentialist view of identity, she views identity as malleable rather than fixed, and she holds the shaping power of her own words in high esteem. As Foster and Simon put it, "Anne [...] demonstrates her sensitivity to the flexible relationship between words and their signification, and, in creating her own discourse, challenges the privileging of the male Logos" (161). For Anne, her very survival depends on the use of her own self-identifying brand of logocentric art.

While Anne shapes herself through her words, Weetzie does so through visual art-- and more specifically, by turning herself into a canvas for this art: "She was a skinny girl with a bleach-blonde flat-top. Under the pink Harlequin sunglasses, strawberry lipstick, earrings, dangling charms, and sugar-frosted eye shadow she was really almost beautiful" (Block 4). From this description, we get an image of an androgynous, ageless Weetzie (in another passage, her bleached hair is referred to as being "white" (15)), painted and adorned in resistance to the status quo (femininity, youth) rather than in support of it; but her beauty is ambiguous--is she beautiful because of the lipstick, charms, and eye shadow, or despite it? In Sandra Bartky's article "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", Bartky lists the practice of make-up and adornment of the body as products of the internalized gaze of patriarchy (Bartky 33), but in Weetzie's case, I would argue that her adornment seems to have less to do with conforming to a beauty standard than getting across a political message:

"That's a great outfit," Dirk said. Weetzie was wearing her feathered headdress and her moccasins and a pink fringed mini dress. "Thanks, I made it," she said, snapping her strawberry bubble gum. "I'm into Indians [...]. They were here first and we treated them like shit." (Block 5)

Like Anne, Weetzie's creativity via her clothes is closely connected to her sense of self (and her sense of others!) and vice versa; through her self-made costumes, she blurs the lines between her art and her "self" because she is both at once. In this way, as an artist, she literally wears the identity she has made for herself. In Jean Dykstra's article

“Putting Herself in the Picture: Autobiographical Images of Illness and the Body”, Dykstra discusses the power exerted by the woman artist who subverts the dominant male gaze in art to include herself as both subject and artist: “Far from a wallowing in narcissistic reflection [...] their use of autobiography [...] is a political strategy” (Dykstra 70). In a similar fashion, Anne and Weetzie’s self-identification in art is also empowerment through autobiography, and makes a strong feminist-friendly statement concerning the self-reflexive choice involved in formulating identity-- be it gender identity, sexual identity, cultural identity or other. Given this existing evidence, I would disagree with Trites’ view of the impossibility of the female bildungsroman, for Anne and Weetzie’s self-identification and production as artists indicate that for them, identity is indeed something that is created self-consciously.

Another way that the feminism of Anne and Weetzie can be traced is in the deconstruction of the traditional institution of the nuclear family in the texts, thereby calling into question issues of “normalcy” and overthrowing narrow definitions of “the family”. Even as the adopted daughter of Matthew and Marilla, Anne still does not belong to what one would call a “conventional” family-- both Matthew and Marilla are well past middle age, and their relationship as brother and sister sets them outside of traditional mother/father spousal roles. Furthermore, as Frank Davey notes, towards the end of the novel, Anne herself becomes the parent-figure, for she “changes Marilla, and influences Marilla’s parenting, at least as much as Marilla changes and influences Anne” (Davey 176). In effect, the role reversal of Anne and Marilla show how permeable and in fact, fragile, the power structure of the family is-- authority is a liminal position, and not indefinitely locked to a particular identity, such as age or gender.

Weetzie’s family takes familial unconventionality a step further. Living in Grandma Fifi’s beach house, Weetzie’s family is comprised of herself, her lover My Secret Agent Lover Man, her best friend Dirk and his boyfriend Duck, her two daughters, her pets, and although absent from the house, her mother Brandy-Lynn and friends Ping Chong, Valentine Jah-Love, and their son Raphael Jah-Love complete the group. Patrick Jones comments on the success of Weetzie’s surrogate family: “Could there be a more loving family than that of Weetzie Bat and her clique? [...] The Bat family is probably the closest and warmest to appear in young-adult literature in a long time” (Jones 700). In painting a family where genders, ages, sexual orientation, and cultures can come together, Block creates the very picture of a third wave collective seeking to resist a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”.

Apart from their similar divergence from the typical model of the family, another common structure of both Anne and Weetzie’s families is the de-privileging of the authoritative role of the Father, and the rise of the centrality of the heroine herself. Foster and Simons identify this pattern of the “absent or inadequate father” in Montgomery’s novel as “a form of covert rebellion against patriarchal dominance, achieved by writing out a potential source of female oppression” (164). In Anne, both Anne’s deceased paternal father and Matthew are effaced through death from the narrative as father figures. Even alive, the role of Matthew as patriarch is one that Foster and Simons argue against: for them, Matthew “embodies maternal comfort rather than paternal authority”,

and in his misunderstood shy, gentle ways “is in fact as much a victim of gender ideology, with its emphasis on male aggressiveness and self-assurance, as are women” (Foster and Simons 164). In the end, Anne’s world is one where the authority of the father is not needed to create a happy family; rather, it is Anne herself who brings Matthew and Marilla together as a family, and who later succeeds Matthew as the breadwinner of the family.

In *Weetzie Bat*, the authority of the father is discarded in the events surrounding the conception of Cherokee. When My Secret Lover Man refuses Weetzie’s request to have a baby with her, Duck comes up with an alternate plan:

I saw it on the talk show once. These two gay guys and their best friend all slept together so no one would know for sure whose baby it was. And then they had this really cool little girl and they all raised her, and it was so cool, and when someone in the audience said ‘What sexual preference do you hope she has?’ they all go together, they go ‘Happiness.’ Isn’t that cool?” (Block 44)

By creating a “three-dad-baby” (Block 54), Weetzie not only exercises her reproductive rights and bodily autonomy by going ahead with her plans for a baby without the cooperation of My Secret Agent Lover Man, but also irrevocably changes the status of the father from the person who defines the identity of the baby, to merely someone who himself doesn’t have to be identified. The ambiguity and the anonymity of the three fathers establish the mother as the most important authority in the child’s life and depreciate the fathers to a secondary supportive role. In a turn away from traditional Freudian beliefs in the law of the father, the mother thus becomes the child’s main authority and source for identity, as is evident in the transmission of Weetzie’s surname to her children (Cherokee Bat) and to the identity of the family as a whole (the Bat family). Thus, in both books, the subversion of the “traditional” family model leads to a more inclusive consideration of the term as well as of the roles of women within this term.

Finally, the feminism of Anne Shirley and Weetzie Bat can be found in their roles as activists who promote social change throughout the novel. In both texts, Anne and Weetzie are imaged as rebellious figures who defy and question social norms-- Foster and Simons cite Anne’s “iconoclastic spirit” in her determination to be educated despite class and gender limitations (160), and Weetzie from the start is imaged as part of a “subculture” (Jones 700) that “no one understood” (Block 1). Both explode constructs of femininity and the traditional female heroine in “girl’s fiction”, whose didactic role was to impart a moral lesson of good behaviour to its young readers (Foster and Simons 161); Anne’s most famous act of “mis-behaviour” is the cracking of her slate over Gilbert Blythe’s head (Montgomery 12), while Weetzie goes clubbing, consumes alcohol and has sex several times over the course of the novel. However, despite the many subversive elements of resistance found in the texts, one of the most common criticisms launched against the argument for feminist readings of Anne and Weetize is the lack of radical progress that takes place at the endings of the novels. Davey ultimately concludes that “In the unfolding of the novel Anne has learned many times over not only to reconcile

herself with social orthodoxy but on occasion to embrace enthusiastically its practices and genres” (Davey 177), while Trites charges that:

Block does not rest easy until everyone is paired off, two by two, even if gender and orientation are irrelevant to her dyads. Students trained to read for competing dialogues intuit that in Block’s novels, ultimately, nothing all that radical really happens. (Trites 150)

But these perspectives fail to take into account the very inconclusiveness that the novels afford their own endings: “And there was always the bend in the road!” Montgomery writes in the penultimate sentence (309), while Weetzie’s final thoughts are: “I don’t know about happily ever after...but I know about happily” (Block 88). In the ambiguous closing of both texts, Anne and Weetzie reject the fixed “happily ever after” tradition that they come from as parodies of the bildungsroman and fairytale/romance genre, in favour of a more open conclusion that anticipates future joy and struggle, but never static complacency. For Anne and Weetzie then, the journey towards self and societal improvement is one that never ends, a message of activism that clearly resounds for feminists.

In the end, the figures of Anne Shirley and Weetzie Bat prove how careful reading and research of the adolescent novel yields rich rewards for the feminist scholar. While critics may cite the idealistic conservatism of Anne or the New Age utopianism of Weetzie as reasons to reject these novels from feminist reconsideration, one must, as Walker says, acknowledge “not so much what [was] sang” but “the notion of the song” (156), and separate the particular historical limitations of both works from their overriding message of female celebration and autonomy. Clearly, at the time of publication, the notion of the not-so-beautiful, hot-tempered, ambitious Anne Shirley as an adolescent heroine was as remarkably refreshing as the punk matriarch Weetzie Bat is today. However, it is also critical to recognize that Weetzie Bat struggles with obstacles of censorship that Anne of Green Gables never had to face; as Patrick Jones points out, “fears about the alternative lifestyles in Block’s books have kept them out of many schools and public libraries” (700). In the face of such political resistance, it is clear that far from being simply a “work of young adult fiction”, Weetzie Bat offers important discourses which challenge accepted ideologies-- we can only hope they reach as many young readers as possible.

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Endnotes

[1] *Anne of Green Gables* was published in 1908, and takes place in the fictional town of Avonlea, Prince Edward Island. *Weetzie Bat* was published in 1989, and takes place in Los Angeles, California. In both works, the date of publication is more or less contemporaneous with the action of the narrative.

[2] Trites distinguishes between the self-conscious move of the hero towards progress that the bildungsroman connotes with the more general development implied by the entwicklungsroman (11). She cites critic Annis Pratt's argument that because women protagonists in narratives of development are "alienated by gender-role norms from the very outset" of the novel, the conscious choice of development is never an option for the heroine, thus eliminating the possibility of a female Bildungsroman (12). Etymologically, the difference in the two root-words can be traced as well: "bildung" is translated as "culture, education, or literacy", while "entwicklung" means simply "development or growth" (Webster's Online Dictionary).