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A Reflection on Gender Roles in Cynthia Rylant's Missing May.

“What is the true mission of spirit messages? To bring us consolation in the sorrows of life...”
- Cynthia Rylant in Missing May

Several years ago had the pleasure of reading Cynthia Rylant's novel, Missing May, which won the Newbery Medal in 1993. I found this story of a young girl's journey from a fractured childhood and the death of her guardian Aunt to be a delightful and powerfully emotional study of loss, grief and friendship. I was particularly impressed with both the protagonist, Summer, who I viewed as vividly drawn and powerful character that would serve as a good role model to both girls and boys reading this book, and the character of her Aunt May. I was surprised, then, to read Susan B. Ernst's criticism of this novel in her article "Gender Issues in Books for Children and Young Adults". In this article, Ernst examines the portrayal of female characters in several recent Newbery novels, arguing that the "traits giving to males are usually more positive and desired than those given to females," and that the female characters are portrayed in stereotypical roles. In regards to Summer in Missing May, Ernst is particularly unimpressed.

She is portrayed as a dependant, passive, fearful, female. While this book is about a female character, it is not one that demonstrates to readers that girls can be self-reliant, capable, and problem solvers. Rather, this book reinforces the passive female stereotypes. (Ernst, 73)

For this paper, I will re-read Missing May with Ernst's criticisms in mind, paying particular attention to the ways in which Rylant portrays gender roles through the characters in this novel. I will reflect on my views of these gender roles against the background of Ernst's statements and try to decide whether these criticisms are valid and if so, are they the only relevant and meaningful way in which to view this book with all of its artistic and emotional power.

After re-reading this novel, I find that much of what Ernst says cannot be disputed and must be considered when reading this novel to classes or working with it in our classrooms. That said, I also wonder if such an emphasis on gender roles and classifying them against what is traditional and non-traditional is missing the main point and power of the novel. To me, this is primarily a spiritual quest, with Summer's journey into wholeness and healing being the novel's primary focus and purpose. Seen against this light, the character of May – whom we meet only in memory – is an extremely powerful, almost shaman-like figure. We first see this side of May when Summer describes the whirligigs that Ob has created, including one called May.

Even one called May, which had more little spinning parts than any of the rest of the whirligigs, and these parts all white – her Spirit, he said. They were grounded to a branch from an oak tree and this, he said, was her Power (7).

On the surface, May might perhaps be described as rather ordinary. She is a housewife that gardens, a bit overweight and past the prime of her life. She is not particularly exciting, well-educated, exotic, or likely to break anyone's conception of what constitutes traditional female gender roles. If you were to travel into the Appalachian mountain regions of this country you would find entire Wall-Marts filled with people who look and live just like May.

Beyond this ordinary surface, there lies a deep power in May. It is this power and spirit that nurtures and holds the family together during her life and again after her death.. This type of nurturing, in one sense, could be seen as stereotypical. She is a woman, therefore, she must be the nurturer, having no other options open to her. The male characters might just as well provide this nurturing, but they do not. This is a dangerous pitfall to be aware of when educating our children, as Susan Lehr warns us in her article *The Hidden Curriculum: Are we teaching young girls to wait for the Prince.* (Lehr, 2001)

Girls in these classroom studies were also characterized as being encouraged to be classroom nurturers and helpers. These teachers also used girls in elementary and secondary classrooms to tame and civilize the aggressive rowdiness of boys, but at what cost to the girls? (Lehr, 2001)

To view her solely in this way - and Ernst does not mention May in her criticism, focusing only on the character of Summer – does her a disservice and robs her of much of her power and dignity. Rather than something stereotypical, I would argue that in May

we see the archetypal –a representation of the power of the maternal that flows through all of nature and manifests itself in both males and females, in literature as well as in life. This is what is powerful about this novel and why I think that it speaks so powerfully to it's readers, regardless of their gender. It is not about limitations – it is about transcendence. Narrowing your focus to only a counting of non-traditional gender roles in this novel would be like counting the peas in your soup and forgetting to savor its incredible flavor.

For May does have and incredible strength of personality and a force about her that cannot be dismissed or discounted.

May was the best person I ever knew. Even better than Ob. She was a big barrel of nothing but love, and while Ob and me were off in our dreamy heads, May was here in this trailer seeing to it there was a good home for us when were ready to land. She understood people and she let them be whatever they needed to be. She had faith in every single person she ever met, and this never failed her, for nobody ever disappointed May. Seems people knew she saw the best of them, and they'd turn that side to her to giver her a better look. (pp.15-16)

This is not to say that she has not been damaged and does not have insecurities, but that it is her growth through and beyond this damage that givers her strength. Both May and Summer have a similar past in that they have both lost their parents at an early age, in May's case by a flash flood that swept away her family's household. Her life is saved by the fast action of her mother, who flings the sleeping baby May into a washtub, which allows her to float to safety. In this we see another example of female character who

acts with strength, even if her gender-role – that of woman as nurturer/protector of the young – could be viewed as stereotypical.

Ernst criticizes Rylant's portrayal of Summer as that of a "dependant, passive, fearful female," but fails to take into account just how this fear and insecurity came into being. This is not the story of a well-nurtured, middle class girl with no scars, but the story of a "kid who'd been passed around for years." She has insecurities, May has insecurities, and the male characters have insecurities as well. Ob is a "disabled navy man who filled with whirligigs all day long" and Cletus strikes Summer as "a flat-out lunatic" with ancient parents and series of obsessive collections, culminating in a fascination with photographs of all kinds and the stories that they tell about the people and the people they end them. These characters, both male and female, are all damaged people and the negative qualities that Ernst finds troublesome in Summer appear in varying degrees in the novels' male characters as well. And once again, I think that it is these various bits of damage and insecurities that give the novel its strength and its appeal to children (and adults), many of whom face similar fears and insecurities in their own lives and development.

Ernst places a heavy emphasis in her criticism on the role Cletus in solving the problems that face the characters of the novel.

In fact if any problem-solving is done, it is Cletus who does it. Cletus finds the article that sends this little group off to consult the medium they hope will let them contact May. Cletus takes charge when they find out from the Reverend Young's son that the medium has died. Cletus makes the suggestion that Ob could sell his whirligigs in a gift shop, a suggestion that seemed to "fix" things for Ob. (Ernst, 1995)

While valid at face value, these concerns overlook that emphasis that Rylant takes on the group healing process that the characters – living and dead – undergo together, each emotionally damaged in some way and each helping each other.

May would tell Cletus and me, if she was here right now, that it's okay to grab for something or somebody that's being swept away from you. She'd tell us to hold on tight because we're all meant to be together. We're all meant to need each other. (p. 23)

And it is this mutual need and the ability of all of us to help each other hold on that I feel is the overriding message of Rylant's novel. While the concerns that Ernst raise are to valid to a extent, and should be understood and addressed by adults teaching or discussing this novel with students, I do not feel that her conclusion that Summer is merely a representation of a "passive female stereotype. She is more than that, and the other characters are more than the sum of their gender roles. To focus exclusively on this aspect of *Missing May* is to miss the wider beauty and strength of the characters, both male and female and not to teach it would be to deny both male and female readers a deeply moving novel about growing whole and healing.

Perhaps a classroom teacher working with this novel could get past the surface gender roles in this novel by having his or her students re-imagine the characters' roles in the novel. "What if it was Ob, and not May who held the family together and then died?" or "What if Summer was a boy instead of a girl?" Even such direct questions as "Why is it that Cletus and not Summer is the one to find solutions to their troubles," would be an effective way to bring these questions of gender roles and stereotypes to the forefront of

the discussion. In such a manner, students would be made to think about the idea of gender roles and would be in less danger of being caught unawares by the “hidden curriculum” of gender. They would also then be free to examine the novel’s larger background, laying the question of gender-roles and stereotyping aside.

It is this larger background that speaks so powerfully to readers. I have shared this novel with students and adults of both genders and each reader has spoken to me about how powerfully it moved them. They see their own struggles reflected in Summer’s journey and both boys and girls have identified with her character. Nobody – and my readers have included the feminist chairperson of a university’s English department – has mentioned feeling concerned or limited by Rylant’s depiction of gender roles. They have, rather, seen this as a powerfully identifiable and healing book.

This novel reminds me of two other recent novels that feature girl protagonists of similar age and social background (and with similar wounds and insecurities) as Summer. They are Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo and Me and Rupert Goody by Barbara O’Connor. All three novels are written by women and all feature a girl growing into sense of self and security out of a damaged and fractured childhood. All three girls are both helped and hindered in some way by the novel’s male characters (although Because of Winn-Dixie features more adult female characters who help guide and influence Opal than you find in the other novels), and the criticisms that Ernst levels against Missing May might well be leveled against these other two books. In a larger paper, it would be interesting to examine all three of these books, to see to what extent these criticisms are valid, and to the extent that they are, reflect on how much they damage or take away from the positive elements of these works. I would also be

interested in talking with students who have read these three books, particularly girls, and raising this issue of gender roles with them to see what they felt about the characters in the novels.

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