Introduction

Feminism (n.): Plural

The world changes faster than we can fathom in ways that are complicated. These bewildering changes often leave us raw. The cultural climate is shifting, particularly for women as we contend with the retrenchment of reproductive freedom, the persistence of rape culture, and the flawed if not damaging representations of women we're consuming in music, movies, and literature.

We have a comedian asking his fans to touch women lightly on their stomachs because ignoring personal boundaries is oh so funny. We have all manner of music glorifying the degradation of women, and damnit, that music is catchy so I often find myself singing along as my very being is diminished. Singers like Robin Thicke know "we want it." Rappers like Jay-Z use the word "bitch" like punctuation. Movies, more often than not, tell the stories of men as if men's stories are the only stories that matter. When women are involved, they are sidekicks, the romantic interests, the afterthoughts. Rarely do women get to be the center of attention. Rarely do our stories get to matter.

How do we bring attention to these issues? How do we do so

in ways that will actually be heard? How do we find the necessary language for talking about the inequalities and injustices women face, both great and small? As I've gotten older, feminism has answered these questions, at least in part.

Feminism is flawed, but it offers, at its best, a way to navigate this shifting cultural climate. Feminism has certainly helped me find my voice. Feminism has helped me believe my voice matters, even in this world where there are so many voices demanding to be heard.

How do we reconcile the imperfections of feminism with all the good it can do? In truth, feminism is flawed because it is a movement powered by people and people are inherently flawed. For whatever reason, we hold feminism to an unreasonable standard where the movement must be everything we want and must always make the best choices. When feminism falls short of our expectations, we decide the problem is with feminism rather than with the flawed people who act in the name of the movement.

The problem with movements is that, all too often, they are associated only with the most visible figures, the people with the biggest platforms and the loudest, most provocative voices. But feminism is not whatever philosophy is being spouted by the popular media feminist flavor of the week, at least not entirely.

Feminism, as of late, has suffered from a certain guilt by association because we conflate feminism with women who advocate feminism as part of their personal brand. When these figureheads say what we want to hear, we put them up on the Feminist Pedestal, and when they do something we don't like, we knock them right off and then say there's something wrong with feminism because our feminist leaders have failed us. We forget the difference between feminism and Professional Feminists.

I openly embrace the label of bad feminist. I do so because I am flawed and human. I am not terribly well versed in feminist history. I am not as well read in key feminist texts as I would

like to be. I have certain . . . interests and personality traits and opinions that may not fall in line with mainstream feminism, but I am still a feminist. I cannot tell you how freeing it has been to accept this about myself.

I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I'm not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers. I am not trying to say I'm right. I am just trying—trying to support what I believe in, trying to do some good in this world, trying to make some noise with my writing while also being myself: a woman who loves pink and likes to get freaky and sometimes dances her ass off to music she knows, she *knows*, is terrible for women and who sometimes plays dumb with repairmen because it's just easier to let them feel macho than it is to stand on the moral high ground.

I am a bad feminist because I never want to be placed on a Feminist Pedestal. People who are placed on pedestals are expected to pose, perfectly. Then they get knocked off when they fuck it up. I regularly fuck it up. Consider me already knocked off.

When I was younger, I disavowed feminism with alarming frequency. I understand why women still fall over themselves to disavow feminism, to distance themselves. I disavowed feminism because when I was called a feminist, the label felt like an insult. In fact, it was generally intended as such. When I was called a feminist, during those days, my first thought was, *But I willingly give blow jobs.* I had it in my head that I could not both be a feminist and be sexually open. I had lots of strange things in my head during my teens and twenties.

I disavowed feminism because I had no rational understanding of the movement. I was called a feminist, and what I heard was, "You are an angry, sex-hating, man-hating victim lady person."

This caricature is how feminists have been warped by the people who fear feminism most, the same people who have the most to lose when feminism succeeds. Anytime I remember how I once disavowed feminism, I am ashamed of my ignorance. I am ashamed of my fear because mostly the disavowal was grounded in the fear that I would be ostracized, that I would be seen as a troublemaker, that I would never be accepted by the mainstream.

I get angry when women disavow feminism and shun the feminist label but say they support all the advances born of feminism because I see a disconnect that does not need to be there. I get angry but I understand and hope someday we will live in a culture where we don't need to distance ourselves from the feminist label, where the label doesn't make us afraid of being alone, of being too different, of wanting too much.

I try to keep my feminism simple. I know feminism is complex and evolving and flawed. I know feminism will not and cannot fix everything. I believe in equal opportunities for women and men. I believe in women having reproductive freedom and affordable and unfettered access to the health care they need. I believe women should be paid as much as men for doing the same work. Feminism is a choice, and if a woman does not want to be a feminist, that is her right, but it is still my responsibility to fight for her rights. I believe feminism is grounded in supporting the choices of women even if we wouldn't make certain choices for ourselves. I believe women not just in the United States but throughout the world deserve equality and freedom but know I am in no position to tell women of other cultures what that equality and freedom should look like.

I resisted feminism in my late teens and my twenties because I worried that feminism wouldn't allow me to be the mess of a woman I knew myself to be. But then I began to learn more about feminism. I learned to separate feminism from Feminism or Feminists or the idea of an Essential Feminism—one true

feminism to dominate all of womankind. It was easy to embrace feminism when I realized it was advocating for gender equality in all realms, while also making the effort to be intersectional, to consider all the other factors that influence who we are and how we move through the world. Feminism has given me peace. Feminism has given me guiding principles for how I write, how I read, how I live. I do stray from these principles, but I also know it's okay when I do not live up to my best feminist self.

Women of color, queer women, and transgender women need to be better included in the feminist project. Women from these groups have been shamefully abandoned by Capital-F Feminism, time and again. This is a hard, painful truth. This is where a lot of people run into resisting feminism, trying to create distance between the movement and where they stand. Believe me, I understand. For years, I decided feminism wasn't for me as a black woman, as a woman who has been queer identified at varying points in her life, because feminism has, historically, been far more invested in improving the lives of heterosexual white women to the detriment of all others.

But two wrongs do not make a right. Feminism's failings do not mean we should eschew feminism entirely. People do terrible things all the time, but we don't regularly disown our humanity. We disavow the terrible things. We should disavow the failures of feminism without disavowing its many successes and how far we have come.

We don't all have to believe in the same feminism. Feminism can be pluralistic so long as we respect the different feminisms we carry with us, so long as we give enough of a damn to try to minimize the fractures among us.

Feminism will better succeed with collective effort, but feminist success can also rise out of personal conduct. I hear many young women say they can't find well-known feminists with whom they identify. That can be disheartening, but I say, let

us (try to) become the feminists we would like to see moving through the world.

When you can't find someone to follow, you have to find a way to lead by example. In this collection of essays, I'm trying to lead, in a small, imperfect way. I am raising my voice as a bad feminist. I am taking a stand as a bad feminist. I offer insights on our culture and how we consume it. The essays in this collection also examine race in contemporary film, the limits of "diversity," and how innovation is rarely satisfying; it is rarely enough. I call for creating new, more inclusive measures for literary excellence and take a closer look at HBO's *Girls* and the phenomenon of the Fifty Shades trilogy. These essays are political and they are personal. They are, like feminism, flawed, but they come from a genuine place. I am just one woman trying to make sense of this world we live in. I'm raising my voice to show all the ways we have room to want more, to do better.

[ME]

a very dedicated fan base of women who remain so relieved to see themselves in some small way.

Women of color come of age and have the same experiences Dunham depicts in her shows, but we rarely see those stories because they don't fit the popular imagination's rendering of Other girlhood, which is generally nonexistent in popular culture. At least there have been a few shows for black women to recognize themselves—the aforementioned *Girlfriends*, *Living Single*, *A Different World*, *The Cosby Show*. What about other women of color? For Hispanic and Latina women, Indian women, Middle Eastern women, Asian women, their absence in popular culture is even more pronounced, their need for relief just as palpable and desperate.

The incredible problem *Girls* faces is that all we want is everything from each movie or television show or book that promises to offer a new voice, a relatable voice, an important voice. We want, and rightly so, to believe our lives deserve to be new, relatable, and important. We want to see more complex, nuanced depictions of what it really means to be whoever we are or were or hope to be. We just want so much. We just need so much.

I'm more interested in a show called *Grown Women* about a group of friends who finally have great jobs and pay all their bills in a timely manner but don't have any savings and still deal with sloppy love lives and hangovers on Monday morning at work. That show doesn't exist, though, because stability holds little allure for the popular imagination and Hollywood rarely acknowledges women of a certain age. Until that show comes along or I decide to write it, we have to deal with what we have.

I Once Was Miss America

In 1984, Vanessa Williams became Miss America. She would later have to step down because of a nude photo scandal, but when she was first crowned it was an amazing moment for black girls everywhere. Williams was the first black woman to wear the Miss America crown in the pageant's sixty-three-year history. I was not the kind of girl who cared much about pageants or being a beauty queen, but watching Williams and her perfect cheekbones and glittering teeth as she accepted the crown gave girls like me ideas. That moment made us believe we too could be beautiful.

While Vanessa Williams offered black girls a new image of who the All-American Girl could be, the more traditional image of the All-American Girl could be found in Sweet Valley, an idyllic town in sunny Southern California where the lawns are perfectly manicured. Everyone is fit and beautiful and successful. As is the case in most perfect places, life in Sweet Valley is episodic. There is a narrative arc to each day or week or month, always a valuable lesson to be learned from life's experiences. The endings, in Sweet Valley, are mostly happy. The meek inherit. All

good things come to those who wait. There is nowhere in the world like Sweet Valley.

Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield are the sweethearts of Sweet Valley. They are blond and thin and perfect even with all their human flaws. The Wakefield sisters are twins—twice the perfection. Elizabeth is the good twin, and Jessica is the more rebellious twin. Jessica is a bad, bad girl, even though in Sweet Valley, a bad girl is never quite that bad. The sisters wear matching lavaliere necklaces, and they drive a red Fiat. Elizabeth and Jessica love each other and are best friends, but they are also rivals. Sisters are complicated even when they are perfect.

Elizabeth is responsible and universally adored for her sweetness and patience. She wants to be a journalist. She loves Todd Wilkins, a tall, handsome, and popular basketball player. She works on the school paper and is a cheerleader—smart and athletic, the perfect combination.

Jessica likes boys and partying. She is charming and enjoys gossip, flirting, and shopping. She loves to borrow Elizabeth's clothes, and Elizabeth puts up with it because you cannot say no to Jessica Wakefield. She's a cheerleader too, and although she comes off as a bit of an airhead, Jessica has depth and intelligence. She sometimes says unkind things, but that's because she is impulsive and has a bit of a temper. She's all emotion. Jessica is the kind of girl who gives in to her impulses, while Elizabeth controls her urges, at least most of the time.

The Wakefield twins aren't real; they are the main characters of the Sweet Valley High series. I started reading the Sweet Valley High books when I was eight or nine years old. I was cross-eyed and wore thick bifocals. Other than my younger brother, I was the only black kid in school, so I was going to be noticed even though I wanted very much to go unnoticed. I was shy and awkward and didn't know how to fix myself. My hair was wild, stood on end, earning me the inexplicable nicknames Hair, Beard, and Mustache

even though I had neither a beard nor a mustache. My classmates also called me Don King. I looked nothing like Don King. He's a man, for one. I was told my parents "talked funny," which I later realized was a reference to their thick Haitian accents, which I did not hear until they were pointed out to me, and then suddenly those accents were all I heard. I read books while I walked to school. I had the strangest laugh—somewhat halted and tentative—and a bit of a bucktooth situation. I regularly wore overalls by choice and didn't *really* know any curse words, so that should give you a sense of where I was on the social ladder—reaching for the bottom rung.

When I first started reading Sweet Valley High books, I wanted girls like the Wakefield twins to love me. I wanted the handsome boys who chased girls like those Wakefield twins to love me. I wanted the popular kids to pull me into the shelter of their golden embrace and make me popular too. Popularity is contagious. Many movies from the 1980s bear this theory out. I had hope, is what I'm saying, though certainly that hope was fragile.

There was one particular group of golden, popular kids at my school. They're in every school, an interchangeable infestation of good genes and big smiles and perfect hair and Guess or Girbaud jeans. I don't remember much about grade school, but I remember the first and last names of the popular kids. If I returned to my childhood neighborhood, I could point out their houses and other geographical points of interest. I watched the popular kids all the time, trying to figure out how to breathe the air in their atmosphere. They were so *American* and, therefore, exotic because they had freedoms I did not. I was a different kind of American. I had conservative Haitian parents who wanted the best for their kids but were also very wary of American permissiveness. I was American at school and Haitian at home. This required negotiating a fine balance, and I am a clumsy person.

There is nothing more desperate and unrequited than the love an unpopular girl nurtures for the cool kids. One day, the kids

in the popular clique were teasing me, about what, I do not remember. I got angrier and angrier as they taunted me, not only because they were teasing me but also because I was so painfully aware of the gaping distance between where we were and where I wanted us to be—walking through the mall, arm in arm, or sharing secrets at a slumber party, or gossiping about cute boys. I liked the mall. I had secrets. I liked cute boys.

That day, though, I needed to come up with a snappy retort to show them they couldn't push me around, to show them I was cool too, to stand my ground. I pointed my fingers at them like Miss Celie laying a curse on Mister in *The Color Purple*, and I shouted, "One day, just you wait and see. I'm going to become Miss America." That was my mother's nickname for me, Miss America. I'm her beloved firstborn, her first child born in these United States. I loved my nickname. Those popular kids laughed and laughed. For the rest of that year and into the next, they teased me mercilessly about being Miss America, asking how my campaign was going, making comments about sashes and crowns, prancing around in front of me doing the Miss America wave. They incorporated props. Those kids made it clear I didn't have a shot in hell at the crown, but I'm stubborn and Vanessa Williams had won Miss America so I began to sincerely believe I was going to become Miss America. I reminded my classmates of my belief regularly, which only fueled their petty torments. I have no idea where I was going with that strategy.

The Sweet Valley High books were extremely popular when I was young, and most girls immediately identified as an Elizabeth or a Jessica. Most of the people who knew me would assume I was an Elizabeth, minus her popularity, but I wasn't. In my head and in my heart, I was a bad girl: misunderstood and interesting. I was a Jessica—a girl who was confident and sexy and smart, a girl everyone wanted to be around. I was the future Miss America, ordained by my mother and Vanessa Williams.

I always knew there was something unnatural about Sweet Valley. I did not care. I still don't. I was well aware not everyone lives in a perfect suburb with perfect parents leading perfect lives. I had been to Haiti, seen incomprehensible poverty with my own eyes, so I knew my relatively good fortune was an accident of birth. I knew there is rarely such a thing as a happy ending. I understood that the Sweet Valley High books espouse an unrealistic, narrow ideal of beauty (blond, white, thin) and that any town where everyone looks and acts the same is not to be trusted. The one time a citizen of Sweet Valley (Steven Wakefield, the twins' older brother) dated interracially, that relationship lasted for only one book (#94) because the couple decided, in the end, that they were too different. I also knew that verdict was suspect.

Like many writers, I lived inside of books as a child. Inside books I could get away from the impossible things I had to deal with. When I read I was never lonely or tormented or scared. I read everything I could get my hands on, and my parents indulged and encouraged me. They were strict about things like television and grades, but they never censored my reading material or questioned my love of Sweet Valley. We moved around a lot for my father's job, but Sweet Valley never moved and the people never changed. The kids in Sweet Valley were a constant, and in a small, poignant way, they were my friends.

I waited for new Sweet Valley High books the way other kids waited for new comics or movie releases. Each time my mother took me to the mall, I went straight to Waldenbooks and quickly scanned the shelves in the Young Adult section, wondering what the twins and their friends and enemies would get into next. When the series began churning out thick super editions, I could have died and gone to Sweet Valley heaven. As my collection of Sweet Valley High books grew, I maintained the set meticulously, keeping the books in perfect order and pristine condition. Sometimes my brothers would sneak into my room and reorder

the books. Minor skirmishes would erupt between us that often ended with me doing something like burying their favorite toys in the backyard. I was quite serious about my Sweet Valley High books.

Nostalgia is powerful. It is natural, human, to long for the past, particularly when we can remember our histories as better than they were. Life happens faster than I can comprehend. I am nearly forty, but my love of Sweet Valley remains strong and immediate. When I read the books now, I know I'm reading garbage, but I remember what it was like to spend my afternoons in Sweet Valley, hanging out with the Wakefield twins and Enid Rollins and Lila Fowler and Bruce Patman and Todd Wilkins and Winston Egbert. The nostalgia I feel for these books and these people makes my chest ache.

When I learned Francine Pascal was releasing *Sweet Valley Confidential*, an update to the Sweet Valley High series, set ten years into the future, I basically lost my shit and began obsessing about what was going down in Sweet Valley. I began marking the days until the book's release.

At 2:30 in the morning, on the day of its release, *Sweet Valley Confidential* downloaded to my Kindle. I spent the next three hours reading. There wasn't a page I turned, electronically speaking, where I didn't think *Girrrrrrrrrl*, laugh aloud, or mutter "Mmmm." Reading this book was a vocal and emotional experience. I went to work, and when I got home, I read *Sweet Valley Confidential* again. The book was, as you might imagine, terrible, an insult to the memory of the original Sweet Valley High series. As I read, I kept thinking, *They could have called me. I work cheap.* "They," of course, have no idea who I am, but still, it hurt to know how many fans of Sweet Valley are out there, fans who could have written this book in the manner it deserved.

Sweet Valley Confidential makes you understand why so many people are lamenting the death of publishing. The book is bewildering. On a fundamental level, the writing is extremely bad. The word "appalling" comes to mind. The narrative structure is so deeply flawed it physically pained me. The story jumps from the present told in third person past tense to the past told in first person present tense. Sometimes the narrator changes from one twin to the next, and then other times the narrator is another, lesser character. I have spent more time than I care to admit trying to make sense of these authorial choices. Every so often, some sort of Web 2.0, social media reference is dropped into the narrative as if Pascal is saying, "Look, I'm still relevant! Twitter! Facebook! Oh my!"

The twins and their friends are all a decade older, but there is little evidence of any emotional maturity. You would expect that the twins, as women in their late twenties, would have sex lives, but most of the sex in the book is strangely antiseptic, eroticism from another room, as if the audience is still tween and teen girls. When you do see a bit of Elizabeth's or Jessica's sexual personas, it's written so you can only cringe. Many of the petty grievances from high school linger, and most of the characters come off as the very worst people in the world. The whole enterprise has the feel of caricature. The twins have been written in such a way that makes you think Pascal (who created the series but didn't write any of the original books) has no idea who the Wakefield twins are. Elizabeth and Jessica display behaviors so uncharacteristic that the simplest explanation is that Elizabeth and Jessica have both been lobotomized. I don't want to give too much away, but throughout the novel, we're supposed to feel sorry for Elizabeth. However, she is portrayed as such a self-indulgent, self-pitying sop of a woman you start to feel like she deserves her misery. Jessica, on the other hand, we're supposed to hate, but she's professionally successful and in a loving relationship and has a personality. She seems rational and interesting and as vibrant as ever. She makes mistakes but in a really human, endearing way. When you find yourself rooting for the person you're supposed to hate

because of the overall plot of the novel, the narrative has taken a drastically wrong turn. (For the record, TEAM JESSICA 4 EVA!)

One thing remains gloriously the same, though: the gratuitous descriptions of Elizabeth and Jessica's beauty.

In *Sweet Valley High 1: Double Love*, the twins are described thusly:

> *With their shoulder-length blond hair, blue-green eyes, and perfect California tans, Elizabeth and Jessica were exact duplicates of one another, down to the tiny dimples in their left cheeks when they smiled. Each wore a gold lavaliere around her neck—matching presents from their parents on their sixteenth birthday last June.*

Twenty-eight years later, in *Sweet Valley Confidential*, the twins look much the same, though their description has aged finely, like wine:

> *Like the twins of that poem, Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield appeared interchangeable, if you considered only their faces.*
>
> *And what faces they were.*
>
> *Gorgeous. Absolutely amazing. The kind you couldn't stop looking at. Their eyes were shades of aqua that danced in the light like shards of precious stones, oval and fringed with thick, light brown lashes long enough to cast a shadow on their cheeks. Their silky blond hair, the cascading kind, fell just below their shoulders. And to complete the perfection, their rosy lips looked as if they were penciled on. There wasn't a thing wrong with their figures, either. It was as if billions of possibilities all fell together perfectly.*
>
> *Twice.*

When I first read the passage from *Sweet Valley Confidential*, I woke someone up with my laughter. I literally applauded because I was so thrilled by the exquisite badness.

To be fair, *Sweet Valley Confidential* could never have satisfied the expectations of those of us who fell in love with the original Sweet Valley High series. Like I said, nostalgia is powerful and that power builds with time; it often reshapes our memories. It's not that the original Sweet Valley High books were the mark of great literature, but that to some preteen and teenage girls, the books were the most familiar and resonant expressions of our angst and our fondest wishes for ourselves, the girls we wanted to become. There is a young girl-heart still throbbing in many of us. Those of us who read *Sweet Valley Confidential* were looking to recapture some of the Sweet Valley magic from our youth.

Despite the book's flaws, the magic was very much there for me. I easily embraced the drama, the absurdity, the wild implausibilities. You would not believe what's going down in Sweet Valley and who has ended up with whom, but let me tell you, it's all a delicious scandal. Someone's gay! Someone betrayed her sister. Someone's living in New York City. Someone got married to a wealthy but controlling man and lived in Europe until she escaped. Someone is engaged to be married and everyone's talking. A guy we all thought was a prince of a man is really just a man. Someone has turned into a real bitch. Someone uses baking to sublimate her sorrow. Someone had cancer. Someone became a real asshole. Someone hasn't changed one little bit. Someone got filthy rich. Someone got filthier rich. Someone died. Someone loves someone else in a tragic, unrequited way. Amidst all the drama, some things in Sweet Valley don't change. There are many happy endings. As mindless, escapist entertainment, *Sweet Valley Confidential* delivers.

I was never going to become Miss America. I know that now. Vanessa Williams and her glittering teeth could only do so much. Nonetheless, I continue to have a very active fantasy life. In one of my more elaborate, embarrassing flights of fancy, I win an Oscar for

writing the Best Adapted Screenplay based on my bestselling novel, which has graced the *New York Times* bestseller list for at least fifty-seven weeks. At the Oscar ceremony I am wearing something flawless by a designer with a long, exotic name. My hair and face are beat. I don't trip when I walk up the stairs in my Louboutins to accept my honor. My date is my husband, who is the most handsome, famous movie star in the world. He is madly, uxoriously in love with me, and he beams as I stare into the audience. He will win Best Actor later in the evening because he starred in my movie. That's how we met. In my acceptance speech, I thank my parents and my agents and my famous movie-star husband and my friends. I thank Francine Pascal for creating the land of Sweet Valley and Vanessa Williams for teaching me I could be beautiful. Then I call out the names of the golden, popular kids who never loved me. I raise my Oscar over my head with one hand, and I point my fingers at a camera with the other, once again like Miss Celie laying a curse on Mister. I say, "I once told you I was going to become Miss America. This isn't the Miss America crown, but it's pretty damn close."

As a black girl, as a Haitian girl, I was not supposed to see myself in the Sweet Valley High books, but I did. Perhaps it was because I too lived in the suburbs, perhaps it was because I was looking for the way toward a perfect life and becoming Miss America, but I felt the Sweet Valley stories deeply. I read and reread the books countless times. The drama, recycled plots, and ludicrous circumstances spoke to me profoundly. This may also explain why in high school I become utterly devoted to *Beverly Hills 90210*, which took the Sweet Valley High formula and elevated it to high art. *Sweet Valley Confidential* reminded me of my most awkward years and the silly promise I made to a silly group of kids. The book reminded me of the solace, escape, and quiet joy I found in Sweet Valley. Some experiences are universal. A girl is a girl whether she lives in West Omaha or Sweet Valley. Books are often far more than just books.

Garish, Glorious Spectacles

The green girl likes to watch herself suffer.

—Kate Zambreno, *Green Girl*

In her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asserts that gender is a performance, an unstable identity that forms through how it is performed over and over. She writes,

> *Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a* stylized repetition of acts. *The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.*

While our conceptions of gender have evolved since the publication of *Gender Trouble*, there is a lot to be said for Butler's

said for the women of reality television as they break themselves against one another, against the camera, against the ways they are expected to perform their gender.

What may be most terrifying is just how real reality television is, after all. We say we watch these shows to feel better about ourselves, to have that reassurance that we are not that desperate. We are not that green. But perhaps we watch these shows because in the green girls interrupted, we see, more than anything, the plainest reflections of ourselves, garishly exposed but unfettered.

Not Here to Make Friends

My memory of men is never lit up and illuminated like my memory of women.

—Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*

In my high school yearbook there is a note from a girl who wrote, "I like you even though you are very mean." I do not remember the girl who wrote this note. I do not remember being mean to her, or to anyone, for that matter. I do remember that I was feral in high school, socially awkward, emotionally closed off, completely lost.

Or maybe I don't want to remember being mean because I've changed in the twenty years between then and now. Around my junior year, I went from being quiet and withdrawn to being mean, where mean was saying exactly what I thought and making sarcastic comments relentlessly. Sincerity was dead to me.

I had so few friends it didn't really matter how I behaved. I had nothing to lose. I had no idea what it meant to be likable, though I was surrounded by generally likable people—or, I suppose, I was surrounded by people who were very invested in projecting a likable facade, people who were willing to play by the rules. I had likable parents and brothers. I was the anomaly as a social

outcast. Even from a young age I understood that when a girl is unlikable, a girl is a problem. I also understood that I wasn't being intentionally mean. I was being honest (admittedly, without tact), and I was being human. It is either a blessing or a curse that those are rarely likable qualities in a woman.

Inevitably on every reality television program, someone will boldly declare, "I'm not here to make friends." These people do so to establish that they are on a given program to win the nebulous prize or the bachelor's heart or to get the exposure they need to begin their unsteady rise to a modicum of fame. They make this declaration by way of explaining their unlikability or the inevitably unkind edit they're going to receive from the show's producers. It isn't that they are terrible, you see. It's simply that they are not participating in the show to make friends. They are freeing themselves from the burden of likability, or they are, perhaps, freeing us from the burden of guilt for the dislike and eventual contempt we might hold for them.

In the movie *Young Adult*, Charlize Theron stars as Mavis Gary. Nearly every review of the movie raises her character's unlikability, painting her with a bright scarlet *U*. Based on this character's critical reception, an unlikable woman embodies any number of unpleasing but entirely human characteristics. Mavis is beautiful, cold, calculating, self-absorbed, full of odd tics, insensitive, and largely dysfunctional in nearly every aspect of her life. These are, apparently, unacceptable traits for a woman, particularly given the sheer number working in concert. Some reviews go so far as to suggest that Mavis is mentally ill, because there's nothing more reliable than armchair diagnosis by disapproving critics. In his review, Roger Ebert lauds *Young Adult* screenwriter Diablo Cody for making Mavis an alcoholic because "without such a context, Mavis would simply be insane." Ebert and many others require an explanation for Mavis's behavior. They require a diagnosis for her unlikability in order to tolerate her. The simplest explanation, of Mavis as human, will not suffice.

In many ways, likability is a very elaborate lie, a performance, a code of conduct dictating the proper way to be. Characters who don't follow this code become unlikable. Critics who criticize a character's unlikability cannot necessarily be faulted. They are merely expressing a wider cultural malaise with all things unpleasant, all things that dare to breach the norm of social acceptability.

Why is likability even a question? Why are we so concerned with whether, in fact or fiction, someone is likable? *Unlikable* is a fluid designation that can be applied to any character who doesn't behave in a way the reader finds palatable. Lionel Shriver notes, in an essay for the *Financial Times*, that "this 'liking' business has two components: moral approval and affection." We need characters to be lovable while they do right.

Some might suggest that this likability question is a by-product of an online culture in which we reflexively click "Like" or "Favorite" on every status update and bit of personal trivia shared on social networks. Certainly there is a culture of relentless affirmation online, but it would be shortsighted to believe that this desire to be liked, this desire to express what or whom we like, begins or ends with the Internet. I have no doubt that Abraham Maslow has some ideas about this persistent desire, in so many of us, to be liked and, in turn, to belong, to have our deftness at following the proper code of conduct affirmed.

As a writer and a person who has struggled with likability—being likable, wanting to be liked, wanting to belong—I have spent a great deal of time thinking about likability in the stories I

read and those I write. I am often drawn to unlikable characters, to those who behave in socially unacceptable ways, say whatever is on their mind, and do what they want with varying levels of regard for the consequences. I want characters to do bad things and get away with their misdeeds. I want characters to think ugly thoughts and make ugly decisions. I want characters to make mistakes and put themselves first without apologizing for it.

I don't even mind unlikable characters whose behavior is psychopathic or sociopathic. This is not to say I condone, for example, murder, but Patrick Bateman, in *American Psycho*, is a very interesting man. There is a psychiatric diagnosis for his unlikability, a deviant pathology, but he has his charms, particularly in his scathing self-awareness. Serial killers are people too, and sometimes they are funny. "My conscience," Bateman thinks in the novel, "my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist."

I want characters to do the things I am afraid to do for fear of making myself more unlikable than I may already be. I want characters to be the most honest of all things—human.

That the question of likability even exists in literary conversations is odd. It implies that we are engaging in a courtship. When characters are unlikable, they don't meet our mutable, varying standards. Certainly we can find kinship in fiction, but literary merit shouldn't be dictated by whether we want to be friends or lovers with those about whom we read.

Frankly, I find "good," purportedly likable characters rather unbearable. Take May Welland in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. May's likability is, to be fair, deliberate, a choice Wharton has made so Newland Archer's passion for Countess Olenska is ever more fraught and bittersweet. Still, May is the kind of woman who always does everything right, everything that is expected of her. She is a perfect society lady. She knows how to keep up appearances. Meanwhile, everyone looks down on May's unspoken rival and cousin, the Countess Olenska, a woman who dares to defy social conventions, who dares to not tolerate a terrible marriage, who dares to want real passion in her life even if that passion is found with an unsuitable man.

We're not supposed to like her, but Countess Olenska intrigues me because she is interesting. She stands apart from the blur of social conformity. We're supposed to like, or at least respect, May for being the proper and sweet innocent she carries herself as; but in Wharton's skilled hands, we eventually see that May Welland is as human, and therefore as unlikable, as anyone else. This question of likability would be far more tolerable if all writers were as talented as Edith Wharton, but alas.

Far more pernicious than the characters whose likability serves a greater purpose within a narrative are the characters who are flatly likable. It's a bit silly, but I spend a great deal of time, even now, lamenting the perfection of one Elizabeth Wakefield, one of the two golden twins prominently featured in the popular Sweet Valley High young adult series. Elizabeth is the good girl who always makes the right choices, even when she has to sacrifice her own happiness. She gets good grades. She's a good daughter, sister, and girlfriend. It's boring. Elizabeth's likability is downright loathsome. I am Team Jessica. I prefer Nellie Olesen over Laura Ingalls Wilder.

This matter of likability is largely a futile one. Oftentimes, a likable character is simply designed as such to show that he or she is one who knows how to play by the rules and cares to be seen as playing by the rules. The likable character, like the unlikable character, is generally used to make some greater narrative point.

Often in literary criticism, writers are told that a character isn't likable, as if a character's likability is directly proportional to the

quality of a novel's writing. This is particularly true for women in fiction. In literature, as in life, the rules are all too often different for girls. There are many instances in which an unlikable man is billed as an antihero, earning a special term to explain those ways in which he deviates from the norm, the traditionally likable. The list, beginning with Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, is long. An unlikable man is inscrutably interesting, dark, or tormented, but ultimately compelling, even when he might behave in distasteful ways. This is the only explanation I can come up with for the popularity of, say, the novels of Philip Roth, who is one hell of a writer but who also practically revels in the unlikability of his men, with their neuroses and self-loathing (and, of course, humanity) boldly on display from one page to the next.

When women are unlikable, it becomes a point of obsession in critical conversations by professional and amateur critics alike. Why are these women daring to flaunt convention? Why aren't they making themselves likable (and therefore acceptable) to polite society? In a *Publishers Weekly* interview with Claire Messud about her novel *The Woman Upstairs*, which features a rather "unlikable" protagonist, Nora, who is bitter, bereft, and downright angry about what her life has become, the interviewer said, "I wouldn't want to be friends with Nora, would you? Her outlook is almost unbearably grim." And there we have it. A reader was here to make friends with the characters in a book and she didn't like what she found.

Messud, for her part, had a sharp response for her interviewer.

> *For heaven's sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Would you want to be friends with Mickey Sabbath? Saleem Sinai? Hamlet? Krapp? Oedipus? Oscar Wao? Antigone? Raskolnikov? Any of the characters in* The Corrections*? Any of the characters in* Infinite Jest*? Any of the characters in anything Pynchon has ever written? Or Martin Amis? Or Orhan Pamuk? Or Alice Munro, for that matter? If you're reading to find friends, you're in deep trouble. We read to find life, in all its possibilities. The relevant question isn't "Is this a potential friend for me?" but "Is this character alive?"*

Perhaps, then, unlikable characters, the ones who are the most human, are also the ones who are the most alive. Perhaps this intimacy makes us uncomfortable because we don't dare be so alive.

In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood says,

> *A great deal of nonsense is written every day about characters in fiction—from the side of those who believe too much in character and from the side of those who believe too little. Those who believe too much have an iron set of prejudices about what characters are: we should get to "know" them; . . . they should "grow" and "develop"; and they should be nice. So they should be pretty much like us.*

Wood is correct, in part, but the ongoing question of character likability leaves the impression that what we're looking for in fiction is an ideal world where people behave in ideal ways. The question suggests that characters should be reflections not of us, but of our better selves.

Wood also says, "There is nothing harder than the creation of fictional character." I can attest to this difficulty, though with perhaps less hyperbole. I have, indeed, found several other tasks harder over the years. Regardless, characters are hard to create because we need to develop people who are interesting enough to hold a reader's attention. We need to ensure that they are some measure of credible. We need to make them distinct from ourselves (and, in the best of all words, from those in our lives,

unless of course there is a need to settle scores). Somehow they need to be well developed enough to carry a plot, or carry a narrative without a plot, or endure the tribulations we writers tend to throw at them with alacrity. It's no wonder so many characters are unlikable, given what they have to put up with.

It is a seductive position writers put the reader in when they create an interesting, unlikable character—they make the reader complicit, in ways that are both uncomfortable and intriguing.

If people with messy lives are the point of certain narratives, if unlikable women are the point of certain narratives, novels like *Battleborn*, *Treasure Island!!!*, *Dare Me*, *Magnificence*, and many others exhibit a delightful excess of purpose, with stories filled with women who are deemed unlikable because they make so-called bad choices, describe the world exactly as they see it, and are, ultimately, honest and breathtakingly alive.

These novels depict women who are clearly not participating in their narratives to make friends and whose characters are the better for it. Freed from the constraints of likability, they are able to exist on and beyond the page as fully realized, interesting, and realistic characters. Perhaps the saying "the truth hurts" is what lies at the heart of worrying over likability or the lack thereof—how much of the truth we're willing to subject ourselves to, how much we are willing to hurt, when we immerse ourselves in the safety of a fictional world.

Sara Levine's *Treasure Island!!!* features a narrator who is unlikable in curious ways. She is utterly self-obsessed, acts without considering consequences, and always makes choices that will benefit herself over others. She is intensely preoccupied with the book *Treasure Island* and sets out to live her life by the book's core values: BOLDNESS, RESOLUTION, INDEPENDENCE, and HORN-BLOWING. As the narrator careens from one self-created disaster to another, she is unrepentant. There is no redemption or lesson learned from misdeeds. There is no apology or moral to the story, and that makes an already incisive and intelligent novel even more compelling.

When you think about it, these core values the narrator in *Treasure Island!!!* seeks to live by—BOLDNESS, RESOLUTION, INDEPENDENCE, and HORN-BLOWING—are characteristics that define how supposedly unlikable women lead their fictional lives.

In Pamela Ribon's *You Take It from Here*, a woman, Smidge, is dying of lung cancer and wants her best friend, Danielle, to essentially finish the job of raising her daughter and being her husband's companion in grief. The book's premise is an interesting one, but what really stands apart is how deeply unlikable Smidge is. She is the kind of person who, it might seem, shouldn't have any friends—bossy, intense, controlling, unrepentant, and manipulative. And yet. She has a best friend, a daughter, a husband, and a community of people who will deeply mourn her when she is gone. Ribon's steadfastness in this character's lack of likability is admirable. She never panders by making Smidge somehow have some kind of epiphany of character simply because she is dying. Ribon is unwavering in what she shows us of Smidge, and the novel is the better for it.

A customer review of *You Take It from Here* on Amazon.com from Danae Savitri states, "I never warmed up to Smidge as a character, thought she suffered from borderline personality disorder, common among people who are charismatic narcissistics, who alternately bully, manipulate, and charm others around them." Instead of judging the book, she calls into question a woman's likability. Again, there is an armchair diagnosis of mental disease. Pathologizing the unlikable in fictional characters is an almost Pavlovian response.

Dare Me, by Megan Abbott, is a book about high school cheer-

leaders, but it is nothing like what you might expect. Populated by women who act with boldness, resolve, independence, and a prioritizing of the self, these mighty principles from *Treasure Island!!!*, *Dare Me* is both engaging and terrifying because it reveals the fraught intimacy between girls. It's a novel about bodies and striving for perfection and ambition and desire so naked, so palpable, you cannot help but want the deeply flawed women in the book to get what they want, no matter how terribly they go about getting it. The young women at the center of the novel, Beth and Addy, are friends as much as they are enemies. They betray each other and they betray themselves. They commit wrongs, and still they are each other's gravitational center. On the phone, after a drunken night, Beth asks Addy if she remembers

> *how we used to hang on the monkey bars, hooking our legs around each other, and how strong we got and how no one could ever beat us, and we could never beat each other, but we'd agree to each release our hands at the count of three, and that she always cheated, and I always let her, standing beneath, looking up at her and grinning my gap-toothed, pre-orthodontic grin.*

It is a moment that shows us how Addy has always seen Beth plainly, and understood her and loved her nonetheless. Throughout the novel Beth, and Addy to an extent, remains unlikable, remains flawed, but there is no explanation for it, no clear trajectory between cause and effect. Traditional parameters of likability are deftly avoided throughout the novel in moments as honest and no less poignant as these.

Susan Lindley, a widow, has to move on after her husband's tragic death in Lydia Millet's *Magnificence*. From the outset, we know she was unfaithful to her husband. She inherits her uncle's mansion, filled with a rotting taxidermy collection, and sets about making some kind of order, both in the mansion and in her own life. She has a daughter who is involved with her boss and a boyfriend who is married to another woman. She feels responsible for her husband's death but is matter-of-fact in reconciling herself to this. "Was she relieved, slut that she was?" Susan thinks. "Was there something in her that was relieved by any of this? If anyone could admit such a thing, she should be able to. She was not only a slut but a killer." Susan does go on to acknowledge that she feels a profound absence in the loss of her husband, a "freedom of nothing," and throughout the novel she indulges in this freedom; she embraces it.

So much of *Magnificence* is grounded solely in Susan's experiences, her awkward perceptions of the world she has created and continues to create for herself. We also have the pleasure of seeing a woman in her late forties as a deeply sexual being who is equally unashamed in her want for material things as she becomes more and more attached to the mansion she has inherited. Though the prose often gives over to lush excess and meditation, what remains compelling is this woman who reveals little remorse for her infidelities and the ways she tends to fail the people in her life. In a lesser novel, such remorse would be the primary narrative thrust, but in *Magnificence* we see how a woman, one deemed unlikable by many, is able to exist and be part of a story that expands far beyond remorse and the kinds of entrapments that could hold likable characters back. We are able to see just what the freedom of nothing looks like.

The short story collection *Battleborn*, by Claire Vaye Watkins, contains many stories with seemingly unlikable women. As much as the stories are about place, all set, in some form, in the desert of the American West, several stories are about women and their strength, where their strength comes from, and how that strength can fail in unbearably human ways. The phrase "battle born" is, in fact, Nevada's state motto—meant to represent the state's strength, forged from struggle. In perhaps the most powerful story, "Ron-

dine al Nido," there is an epigraph at the beginning. Normally, I do not care for epigraphs. I don't want my reading of a story to be framed by the writer in such an overt way. This story's epigraph, though, is from the *Bhagavad Gita*, and reads, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." From the outset we know that only ruin lies ahead, and the story becomes a matter of learning just how that ruin comes about. We learn of a woman who "walks out on a man who in the end, she'll decide, didn't love her enough, though he in fact did love her, but his love wrenched something inside him, and this caused him to hurt her." Really, though, this is a story about when the woman was a girl, sixteen, with a friend, Lena, the kind who would follow the narrator, "our girl," wherever she went. There is an evening in Las Vegas, and an incident in a hotel room with some boys the girls meet, one that will irrevocably change the friendship, one that could have been avoided if a flawed young woman didn't make the wrong choice, the choice that makes the story everything.

Perhaps the most unlikable woman in recent fictional memory is Amy in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, a woman who goes to extraordinary lengths—faking her own murder and framing her husband, Nick—to punish his infidelity and keep him within her grasp. Amy was so excessively unlikable, so unrepentant, so shameless, that at times this book is intensely uncomfortable. Flynn engages in a clever manipulation in which we learn more and more about both Nick and Amy in small moments, so that we never quite know how to feel about them. We never quite know if they are likable or unlikable, and then we do know that they are both flawed, both terrible, and stuck together in many ways, and it is exhilarating to see a writer who doesn't blink, who doesn't pull back.

There is a line of anger that runs throughout *Gone Girl*, and for Amy, that anger is born of the unreasonable burdens women are so often forced to bear. The novel is a psychological thriller, but it is also an exquisite character study. Amy is, by all accounts,

a woman people should like. She's "a smart, pretty, nice girl . . . with so many *interests* and *enthusiasms*, a cool job, a loving family. And let's say it: money." Even with all these assets, Amy finds herself single at thirty-two, and then she finds Nick.

The most uncomfortable aspect of *Gone Girl* is the book's honesty and how desperately similar many of us likely are to Nick and Amy in the ways they love and hate each other. The truth hurts. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts. When we finally begin to see the truth of Amy, she says of the night she met Nick,

> *That night at the Brooklyn party, I was playing the girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl. Men always say that as* the *defining compliment, don't they?* She's a cool girl. *Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding . . . Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl.*

This is what is so rarely said about unlikable women in fiction—that they aren't pretending, that they won't or can't pretend to be someone they are not. They have neither the energy for it nor the desire. They don't have the willingness of a May Welland to play the part demanded of her. In *Gone Girl*, Amy talks about the temptation of being the woman a man wants, but ultimately she doesn't give in to the temptation to be "the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain." Unlikable women refuse to give in to that temptation. They are, instead, themselves. They accept the consequences of their choices, and those consequences become stories worth reading.

How We All Lose

Discussions about gender are often framed as either/or propositions. Men are from Mars and women are from Venus, or so we are told, as if this means we're all so different it is nigh impossible to reach each other. The way we talk about gender makes it easy to forget Mars and Venus are part of the same solar system, divided by only one planet, held in the thrall of the same sun. Unfortunately, many books released in 2012 did little to productively reframe the cultural conversation about gender. Instead, these books offered rather narrow insights into women and men and were, at times, disappointing for the opportunities they missed to bring nuance to how we think about gender.

If women's fortunes improve, it must mean men's fortunes will suffer, as if there is a finite amount of good fortune in the universe that cannot be shared equally between men and women. This is certainly how I felt while reading Hanna Rosin's interesting and intelligent, but ultimately frustrating, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women.* What does it even mean to suggest that the end of men is explicitly connected to the rise of women? There's no denying women are doing better than they ever have, but is that really saying much? When you consider what life was like for women before suffrage, before Title IX, before the Equal Pay Act, before *Roe v. Wade*, before any number of changes that made life merely tolerable, most any success women encountered would seem like a rise in circumstance.

Rosin has clearly done a great deal of research and makes compelling arguments. I particularly appreciated the way she tried to advance the conversation about gender by upending our expectations. So often when we talk about gender, we have tunnel vision, where we can only understand the lives of women as being grounded in disadvantage (the endless "having it all" debate, for example). Rosin complicates that notion by revealing the many ways women are gaining the upper hand in education, several industries, and the culture at large.

I was skeptical as I read *The End of Men*, but Rosin makes it easy to respect many of her ideas. At the same time, it's pretty easy to frame an argument convincingly by being selective in the data presented. No writer or critic is free from this selectivity, but at times it stands out as problematic in *The End of Men.* In the chapter "Pharm Girls: How Women Remade the Economy," Rosin discusses the rise of women in the pharmaceutical industry. She notes that "in 2009, for the first time in American history, the balance of the workforce tipped toward women, who continue to hover around 50 percent." This is an encouraging, important statistic, but according to 2010 census data, women still earn 77 percent of what men earn and that cannot be ignored. We make up half the workforce but pay a pretty steep price for that privilege.

Throughout the chapter, Rosin highlights the great strides women have made as pharmacists, how they are practically dominating the field, and it is truly inspiring to see how far we've come