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‘Tomboy’ is anachronistic. But the concept still has something to teach us.

These characters still give us room to experiment with the complexities of gender and sexuality.

By Lynne Stahl

Later this year, the newest film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s beloved novel “[Little Women](#)” will arrive in theaters. This one is an A-list Greta Gerwig production, spangled with the likes of Meryl Streep, Emma Watson and Timothée Chalamet. Exciting as the prospect of Laura Dern as matriarch Marmee March may be, however, I’m much more intrigued to see how this contemporary version handles the novel’s tomboyish co-heroine — especially after a recent [Vanity Fair interview](#) indicating that her gender-bending figured prominently in Gerwig’s mind while filming. Jo March is among the most iconic tomboys in American culture, but that culture is beginning to understand gender in less binary terms than were available to Alcott in the late 1860s. In 2019, children like Jo might be thought of as trans, non-binary and/or gender-nonconforming. Where, then, do tomboys fit in now.

The term “tomboy” has long sounded alarms among [conservative parenting factions](#) for its perceived association with lesbianism and departure from traditional femininity, but it’s come under scrutiny in progressive circles, too, some of which argue that it [upholds the essentialist notion](#) that anatomy largely determines children’s behaviors and inclinations. The author of a 2017 New York Times [essay](#) who wrote that her daughter was more a tomboy than a transboy sparked debate around gender-nonconforming children, and the argument about this trope has also unfolded across [Facebook communities](#) and [clinical studies](#).

What defines tomboyism in the first place? It can’t simply be equated to masculinity. Tomboys are female children distinguished by resistance to stereotypically “girly” behaviors; they’re rambunctious, grass-stained and generally disinclined to passivity, dolls, frills and flirting with boys. Think of spiky-haired, surly drummer Watts in “[Some Kind of Wonderful](#)” or feisty survivalist Katniss in “[The Hunger Games](#).” While tomboys vary in their particulars, their one constant is a staunch refusal to conform to female stereotypes.

But fictional stories about tomboys, from “[Freaky Friday](#)” to “[Juno](#),” also feature plotlines that inevitably pair these characters off with boys, offering uncomplicatedly happy, tidy conclusions in which the tomboy drops her resistance and acquires a boyfriend. It’s a process that constricts their characteristic independence, and it can feel torturous for those of us who don’t identify with traditional femininity — and who see something of ourselves in fictional figures who reject it. Empathetic viewers might want to see a character embrace her singleness, even if an actual lesbian pairing is too much to hope for.

The attempt to fix the tomboy by marrying her off invites disturbing associations with real-life [medical practices](#) that “correct” high levels of hormones associated with masculine characteristics. Though less physically invasive, the creative industries have their own ways of imposing corrective measures. Alcott, who never married, was well aware of the narrative constraints she and Jo faced. These endings weren’t happy for her, either; she wrote [in a letter to her uncle](#) that “publishers are very perverse & wont let authors have thier [sic] way so my little women must grow up & be married off in a very stupid style.” Literary critic Leslie Fiedler recognized the same phenomenon and argued that readers, too, understand the literary tomboy’s fate from page one. “Every genteel reader knows,” [he writes](#), that the tomboy “will be transformed at the moment that she steps out of her overalls into her first party dress and is revealed as worthy of love!” Taming via romance is the defining feature of tomboy stories, the resolution of tension that renders them palatable to the general public. But if the ending is a foregone conclusion, why do these stories remain compelling?

Maybe the last thing that happens in a story doesn’t have to cancel out everything that came before. Within their narratives, tomboys take liberties, showing us that there are other ways of being in the world. It’s their divergences that stick with us, even if the story line ultimately forecloses them. We can discount their endings the way viewers might brush off a “Bachelor” season finale: It’s a requisite formality of the genre that’s far less illuminating than the social dynamics we witness in the show’s beginning and middle. And besides, every genteel viewer knows that those relationships don’t last.

There’s also something queer about the appeal that these unfeminine females hold for ostensibly straight boys. Often, this attraction is expressed in terms of the tomboy’s divergence from conventional femininity (“You’re not like other girls”) and alignment with masculine norms (“It’s just like being with one of the guys”). In the 1980 summer-camp comedy “[Little Darlings](#),” for instance, Kristy McNichol’s tomboy character mirrors love interest Matt Dillon in both [appearance](#) and demeanor. Based as it is in their similarities, their romance is far cry from the traditional Princess/Prince Charming binary.

Though the romantic capitulations of tomboys can feel artificial, they have a long history. Even after they stopped insisting on marriage, publishers took other measures to stifle rebellious females. In the 1950s, for example, some publishing houses [barred authors](#) from writing endings that portrayed homosexuality in a positive light. If authors wanted to include queer characters, those characters were doomed to endings that restored so-called moral order — meaning any same-sex relationships had to be broken up before the final page.

Yet something about the queerness of tomboy stories manages to linger, untamed. Tomboys resist the requisite order, and in doing so they encourage readers to resist it, too — to read stubbornly between the lines for the stories that are muted, to ignore contrived endings. It’s a way for the audience to take up the tomboyish spirit. Knowing, as Fiedler suggests we do, that the tomboy will be tamed in the end makes her moments of resistance all the more precious. Instead of letting the conclusion negate the whole story’s impact, we can return in our minds to the more affirming moments: Jodie Foster playing field hockey in “Freaky Friday” or McNichol’s [charged food fight](#) with “Little Darlings” co-star Tatum O’Neal.

In “Little Women,” Jo develops a deep and mutually nourishing friendship with Laurie, a neighbor distinguished by his markedly unmasculine demeanor. “In some ways,” [Gerwig suggests](#), “they are each other’s twins.” On the surface, Jo’s tomboyism and Laurie’s affinity for typically feminine pursuits make them seem more different than alike. Yet on a deeper level, they are united by their shared refusal to conform with gendered expectations about how they “should” behave.

As we work to negotiate happier endings for all, we can also turn our minds to better beginnings. In recent years, a handful of states have started offering [gender-neutral options](#) on birth certificate. While this shift barely chips away at the damaging legal and cultural confines of the sex/gender binary, it’s a crucial, encouraging step. I don’t mean to imply that tomboys are perfect models of social justice and resistance — far from it. Many tomboy stories rely on regressive notions of race and class, grounding their visions of ideal femininity in wealth and whiteness. But representation is important, and it’s better to represent and [study](#) limited modes of resistance, flaws and all, than none.

Norms will always exist; there will always be mores and expectations against which to chafe. If we want greater gender autonomy, we have to understand how traditional ideas about gender linger in the stories we tell and the endings we envision for ourselves. Beyond resisting gender norms, tomboys give us a way to see the complex dynamics that shape our expression and perception of identity. And even if the word “tomboy” is reaching its own ending, the tomboy’s refusal to conform keeps its power still.

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