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A Textual Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Athletes in Young Adult Literature

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A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS
OF THE PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE ATHLETES
IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

A Graduate Research Paper
Submitted to the
Division of School Library Studies
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
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by
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IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The role of women in sports has changed dramatically in the last forty years. The civil rights movement and Title IX legislation have provided opportunities for women to compete in a wide range of sports, and female athletes are much more visible in the media today. The purpose of this study was to examine recent portrayals of female athletes in young adult sports fiction to determine whether they are represented authentically. This researcher analyzed how female athletes are portrayed in sports fiction, the characteristics of an authentic female athlete, and whether female athletes are stereotyped in this genre of young adult literature. This qualitative content analysis examined twenty young adult novels written for readers in grades fifth through twelfth that feature a female athlete as the protagonist and range in publication from 1990-2010.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Sports have become a daily part of life for young girls throughout the United States. Until the middle of the twentieth century, sports were dominated by males, but since then more and more females are becoming involved in athletics. Now being told, “You play like a girl!” may not be considered such an insult. According to the Women’s Sports Foundation (2008), there are over 3 million high school aged girls participating in organized school sports in the United States. The numbers have risen from 1 in 27 girls participating in 1971 to 1 in 2.4 in 2008. The percentage of girls aged 6 to 11 years frequently participating in sports has risen from 20.4% to 32.4% since 1987. In 1972, national legislation, referred to as Title IX, banned sex discrimination in both academics and athletics in U.S. schools. This law led to an increase in female sports participation in elementary and secondary schools (Thomas, 2008). With the passage of Title IX, many more opportunities have become available for girls to join athletic teams and stereotypes and barriers are starting to diminish. “Combined with the advocacy efforts of the women’s sports movement, this legislation had a significant impact by expanding physical activity opportunities for girls and women” (President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 1997). Now, there are very few sports that are considered solely “male sports.” The popularity of collegiate, professional, and Olympic women’s sports also may encourage more young girls to try such sports as soccer, softball, or basketball.

Women now comprise 33 percent of all college athletes and approximately 39 percent of United States Olympic team members. Reciprocally, as more female role models become available for young girls to emulate, their interest and involvement in fitness and athletic activities will continue to grow (President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 1997.)

Thomas (2008) stated that participation on a high school athletic team increases female graduation rates by 41%, is correlated to success as an adult, and has developmental benefits including building self-confidence, self-esteem, and problem-solving skills.

Despite the rise in numbers of girls participating in sports, sports fiction for young adults may not portray an authentic image of a female protagonist. Instead, female athletes may be portrayed as masculine or as tomboys. Several sources cite the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (1997) that states,

Girls may perceive that it is socially unacceptable to be strong, physical, and athletically talented; this is the very definition of a popular boy. An erroneous but particularly persistent and long-standing belief is that sports are masculinizing and that physically active girls are more likely to become lesbians, or that all successful female athletes are lesbians (Cahn, 1994; Kane, 1996; Lenskyj, 1986, p. 75.)

In order for a sports fiction novel, featuring a female protagonist, to be authentic and relatable to the average female athlete, Kriegh (1996) states they should, "have access to fictional literature that represents their lives, providing positive, diverse role models and encourage healthy participation in sports" (p. 20). This portrayal of a female athlete may be more representative of the millions of young girls who actively participate in sports in the United States today. The average young female athlete may find it hard to relate to the main character in current young adult sports fiction if she is portrayed stereotypically. Jose and Brewer (1984) discuss the importance of character identification in their research on the factors of story appreciation. When characters are portrayed authentically, readers are more likely to identify with them resulting in increased story appreciation. Much of the research that has been conducted on the portrayal of female athletes in young adult literature is becoming outdated (Kriegh, 1996) or is focused on

gender stereotyping in picture books instead of literature targeted for older readers (McDonald, 2001; Narahara, 1998; Peterson & Lach, 1990).

Problem Statement

Despite the increasing frequency of girls participating in sports, fictional young adult literature lacks authentic portrayals of female athletes. Kriegh (1996) states, “Given these figures, it would seem likely that a great deal of literature of all kinds (novels as well as newspapers and magazine articles) about teenage female athletes would be available. In fact, young female athletes’ experiences are not well represented, either in amount or quality of coverage” (p. 20). Instead, too often, the portrayal of young women as athletes in young adult fiction seems to distort the characterization as a masculine figure or a character seeking to emulate masculine behavior.

Research Questions

This study investigated the following research questions:

1. Has the portrayal of female athletes in young adult fiction become more authentic in the last twenty years?
2. What are the characteristics of a modern authentic female athlete and do they emerge from recent young adult fiction?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the portrayals of young female athletes in literature for students in grades fifth through twelfth, since the passage of Title IX, exhibit behaviors and characteristics of an authentic, 21st century female athlete.

Definitions

Authentic sports fiction featuring a female athlete: “Fictional literature that represents their lives, provides positive, diverse role models, and encourages healthy participation in athletics” (Kriegh, 1996, p. 20).

Young adult literature: Books written for readers 12-18 years old.

Assumptions/Limitations

This researcher assumed that there is a lack of young adult sports fiction that portrays the average, authentic female athlete and that instead female athletes in YA literature are often stereotyped. This analysis included twenty sports fiction books featuring a female protagonist published from 1990-2010 for readers in grades fifth through twelfth. The twenty books included ten books published in each decade. The range of publication dates reflects the passage of Title IX when female athletes became better represented in the media and literature and builds upon the work of previous researchers, especially Kreigh (1996) who found that female athlete protagonists were not yet being portrayed as authentic, multi-dimensional characters.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The participation of women in sports has changed dramatically over the last 40 years in the United States. The number of girls involved in organized sports and the visibility of female athletes in mainstream media has increased. Despite this evolution, there seems to be a lack of authentic female athletes featured as protagonists in young adult literature. The purpose of this study was to explore the portrayal of female athletes in young adult literature of the past twenty years to determine whether female protagonists were portrayed authentically in a sports context. Examination of this problem requires an understanding of the changes in women's sports over the last 35 years, gender stereotyping in children's literature, and the value of relevance of character portrayal for the young reader.

Role of Women in Sports

The civil rights movement in the 1960s and national legislation, including Title IX in 1972, created many opportunities for females to participate in sports. This led to female athletes becoming a visible part of our media and culture. The passage of Title IX banning sex discrimination in sports was a defining event in sports history. "For the first time, girls across the United States got a real chance to play on the athletic field- and that little law took on a role far greater than anyone ever imagined it could" (Blumenthal, 2005, p. 3). Title IX led to more and more girls participating in organized school sports. According to Blumenthal (2005), in 1971-1972 only 294,015 girls were participating in high school varsity sports. In 2001-2002, the number had increased to 2,806,998. Sports have allowed girls to be both feminine and smart, but also strong and competitive. There

are many professional female athletes that young girls look up to that represent an authentic, well-rounded athlete.

Girls' and women's gains have manifested themselves in the rise of female sports icons like Mia Hamm, Lisa Leslie, Julie Foudy, Jennie Finch, and Jessica Mendoza who grew up with the benefits of access to high school participation opportunities, college athletic scholarships, and opportunities for professional and Olympic competition (National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, 2008.)

Despite all of the progress that has been made, girls still face discrimination in athletics. Multiple studies have investigated the perceptions of gender-appropriate sports. Alley and Hicks (2005) examined the gender stereotypes of adolescent participants in three sports. Sixty-nine South Carolina high school students were surveyed and asked to rank the masculinity and femininity of karate, ballet, and tennis. They were given three sample paragraphs describing the individuals participating in these sports. They ranked the person's masculinity and femininity, without knowing the gender, on a five point scale. The results of this study showed how males and females were perceived by their peers due to their participation in a male or female-oriented sport. Their findings indicated that females were perceived as more masculine and males as more feminine if they participated in a "sex-inappropriate" sport. The study concluded that these stereotypes, in turn, are seen to affect the social interactions of adolescents.

In a similar study, Hardin and Greer (2009) looked at gender-role socialization, media use, and sports participation on perceptions of gender-appropriate sports. They conducted an Internet survey of 340 college students at a large research university in the Northeast. Participants ranked fourteen sports as masculine or feminine and then answered questions about their participation in sports or fitness activities and how much media they consumed during an average week. A factor analysis was used to analyze the

findings. For the most part both the men and women looked at sports similarly, yet there were some differences. All of the sports in general were perceived as more masculine than feminine. The aggressive, contact sports were considered more masculine and new action sports (skateboarding, motocross) like those shown on the “X games” on ESPN were also considered masculine. Not surprisingly, females ranked many of the sports, including basketball, as less masculine than the males did.

Media coverage and consumption also seemed to factor into gender-appropriate perceptions. Male athletes are featured much more predominantly on television, in newspapers, and on the Internet than female athletes, and participants noted that this did influence their perceptions on which sports were considered more masculine or feminine. Messner (as cited in Hardin & Greer, 2009) found that in the late 1990s, 94% of children consumed sports media, often daily. These results were determined through a survey. Messner then concluded that, “Sports media are thus likely to be one of the major influences on children’s views of gender, race, commercialism, and other key issues (p. xix).

The civil rights movement and Title IX have broken ground, provided opportunities, and helped to discourage discrimination and stereotypes, but there is still a long way to go. Authentic representations of female athletes in young adult literature would be reflective of the progress that has been made by women in sports.

Gender Stereotyping in Literature

Gender stereotyping is a large field of study, yet its’ prevalence in literature for youth has primarily been studied in picture books (McDonald, 2001; Narahara, 1998; Peterson & Lach, 1990). Little research has been done on female stereotyping in young

adult literature and specifically in sports fiction. In one particular study on the portrayal of female athletes in young adult novels, Kriegh (1996) conducted a textual analysis of sixteen young adult sports novels ranging in publication from the 1970s to the 1990s. Two young adult librarians chose the books they felt were most representative of the genre for each decade. Kriegh studied whether young female athletes had access to fictional sports literature that portrayed positive, diverse role models who participated in sports in a healthy way. In grouping the books by decade in which they were published, Kriegh further examined the female protagonist in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexuality. Kriegh concluded that the books she sampled for this study did not accurately portray most female athletes today. Most of the protagonists were white, middle-class girls who were dealing with “unrealistic or uncommon experiences” (p. 25). In her conclusion, Kriegh (1996) noted,

Magazine, newspaper and television portrayals of young female athletes are all important, but it is only in longer works of fiction that female athletes can be brought to life as strong, flawed and infinitely capable characters, with stories that reflect the realities and complexities of individual athletic experiences (p. 25).

While Kriegh’s study provided insight into the portrayal of female athletes in young adult sports fiction, thirteen years have passed since it was published. A question remaining is whether the state of the art in young adult fiction has changed in its portrayal of young female athletes. Much of the gender stereotyping research has focused solely on its occurrence in picture books and representation in male and female characters.

Studies by Narahara (1998) and McDonald (2001) analyzed sex bias in the representation of male and female characters in picture books for young children through textual analyses of children’s books published from the 1960s to the 1980s. Research on gender stereotyping in literature first became common in the 1960s and 1970s during the

women's movement in our country. Studies by Feminists on Children's Literature, Nilson and Key (as cited in Narahara, 1998) examined children's books, including Newbery Award winners, for female gender stereotyping. A prominent study by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross (as cited in Narahara, 1998) analyzed Caldecott, Newbery winner, and honor award picture books for evidence of gender distinctions and representations of character roles. The study concluded that females were greatly underrepresented, especially in primary roles, and also that they were commonly portrayed as passive and immobile.

As time passed, books published in the latter 1970-1980s started to more accurately represent women, though this change was seen to be statistically insignificant (Peterson & Lach, 1990). Peterson and Lach selected a sample of half the picture books (136) listed in the booklist in *Horn Book* for the years 1967, 1977, and 1987. They reviewed the literature by coding its content on the basis of five characteristics including author's gender, main character's gender, number/gender of other characters, type of main character, and genre of the book. They concluded that female characters in books still continue to be portrayed stereotypically, sometimes subtly, in their demeanor, occupation, and role. Peterson and Lach (1990) stated that, "A young child's sense of personal and gender significance is changed, influenced and connected to the world community through books written for them by adults" (p. 187). They continued by asserting how books shape and influence the young and that they have an ever-increasing influence and power on gender development. Peterson and Lach (1990) also summarized studies on gender stereotyping in children's literature. They concluded that, "These studies clearly show that sustained use of non-sexist materials produce significant

changes in children's thinking. They develop more egalitarian attitudes about what females and males can do, and they show decreased sex-role stereotyping in general" (p. 192). The elimination of gender stereotyping in children's literature is important because gender stereotypes and sexism limit children's potential growth and development while non-sexist books can produce positive changes in self-concept, attitudes, and behavior (Narahara, 1998).

Chick (2002) states that, "Gender misconceptions can be challenged early if boys and girls are consistently exposed to books with strong female characters and equitable gender messages" (p. 20). Chick, a professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Penn State Altoona, has conducted studies on gender issues, gender bias, and children's literature choices. She discussed the importance of challenging gender stereotypes by selecting books for children that contain strong female characters. Gender stereotypes can be hard to unlearn. "Book selections must retain the essence of masculinity and femininity without resorting to stereotypes. The authors of children's books must be careful in stories to present images of girls and women that are not simply substitutes for male characters" (p. 21). Female characters should show a wide range of emotions and traits including perseverance, courage, and independence and not only stereotyped "girl" traits including weakness, passivity, and dependency (Chick, 2002.) Young female readers should be able to find positive female role models in the books they read. Female characters should be as multi-faceted as the women living in our country today. Gender stereotypes in fictional literature can influence and shape a young girl's gender identity and perceptions of their role in the world.

Value of Character Portrayal in Reading Material Selections

Nevil (2000) compiled multiple preference and interest studies that examined what students were actually reading instead of looking at studies of what students might want to read. This method provided a more accurate view of children's reading interests and demonstrated that accessibility in terms of language and setting was a determinate of interest but also that identification with characters was another major determinate of reading engagement. Jose and Brewer (1983) examined the effects of structural factors on the development of story appreciation. They tested a developmental model of story-liking for suspense stories by having second, fourth, and sixth grade children rate suspense stories on 10 affective scales. They found that one factor of story-liking was identification with the story character and that reader identification increased with greater perceived similarity between the character and the reader.

Smith (2001) investigated how a group of sixth grade girls "negotiated their identities" through discussions about books that contained strong, independent, and realistic female characters. Smith examined female identity development through this ethnographic study of a racially and culturally diverse group of middle school girls. During weekly book club discussions, the girls "illustrated the complexity of their identification with the novels' characters and the contradictory and fluid negotiation of their own identities and female roles" (p. 4). Smith also observed that as the girls shared how they identified with the characters, they emphasized that they did not want to be limited to female gender stereotypes. The participating girls used the texts they read to question and explore their own lives and also hopes for the future. The novels that were selected for this book club all featured female protagonists. Smith shared the reason

behind these selections by stating, “The selection of novels with female protagonists allowed these readers to actively position themselves as readers who could explore their questions and emotions and to identify with the heroine” (p. 14). These young girls were able to discuss their own lives by reading about characters they felt were relatable to them.

Despite recorded progress in reducing gender stereotyping in the United States, many of our fictional sports novels featuring female protagonists do not reflect that progress. Research by Nevil (2000), Jose and Brewer (1983), and Smith (2001) indicated that many young readers enjoy being able to identify with and relate to a character in the books they are reading. If the portrayals of females in young adult sports fiction are inauthentic and stereotypical, it is hard for young women to benefit by reading about these characters. Stereotypical portrayals can negatively influence a girl’s gender identity and role so young adult books featuring authentic females as protagonists should be accessible to readers (Chick, 2002).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study examined the portrayal of female athletes in young adult sports fiction to determine whether an authentic female athlete is represented in this genre of literature. Millions of young girls are now participating in athletics and events in sports history, such as Title IX, have created many more opportunities for females in sports. In order to analyze the portrayal of female athletes in young adult sports fiction published since Title IX's passage, the researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis.

Qualitative content analysis is defined as, "A research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). This type of qualitative analysis does not focus solely on counting the occurrence of words or concepts but instead investigates themes, patterns, and meanings of a particular text. The texts are purposely chosen in order to answer the research questions addressed in the study. Qualitative content analysis is inductive in nature because the researcher examines topics, themes, and the inferences drawn from them in order to produce descriptions or typologies (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Content analysis applies systematic procedures for processing data including categorizing and coding data. Using inference and interpretation, raw data is organized into categories and themes. As data are coded, new themes and concepts may develop which are added to the coding process. After data have been collected and coded, the researcher provides both a description and interpretation of the study's findings.

"Qualitative content analysis does not produce counts and statistical significance; instead,

it uncovers patterns, themes, and categories important to a social reality” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 312). This research method has limitations. “Some people will complain that a thematic analysis violates the text, especially if it does not fully consider the context from which the text was generated or if it is used to make inferences that the author did not particularly have in mind” (Bazerman & Prior, 2004, p. 37). Researcher objectivity and bias also is of concern in this approach. Lacity and Janson (1994) suggest that researchers be aware of their own filters and bias while understanding that there could be multiple interpretations for any particular text.

Procedure

This study examined twenty young adult sports fiction novels that feature a female protagonist. The population studied included ten books published in each decade from 1990-2010 and was targeted for readers in fifth through twelfth grade. This publication range was chosen to build upon earlier research by Kriegh (1996) who concluded that female athlete characters in young adult fiction were not portrayed authentically. The books chosen from each decade featured a variety of sports. The novels used in this study were selected from Wilson’s Core Collection for Middle School and Senior High School and the Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database. The selection criteria used for this study included young adult sports fiction novels featuring a female protagonist, published between 1990-2010, that received at least two positive reviews.

The novels used in this study were analyzed by using a coding system that involved a set of pre-determined themes as created by the researcher. As books were analyzed, additional themes developed. In order to determine whether the selected books featured an authentic representation of a young female athlete, an evaluation form was developed

to guide the researcher in analyzing the texts. The evaluation guide was derived from the characteristics of an authentic female athlete and key themes identified in previous studies. Appendix A contains the evaluation form used in this study.

The researcher used the evaluation form to record basic bibliographic information about each book. A list of specific questions guided analysis of the main character and story elements of each selected novel. The analysis form also provided an open-ended opportunity for the researcher to record general impressions of the book's contents so that unanticipated themes emerging from the analysis could be recorded. After each of the books had been read and analyzed, the researcher identified patterns and trends observed in young adult sports fiction novels that featured a female protagonist. A constant comparative method was used which includes "generating and connecting categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories" (Cresswell, 2008, p. 443). These findings then reflected whether this genre of literature tended to provide an authentic representation of young female athletes.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis of twenty sports fiction novels featuring a female protagonist. The list of novels analyzed can be found in Appendix B. The researcher analyzed multiple themes including character portrayal (identifiable masculine and feminine qualities), the sport played (gender-neutral or traditionally male or female-oriented), whether sports were a major storyline, whether the character was facing overwhelming obstacles or discrimination, and finally main character sexuality and stereotypes.

Findings

The researcher examined the themes present in the chosen novels in order to answer the following research questions:

1. Has the portrayal of female athletes in young adult fiction become more authentic in the last twenty years?
2. What are the characteristics of a modern authentic female athlete and do they emerge from recent young adult fiction?

Evidence and examples of each theme were noted in order to compare the novels across the two decades of publication. Tables were also created, when necessary, so evidence could be examined by the researcher.

Character portrayal

Of the twenty novels analyzed, twelve presented well-rounded female protagonists that exhibited both masculine and female qualities and did not display stereotypes of female athletes. The female characters appeared athletic, competitive, driven, and strong

but also displayed thoughtfulness, sensitivity, friendliness, and nurturing qualities. The lives of the young women were portrayed as well-rounded and included secondary storylines about family or friend relationships, school, and other common young adult issues. Sports were a large part of their daily lives, but not their only focus. These types of characters would likely be relatable to the average young female athlete. Table 1 provides a description of the authentic portrayals of female athletes in the novels examined.

Table 1

Well-rounded/Authentic Portrayals of Young Female Athletes

Title	Protagonist and Sport Played	Examples of Authentic Qualities
Forward Pass (1990)	Jill (Football)	Jill is an all-star basketball player and is recruited to play on the football team because of her athletic ability. Beyond a competitive athlete, she is also described as easygoing, thoughtful, and attractive.
Sarah with an H (1996)	Sarah (Basketball)	Sarah is a talented basketball player that exemplifies toughness by playing with a broken finger in the state final, but is also described as pretty, smart, and a good student.
A Season of Comebacks (1997)	Molly (Softball)	Molly is a typical young girl who loves to play softball. She is imaginative and outgoing and feels like she lives in the shadow of her older sister, Allie, who is an all-star pitcher. She is a hard worker, competitive, and relatable to the average young female athlete.
Head above Water (1999)	Skye (Swimming)	Skye is a dedicated swimmer trying to qualify for the state meet. She is often responsible for the care of her brother with Down's syndrome. She is athletic and driven, but also is nurturing, kind, and has a good heart. She also stands up for herself and her brother when they face judgment and prejudice from their peers.
Winning (1999)	Vicky (Tennis)	Vicky considers herself an average girl. She loves playing tennis and is competitive and hard-working, but also plays for fun and always tries her best. She tries to see the good in others and is an honest young girl who wants to do the right thing. She expects the same from her teammates when she discovers one has been dishonest in her tennis matches.
Sliding into Home (2003)	Joelle (Baseball)	Joelle is competitive, driven, and a star baseball player. When she isn't allowed to try-out for the boy's team, she creates an all-girl baseball league. She is a

		tomboy, in regards to athletics, but she also has many female friendships and is outgoing and relatable to young girls. She stands up for what she feels is right and perseveres despite the obstacles in front of her.
Going for the Record (2004)	Leah (Soccer)	Leah is dedicated, competitive, and fitness-driven in her pursuit of making the U-18 Olympic Developmental soccer team. She is strong and independent, but after her dad gets cancer she softens and becomes more spiritual and emotional. She learns to rely more on others.
Can I Play? (2005)	Keli (Volleyball)	Keli is an all-star volleyball player who transfers schools in order to be on an elite team that will increase her chances of playing volleyball in college. This decision is not taken lightly because she knows her friends and hometown will feel betrayed if she leaves, but she decides to pursue her dream. While earning a starting spot on the Dallas High School team, she proves herself as a well-spoken, respectful, leader whose great attitude is admired by the coaching staff and her teammates.
Dairy Queen (2006)	D.J. (Football)	D.J. is a strong, hard-working teen girl who is responsible for much of her family's farm work and is also passionate about football. She is an average, relatable girl searching for her identity and also seeks to make peace within her family. She is tough, but also caring, dependable, and driven.
Throwing like a Girl (2007)	Ella (Softball)	Ella, the new girl in town, decides to play softball and works hard to become an integral part of the team. She is relatable in that she deals with family and friend issues, developing her identity, and finding a sense of belonging. She is a competitive athlete who works well with her teammates, helps those in need like her friend Rocky, and stands up for what is right.

The Girl Who Threw Butterflies (2009)	Molly (Baseball)	Molly is an athletic tomboy, but also sensitive and emotional, especially regarding the death of her father. She develops confidence as she participates on her school's baseball team and always strives to have fun and do her best.
Breakaway (2010)	Lily (Soccer)	Lily is a competitive soccer player who is passionate about the sport and feels like a star on the field. She is an average middle school girl dealing with family, friends, and concerned about popularity and cell phones. After being suspended for 2 games because of a selfish decision, she apologizes and resumes her spot as a leader on the team. During this time, she also takes under her wing a teammate that is lacking in both self-confidence and support from her family.

A portion of the novels analyzed, eight of the twenty, featured female protagonists that were stereotypical in nature. They were either tough tomboys who behaved or were portrayed as more masculine in nature or weak and fragile and stereotypically feminine. The physical appearances of the female main characters were often described as “big-boned” or “built like a draft horse.” These descriptions hint toward a masculine appearance. Many of these characters were described as stereotypical tomboys who were tough, unemotional, focused on their athletic achievements, and lacking in feminine qualities. Table 2 outlines the female athletes that were portrayed with stereotypical qualities in the books analyzed.

Table 2

Stereotypical Portrayals of Young Female Athletes

Title	Protagonist and Sport Played	Stereotypical Qualities
There's a Girl in my Hammerlock (1991)	Maisie (Wrestling)	Maisie is a tough tomboy who is athletic and decides to go out for the all-male wrestling team. She's feisty, stands up for herself, and is aggressive when she needs to be. She is focused on wrestling and proving herself amongst the boys. She exhibits few feminine qualities.
The Lean Mean Weightlifting Queen (1992)	Susan (Power-lifting)	Susan is training to be a power-lifter, a sport that is deemed "unglamorous" and "unfeminine." She is portrayed as more masculine and is described as "big-boned" and "solid." She is self-conscious, yet strong-willed. She does have a close female friend she confides in and develops a crush on a spotter at the gym but lacks in many feminine qualities.
Run for your Life (1996)	Kisha (Track)	Kisha is a stereotypical tomboy growing up in an impoverished environment and competing on a community-based track team. She is tough, ignorant, naïve, and sheltered. She discovers that running is an outlet for her and allows her to build relationships with girls her own age. Kisha's environment of poverty and violence may be a contributing factor to her masculine portrayal. She is street-wise and tough and has likely learned to be that way in order to survive.
The Luckiest Girl in the World (1997)	Katie (Figure-skater)	Katie is a competitive figure skater living with her abusive mother and an extreme pressure to succeed. Living in such an unhealthy environment with emotional distress, she turns to self-mutilation. Katie is described as fragile, weak, pretty,

		petite, and a perfectionist. Much of the novel is focused on her emotional health and the process of recovery. She is portrayed as quite feminine
The Necessary Hunger (1997)	Nancy (Basketball)	Nancy is a highly-skilled basketball player playing on a summer AAU team with her female peers. She lives in a rough environment in California and is a very tough, hard-working, athlete, but also uses crude language and drinks beer with her father. She is a lesbian who desires to be with her teammate. Nancy is portrayed in a masculine way and lacks many feminine qualities. The environment in which she lives may be a contributing factor in her portrayal.
Tackling Dad (2005)	Cassie (Football)	Cassie has been a tomboy all of her life, all of her friends are athletes, and she's always played football with the boys. She hates shopping and makeup. Her stepmom is always pushing her to become more feminine, but Cassie likes being a tomboy. She has to act tough in order to compete with the boys on the football team.
Boost (2008)	Savvy (Basketball)	Savvy is obsessed with basketball and is striving to be bigger and stronger so she can be a starter on the U-18 squad. She's confident in basketball, but less so in her daily life. She is described as unsure, awkward, and tall. She does have a crush on a football player and gets emotional when a steroid scandal involves her but basketball remains her focus. She is determined and competitive, but is rarely portrayed with feminine qualities as well.
The Ring (2009)	Mardie (Boxing)	Mardie is a troubled young girl who lacks direction and is involved with the wrong crowd. She acts tough, gets drunk, shoplifts, and is distant

		from her family. Through boxing, she becomes hard-working, competitive, passionate, self-confident, and dedicated, but lacks many identifiable feminine qualities.
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The books analyzed in this study indicate a growth in authentic portrayals of female athletes in young adult sports fiction. Kriegh's study identified that books published in the 1980s and early 1990s often had "simple topics and flat characters" (p. 22). This study found that 50% of the sports fiction books published in the 1990s and 70% published in the 2000s, portrayed authentic, relatable, well-rounded female protagonists. The main characters displayed both feminine and masculine qualities and were not stereotypical in nature.

Types of Sports

The novels analyzed for this study featured female protagonists playing a wide range of sports. The researcher examined how many were playing gender-neutral sports and how many were competing in sports that are traditionally considered female or male-oriented. Table 3 outlines the sports portrayed in the novels of this study.

Table 3

Gender-neutral/Gender-typical Sports

Sport	Frequency	Type of Sport
Basketball	3	Gender-neutral
Football	3	Male
Baseball	2	Male
Softball	2	Female
Soccer	2	Gender-neutral
Swimming	1	Gender-neutral
Track and Field	1	Gender-neutral
Boxing	1	Gender-neutral
Tennis	1	Gender-neutral
Figure Skating	1	Gender-neutral
Wrestling	1	Male
Power-lifting	1	Gender-neutral
Volleyball	1	Female

A few of the sports portrayed in these novels are gender-neutral, but are more widely accepted as male-dominated sports. For example, both boxing and power-lifting have female participants but they are less well-known and publicized in the media. In six of the twenty books analyzed, female athletes were participating on a football, baseball, or wrestling team. Playing a traditionally male-oriented sport often led to discrimination and bullying for the female characters.

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (2011), the five most popular high school sports for young women in 2009-2010, based on participation rates and starting with the most popular, are basketball, track and field, volleyball, fast-pitch softball, and soccer. The sample of novels used in this study does not reflect these patterns. Only nine of the twenty novels featured sports that are most popular among female high school athletes. The researcher found it difficult to locate twenty positively-reviewed sports fiction novels featuring a female protagonist for this study and those sampled are not necessarily representative of the participation patterns of female high school athletes in the United States, according to these statistics.

Sports as a Major Storyline

Traditionally in sports fiction novels, sports are featured as the dominant storyline in the book. The researcher examined the twenty chosen novels featuring a female athlete to determine whether sports were an integral part of the storyline or whether they became secondary to family, friends, school, or personal issues. Of the twenty novels analyzed, sports were a driving force in the lives of the characters in seventeen of the novels. Training, tryouts, practice, and game action were featured throughout the novels. They stood out as conventional sports fiction. Exemplars of the sport storyline are *A Season of Comebacks*, *Tackling Dad*, and *Throwing like a Girl*. These three titles demonstrate how the storyline develops out of the sport; this plot construction is evident in seventeen of the novels read for this study.

In *A Season of Comebacks* (1997), Molly is a young, passionate softball player who has lived in the shadow of her older sister who is an all-star pitcher. The life of their family revolves around softball because their dad is a coach and both of the daughters

play the sport. Molly plays on the minor league team in town, but gets the chance to move up to the major league team when there is an injury. She proves herself as a worthy player when she is given the chance. The book is filled with softball game and practice action and softball is the dominant theme in the novel.

Cassie, in *Tackling Dad* (2005), has always loved playing football. She played in the Peewee League as a young girl and now wants to play for her middle school team. She is faced with trying to convince her parents to let her play. The book revolves around the game of football from tryouts, to practice, learning how to wear the equipment, to finally playing on the team. Football is the main theme of the book.

In *Throwing like a Girl* (2007), Ella is the new girl in town and decides that playing softball might be a good way to build friendships and participate in her new school's activities. Although she has never played softball before, she takes it upon herself to learn everything she can and earn a spot on the team. She befriends a female classmate, named Rocky, who is a former all-star player who had to quit due to family issues and Rocky becomes her personal coach. With the book divided into three sections titled preseason, regular season, and championship, softball is the main theme of this book. As Ella grows and develops into a confident softball player and young woman, the team also starts to earn respect from the school district and the town. Through being a part of the softball team, Ella establishes a sense of belonging, self-assurance, and builds friendships.

In novels such as *Run for Your Life* (1996), *Sarah with an H* (1996), and *The Luckiest Girl in the World* (1997), sports were a theme in the book but became secondary to larger issues of hope, inspiration, overcoming obstacles, prejudice, tolerance, and self-destruction. In *Run for Your Life*, Kisha is participating on a community-based track

team. The team is an outlet for her because she is living in a very tough environment of poverty, violence, and gangs. The team provides a place where she and her peers can build friendships, feel success, and find hope and inspiration. There is little running or competing until the end of the book. The track team serves as the common bond for the girls in the community.

Similarly, in *Sarah with an H*, there is little basketball action until the state tournament at the end of the book. Basketball is a theme, but much of the novel focuses on high school life, small town beliefs, tolerance, and prejudice. When Sarah's Jewish family moves to town, many of the prejudiced beliefs of the townspeople emerge. The story takes on a much more serious tone and deals with relevant and controversial issues that become much more of a focus than the success of the basketball team.

Finally, in *The Luckiest Girl in the World*, Katie is a figure skater that focuses on perfection and is pushed to succeed in an unhealthy way from her mother. All of this pressure and emotional abuse from her mother leads Katie into self-destructive patterns. The novel focuses very little on Katie's skating, practicing, or competing and instead focuses on her emotional health, self-destruction, family dynamics, and her road to recovery. Again, sports take a backseat to these much more serious issues.

Through this study, it was found that sports had a place in the storyline of all of the novels analyzed, but in *Run for Your Life*, *Sarah with an H*, and *The Luckiest Girl in the World*, sport was a subtext in the lives of the female protagonists. While many had action-packed scenes of training, practicing, and competing, others used sports as a common thread between characters or as an avenue to the discussion of much more important life issues.

Obstacles and Discrimination

Another area of examination in this textual analysis was whether the female protagonists were facing overwhelming obstacles, unrealistic experiences, or discrimination that impacted their experiences playing sports. In six of the twenty novels analyzed, the main characters faced serious issues such as poverty, drugs, violence, abuse, racism, cancer, death, and a steroid scandal. None of these experiences were necessarily unrealistic, but did prove to be overwhelming factors that affected the lives of these young women. In books such as *Run for Your Life* (1996) and *The Necessary Hunger* (1997), Kisha and Nancy both live in tough neighborhoods where poverty, gangs, drugs, and violence are common. Kisha decides to participate on the track team so she won't have to face the potential downfalls of drugs, teen pregnancy, and gangs that many of her peers have succumbed to. Nancy, a Japanese-American, deals with racism and judgment because of her own ethnicity and the inter-racial relationship of her father. She is also involved in a near car-jacking when a gun is pulled on her. Sports become an outlet for them and source of positivity away from their often dangerous environments.

Characters such as Katie, in *The Luckiest Girl in the World* (1997), are facing abusive home lives. Her father has abandoned the family and her mother is emotionally abusive. She faces an extreme pressure to succeed and in the end engages in self-mutilation to deal with her emotional pain. Leah, in *Going for the Record* (2004), is an all-star soccer player who is training to become a member of the U-18 Olympic Developmental soccer team. The day she finds out she has made the team, her father reveals he is dying of cancer. This news changes her life and gives her a new perspective. Her pursuit of success in soccer takes a backseat to spending time with her father. She

even abandons soccer for awhile after his death until realizing that her father would want her to continue to pursue her passion.

In *Sliding into Home* (2003), Joelle is a competitive baseball player who is not allowed to try out for her school's team because she is a girl. Joelle makes many attempts to earn the right to try out, but is shut down repeatedly. In order to prove that girls can play baseball and shouldn't have to resort to softball, she decides to create an all-girl baseball league in her community from the ground-up. She faces many obstacles along the way but ultimately sees her dream come to life.

Finally, in the novel *Boost* (2008), Savvy is a fourteen-year-old competing on a U-18 basketball team. Her addition to the team and eventual earned starting position upsets a few of her teammates, and when she is accused of taking steroids and banned from playing, there is much speculation on who is responsible. She faces judgment and harassment from her own community and her opponents nickname her the "BALCO ho." Her name is eventually cleared when her older sister reveals that the pills were hers because they were helping her lose weight and build muscle for cheerleading.

Along with a number of female protagonists facing overwhelming obstacles, even more faced discrimination as a result of participating in a sport. In nine of the twenty novels examined, the main female character faced discrimination because of her choice in sport to participate in. Table 4 outlines the titles, chosen sport, and examples of discrimination in these nine novels.

Table 4

Discrimination

Title of Novel	Sport Played	Examples of Discrimination
Forward Pass (1990)	Football	Jill is questioned by a lot of people who don't think she should be playing football including her parents, opposing coaches, referees, her boyfriend, and the local sports editor that thinks she is just a "gimmick." He also says, "She's a good athlete and I'll admit she's sturdy- but she's a girl and they'll break her in two" (p. 175).
There's a Girl in my Hammerlock (1991)	Wrestling	The wrestling coach, wrestlers, and Maisie's brother are all against her being a part of the team. The coach states, "To put it bluntly, wrestling is a men and boys' world. Legally, she can do it. But there's no law that says she has to be welcome" (p. 30). Maisie is also named the "hunkiest boy at the dance" (p. 158).
The Mean Lean Weightlifting Queen (1992)	Power-lifting	Once Susan starts power-lifting, her family and boyfriend question her decision. Her boyfriend Sammy states, "Wow, That's pretty rough, isn't it? I mean, that's really an athletic gung-ho type of thing to get into" (p. 26). Her neighbor, Gloria, is a cheerleader and also makes fun of her weightlifting.
The Luckiest Girl in the World (1997)	Figure Skating	At school, one of Katie's classmates is making fun of figure skating and says, "That's not a sport. That's a bunch of faggots dancing around on ice" (p. 175).
Sliding into Home (2003)	Baseball	Joelle is not allowed to try-out for the baseball team and is told to get over it and play softball. Joelle says, "I feel like I entered a time warp when I moved here to Greendale. It was like being transported back to the 1950s. Except in the 1950s, women played baseball for real. Has anybody ever heard of The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League" (p. 46). She also unfairly loses a school mock trial because of her cause.

Tackling Dad (2005)	Football	Cassie is questioned by her father and her friends on why she even wants to play football. Her peers tease her and opposing teams tackle her especially roughly and make comments like, "Welcome to real football" (p. 112).
Dairy Queen (2006)	Football	When D.J. decides to try out for the football team, her best friend calls it disgusting and says she just wants to hang out with the boys. The majority of her football teammates disapprove of her playing and when they play their arch-rivals from Hawley, D.J. is taunted by the opponents. During the game, a Hawley player grabs her butt and calls her a "dyke" as well (p. 245).
The Girl Who Threw Butterflies (2009)	Baseball	During try-outs for the baseball team, a teammate named Lloyd harasses Molly and throws a "warning shot" to her shin (p. 44). Also, at school her locker is covered with graffiti, curse words, and a warning to "give it up" (p. 57).
The Ring (2009)	Boxing	When Mardie's crush Ben sees her training for boxing, he starts to ignore her because boxing seems too masculine. Also, once Mardie cuts off her hair and her classmates find out she is boxing, they make fun of her and call her a dyke. Mardie's dad even says that boxing is not a "girl sport" and is too dangerous.

Discrimination was identified in many of the novels used in this study. Not only were the female athletes discriminated against for playing a sport that was considered masculine or even too feminine, in the case of Katie and figure skating, but also teams were discriminated against in certain novels. When the track team in *Run for Your Life* (1996) showed up at their first competition, they were referred to as, "the ghetto team in tacky uniforms" (p. 144). In *Throwing like a Girl* (2007), the girls have to play on a run-down field in the middle of nowhere next to a construction site. Softball is considered a

“second-tier” sport at the school and football is “god.” When Ella first sees the softball field she states that, “Softball seems to be the ugly stepsister sport at Spring Valley” (p. 32). Racism is also seen in the novels *Sarah with an H* (1996) and *The Necessary Hunger* (1997) because Sarah is judged for being Jewish and Nancy is judged because she is Japanese-American and her father is in an interracial-relationship. The topic of discrimination was prevalent in a large number of the novels examined for this study.

Protagonist Sexuality and Stereotypes

Girls that participate in sports that are traditionally considered masculine risk being stereotyped as masculine, butch, or a lesbian. The President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (1997) states that, “An erroneous but particularly persistent and long-standing belief is that sports are masculinizing and that physically active girls are more likely to become lesbians, or that all successful female athletes are lesbians” (p. 75). In Kriegh’s research (1996), she examined whether sports fiction novels with a female protagonist, addressed the topic of sexuality and the stereotype of homosexuality in female athletes. She concluded that, “Just 5 of the 16 novels sampled so much as insinuated a possible lesbian presence” (p. 24). This theme of sexuality and perceived homosexuality in sports fiction featuring a female protagonist was revisited in this study. In seven of the twenty novels sampled, there was no mention of relationships or sexuality at all. In the majority of the novels, twelve of twenty, the female main character had a crush on either a teammate or a classmate of the opposite sex. In one of the novels, *The Necessary Hunger* (1997), Nancy is a lesbian who is keeping her sexuality a secret from her family but has very intense feelings for her teammate, and daughter of her father’s girlfriend, Raina who is also a lesbian. Many of their fellow basketball teammates are also identified as lesbians

and are described as “lovers of women” and “in the family.” *The Necessary Hunger* is the most explicit novel sampled in terms of the discussion of sexuality as a storyline.

In regard to the stereotyping of female athletes as lesbians, two of the characters are referred to as “dykes” because they chose to play sports that are traditionally masculine. In *The Ring* (2009), Mardie trains as a boxer with her female peers but as soon as she cuts of her hair and her boxing is discovered, she is labeled a “dyke” by her fellow classmates. In *Dairy Queen* (2006), D.J. joins the football team and while playing their biggest rivals from Hawley, an opponent grabs her butt and calls her a “dyke” during the game (p. 245). The only factor behind being called a “dyke” was that they were participating in a sport that is more widely accepted as aggressive and masculine. Sexuality and romantic relationships were not a primary storyline in the novels examined for this study. For the most part, they were just a part of the average, relatable middle school or high school lives of the female main characters.

Summary

This study examined multiple themes in young adult sports fiction featuring a female protagonist. The first theme analyzed was whether the female athletes were portrayed as well-rounded and exhibited both masculine and feminine qualities. In twelve of the twenty novels, the characters were strong, athletic, competitive but also emotional, sensitive and nurturing. Sports were a large part of their lives, but they also dealt with the typical teen issues of family, friends, school, and identity. Although some of the novels, eight of twenty, tended to perpetuate the stereotypes of female athletes as tough, unemotional tomboys, there appears to be positive growth in the portrayal of authentic

female athletes. Half of the novels sampled, published in the 1990s, featured well-rounded female athletes while seven of the ten published in the 2000s did the same.

The sports featured in the novels analyzed ranged from traditionally female, to traditionally male, to gender-neutral. Six of the twenty novels portrayed female athletes competing in football, baseball, or wrestling, which are considered masculine sports. There was a direct link between females playing a masculine sport and discrimination. Only nine of the twenty novels featured female athletes participating in basketball, track and field, volleyball, softball, and soccer which are the five most commonly played high school sports for girls (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2011).

Sports were the dominant storyline in the majority, seventeen of twenty, of novels sampled for this study. Female athletes took part in try-outs, training, and competing in their chosen sport. Athletics were the primary focus and were not secondary to typical teen issues. Only a few novels used sports solely as a thread between characters or as a means to larger issues. The majority of the novels were true sports fiction novels featuring young female athletes.

Discrimination was identified as a theme in a large portion of the novels analyzed for this study. This was likely due to the amount of female characters competing in traditionally masculine sports. In 45% of the novels, the athletes were questioned, harassed, or judged based on their chosen sport of football, baseball, boxing, powerlifting, figure skating, or wrestling. Those who were critical of their choices ranged from family members, to classmates, opposing teams, and even townspeople. Not only were individuals discriminated against, but also two teams as a whole. The members of the track team in *Run for Your Life* were of a lower socio-economic status so they were

teased at a competition because of their uniforms, and the softball team in *Throwing like a Girl* were treated as a second-tier sport at their school and dealt with bad facilities and a lack of support. Beyond discrimination, many of the female athletes in the novels analyzed dealt with overwhelming obstacles in their lives outside of sports. Six of the twenty novels featured issues of poverty, gangs, drugs, violence, abuse, racism, cancer, death, and a steroid scandal. Sports served as a positive outlet for many of these young women.

The final theme examined was the presence of sexuality, relationships, and the stereotype of homosexuality in the portrayal of female athletes. Sexuality and relationships took a prominent role in very few of the novels analyzed. There was no mention in seven of the twenty novels while the majority, twelve of twenty, featured a crush on a fellow teammate or classmate of the opposite sex. *The Necessary Hunger* was the only novel with lesbian characters. Nancy, the main character, was a lesbian with a crush on her teammate Raina. A few of their basketball teammates were identified as lesbians as well. The only other mentions of homosexuality were when two of the female characters, a football player and a boxer, were called “dykes” because of the sports they played in *Dairy Queen* and *The Ring*. In *The Luckiest Girl in the World*, while Katie is talking to a male classmate, he refers to figure skaters as “faggots.” The stereotype of female athletes as lesbians were addressed in only these instances in the novels analyzed.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine twenty young adult sports fiction novels featuring a female protagonist, published between 1990-2010, to determine the characteristics of an authentic female athlete and to analyze whether the portrayal of female athletes has become more authentic in recent young adult fiction. The study included examination of the following themes: character portrayal (masculine and feminine qualities), type of sports participation, sports as the dominant storyline, obstacles and discrimination, and finally sexuality and female athlete stereotypes.

Conclusion

The researcher found that the young adult sports fiction featuring a female protagonist published in the last twenty years has demonstrated a growth in authentic, well-rounded female characters. Kriegh (1996) stated, “Any novelist who wishes to give readers a glimpse at reality will have female characters who are active agents, constrained by realistic social forces, but always striving to direct their lives in a positive fashion” (p. 26). Many of the female characters analyzed in this study were well-rounded in that they exhibited both masculine and feminine qualities and they participated in sports in a healthy way. The majority of the female protagonists demonstrated leadership, positive attitudes, sportsmanship, and teamwork. Although a few were facing serious obstacles in their daily lives, many of the characters were relatable to the average teen girl. Along with sports, they also had to balance family, friends, school, and a social life.

Two of the themes of the young adult sports fiction that was sampled for this study that does not appear to have evolved much since Kriegh's study are the types of sports featured in novels featuring female athletes and the issue of discrimination. As reported by the National Federation of State High School Associations (2011), the five most commonly played sports by high school girls are basketball, track and field, volleyball, fast-pitch softball, and soccer. These five sports were featured in less than half of the novels sampled for this study. Although this was a study of only twenty novels, this may indicate that there is a gap in female sports fiction that is representative of actual girls' participation in high school sports. Similarly, there was a high rate of discrimination present in the novels analyzed for this study. This was likely due to the amount of girls competing in traditionally masculine sports such as football, baseball, and wrestling. These were also the characters that faced sexual stereotypes and were called "dykes" because of the sport they played, which perpetuates the stereotype that female athletes are more masculine or lesbians.

Kriegh's study (1996) examined novels published from the 1970s to the early 1990s and she concluded that, "Simply put, readers deserve to see female athletes nakedly exposed as flawed and infinitely intriguing characters. That story has yet to be told" (p. 26). In the more current young adult sports fiction analyzed in this research study, the portrayal of female protagonists as athletes appears to be progressing in a positive direction to provide fiction that is representative of young women today and relatable to their own experiences. A large portion of the female athletes were also represented as multi-dimensional. Young adult sports fiction featuring a female protagonist seems to

have evolved since the 1970s just as female sports participation has grown. Progress has been made toward authenticity but there is still a ways to go.

Recommendations

This research study focused on young adult sports fiction featuring a female protagonist. For further research, sports fiction for children or adults could be examined to determine whether common themes or additional ones regarding authenticity emerge. Another related study could analyze the portrayal of male protagonists in young adult sports fiction to determine whether they are portrayed authentically or compare and contrast the portrayal of male and female protagonists in young adult sports fiction.

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APPENDIX A
CONTENT ANALYSIS FORM

Title:

Author:

Publisher and Copyright Date:

Recommended Age Range:

General Summary:

1. Description of main character (personality, demeanor). Is she strong, competitive, appear well-rounded, a tomboy...? Is she represented with both feminine and masculine qualities?

Evidence:

2. Is the main character playing on a team of her female peers? In a gender-neutral sport or one that is traditionally male or female-dominated?

Evidence:

3. Do sports provide a major storyline in the book or is it secondary to school, friends, relationships...?

Evidence:

4. Is the main character facing overwhelming obstacles or unrealistic experiences?

Evidence:

5. Does the main character face discrimination or sexism as a result of participating in sports?

Evidence:

6. Is the sexuality of the main character mentioned?

Evidence:

General impressions/Additional themes: (perceived stereotypical nature of characters or authentic representation of young female athletes?):

APPENDIX B

LIST OF NOVELS ANALYZED

- Adler, C. (1999). *Winning*. New York: Clarion Books.
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