Marsha **Sprague**

Girls Who Kill:

The Changing Face of YA Warrior Heroines

In January of 2013, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced that the ban on women serving in ground combat units had been lifted (Cloud & Perry, 2013). This pronouncement opened up a possible 230,000 combat jobs to women in the armed forces, including roles in infantry, armor, and field artillery. According to Panetta's directive, the services may require basic fitness requirements for combat roles, but these must be gender-neutral.

This historic decision came even though a number of groups continued to oppose the idea of putting women in harm's way. The executive president of the Family Research Council, Jerry Boykin, called the policy "another social experiment" that would add additional stresses to army commanders (Ramirez, 2013, para. 8). Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, argued that "women do not have an equal opportunity to survive or help fellow soldiers survive in direct ground combat" (cited in Cloud & Perry, 2013, p. 13). Nevertheless, senators on both sides of the aisle, including John McCain and Nancy Pelosi, endorsed the move as long overdue. With this directive, one of the last explicit gender restrictions for females in the United States has been lifted. Now women can kill and be killed in front-line combat, just as their male counterparts can.

The American public has gradually shifted its mood to support female combatants. In a 1977 poll, 74 % of the civilians polled agreed that "men rather than women should bear arms" (Segal, Kinzer, & Woelfel , p. 472). In contrast, a 2013 poll by Quinnipiac University found that 75% of Americans surveyed support the idea that women who wish to engage in combat should be able to do so (Edwards-Levy, para 2). And, more important, 85% of respondents under age 30 supported the idea of women in combat.

The shift in public sentiment is no doubt a result of the general movement toward increasing equality for women dictated by legal battles and court decisions. In fact, the lifting of the ban on women in combat came about after a suit by the American Civil Liberties Union in November of 2012 (Dao, p. 8). The suit was filed on behalf of four servicewomen and the Women's Action Network, a group that works to effect equality in the military.

Young Adult Literature and Female Combatants

How has this issue been played out in young adult literature? Rachel Brownstein, in her text *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (1982), wrote, "Generations of girls . . . have gone to fiction to escape a stifling or boring or confusingly chaotic reality, and have come back with structures they use to organize and interpret their feelings and prospects" (p. xvii). The sea change in attitude toward American women serving in combat has also played out in young adult literature. How have these texts helped girls "structure their feelings and prospects" about fighting and killing? And how has that changed over the past three decades, as public sentiment shifted?

Early fantasy young adult literature typically featured male warriors as protagonists, but, in the 1980s, YA authors began introducing young heroines who killed. Two texts in particular caught the atten-

tion of readers and critics: *Alanna*, by Tamora Pierce (Book One of the Song of the Lioness Quartet series), published in 1983, and *The Hero and the Crown,* by Robin McKinley, published in 1984.

In order to understand how young adult literature has impacted girls' "feelings and prospects" about killing, it is instructive to examine these texts, especially as they contrast with newer fantasy texts that feature "killer girls," such as *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins, published in 2008, and *Graceling,* by Kristin Cashore, published in 2009. In particular, it is interesting to interrogate the texts to understand the conditions under which the girls become killers and the effect of that role. Questions we can ask include:

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- Do the girls wish to become killers, or is it forced upon them?
- Is it difficult to become a killer, or does it come easily?
- Who are the victims? Do they "deserve" to be killed?
- What is the effect of killing on the psyche of the young women?
- Is there a "balance" or redemptive role to the act of killing that is required or sought by the young women?
- Have these elements changed over the 25 years? And if so, how?

Early Texts: *Alanna* and *The Hero and the Crown*

The two earlier works of fantasy, *Alanna* and *The Hero and the Crown*, are both high fantasy set in fictional realms with elements that loosely resemble medieval times, such as castles and nobles and knights. Alanna is one of boy-girl twins born to a noble lord who has lost his wife and lives in a world of books, barely acknowledging his offspring. When the twins turn 11, their father decides to send them off to boarding school; more specifically, Alanna will attend a convent to learn wifely skills of "sewing and dancing" (p. 2), while Thom will be trained as a page, squire, and then knight in the royal court.

Alanna, however, has the urge and the talent for fighting (she has been taught the basics alongside her twin), while Thom only wishes to become a magician and sorcerer. Because sorcery is taught to boys at the convent, Alanna conceives of a reckless plan: the children will switch places and pretend that they are both boys. Using threats and pleas, the twins are able to convince their respective chaperones that this is a good plan. Alanna cuts her hair and dresses in Thom's clothes, and she and Coram, her manservant and teacher, head for the royal palace.

The text follows Alanna's progress in becoming a page and, by the end of the book, a squire to the prince of the kingdom. It is not easy for Alanna to achieve either of these. She is by far the smallest and least muscled of all the boys in training (no surprise), and although she is talented, she must work much harder to achieve the same level of skill. She almost leaves her training after the first few days, until Coram accuses her of being a "soft, noble lady" (p. 49).

> "I'm not a soft noble lady!" Alanna cried. "But I'm not crazy either! I'm going from sunrise to sunset and after without a stop, and no end in sight. My free time's a joke—I'm out of free time before I get to the third class of the morning. And they expect me to keep up, and they punish me if I don't. And I have to learn how to fall; I'm learning the stance with the bow all over again when I was the best hunter at Trebond, and if I say anything I get more work." (pp. 49–50)

Ultimately, Alanna stays, and she gradually becomes stronger and more skilled. But she makes an enemy of one of the older boys, Ralon, who bullies her, finally resorting to beating her physically whenever he has the chance. Her many friends at court, including Prince Jonathan, try to defend her, but she insists on doing her own fighting. She asks Coram for extra sessions in wrestling and boxing, and she asks her village friend George, who is the ringleader of a gang of thieves, for training in street combat. Gradually Alanna becomes stronger and more resilient, until at last she can challenge Ralon directly. She accuses Ralon of being a "Liar. Sneak. Coward, Bully." (p. 86) and in the ensuing fight, she gouges his eyes, punches his stomach, and finally breaks his nose. The fight ends with Alanna stating, "Never touch me again. If you do, I swear—I swear by Mithros and the Goddess—I'll kill you" (p. 87). We now see that Al-

anna has become a warrior, clearly capable of killing, though it is unclear if she would do so.

At this point in the text, Alanna's other gift is revealed. The reader has known from the beginning that Maude, the village healer, believes that Alanna has a special gift. Maude tells her, "You've a gift for healing. It's greater than mine, greater than any I have ever known. And you've other magic, power you'll learn to use. But the healing—that's the important thing" (p. 9). When Alanna laughs, not really believing Maude's words, Maude reminds her of what a knight does.

> "Have you thought of the lives you'll take when you go off performing those great deeds?"
>
> Alanna bit her lip. "No," she admitted.
>
> "I didn't think so. You see only the glory. But there's lives taken and families without fathers and sorrow. Think before you fight. Think on who you're fighting, if only because one day you must meet your match. And if you want to pay for those lives you do take, use your healing magic. Use it all you can, or you won't cleanse your soul of death for centuries. It's harder to heal than it is to kill. The Mother knows why, but you've a gift for both." (p. 10)

This gift becomes apparent when Alanna's friends—nobles, pages, and squires—fall deathly ill due to a fever that sweeps over the kingdom. Alanna is afraid to use her magic to heal them, because she is not sure she can control it. But when Prince Jonathan becomes sick, she uses all her healing powers to save him.

Alanna has not killed anyone yet, but she has begun to balance the scale by healing Jonathan. Her first—and only—killing in the text occurs when Jonathan invites her to accompany the knights and squires to an outlying desert city. Jonathan and Alanna discover that there are ten "Nameless Ones"—giant, immortal spirits called the Ysandir—who inhabit the Black City, and who are anxious to feed on Alanna and Jonathan. Alanna and Jonathan use their combined strength and magic to defeat the Ysandir, killing them all with Alanna's magical sword and the spells that Alanna and Jonathan have learned. After a sword fight in which Alanna's superior skills defeat the immortals, the final two Ysandir "flared up like a giant torch as everything went black" (p. 257).

By the conclusion of the first book of the series, Alanna has not killed any humans (though she has threatened to). Clearly, the "Nameless Ones" were evil spirits who feasted on humans and so needed to be dispatched. However, this changes in the later books of the series. In the second book, Alanna has her first taste of battle: she kills human soldiers who are threatening the kingdom of Tortall and her prince Jonathan. She also demonstrates her prowess as a sword fighter, and by the final book, she is an aggressive fighter who kills her opponents competently.

Alanna reacts to her killings by avoiding dwelling on the act, and she constantly seeks out new adventures where she can use her lethal skills.

Alanna does not like the effects of war, but she does love being a knight. She does not react to having killed soldiers herself, nor feel guilty that she has caused their deaths. The first soldier she kills is described in this way:

> Gripping Moonlight's reins in her teeth, she guided the well-trained mare with her knees alone, watching for an opening. As the knight lifted both arms to deliver the blow that would shatter her shield and her arm, she saw her chance. Swiftly Alanna slid Lightning into the opening between the knight's arm and chest armor, thrusting deep. With a gasp of surprise, her enemy fell from his horse, dead.
>
> Alanna had no time now to stop and think about the first man she had killed. Jon was still in danger. (pp. 105–106)

Later, in book two (*In the Hand of the Goddess,* 1984), after she kills an evil wizard who was Jonathan's beloved uncle, she reflects,

> . . . *Roger's death was bad*, she thought, *but life could be much, much worse. Perhaps I'll live and be happy, after all.*
>
> She let out a whoop of sheer exuberance and kicked Moonlight into a gallop. "C'mon, Caram!" she cried, galloping past him. "Let's go find an adventure." (p. 241)

Thus, Alanna reacts to her killings by avoiding dwelling on the act, and she constantly seeks out new adventures where she can use her lethal skills.

Aerin, the heroine of McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown*, has much in common with her younger counterpart, Alanna. Aerin is also noble; in fact, she is the king's daughter, though from a second marriage to an outsider who was suspected of being a witch. Aerin does not appear to have the usual gifts that accom-

pany nobility in her kingdom, Damar. This lack, along with her people's suspicion of her mother, makes her an outcast. Yet Aerin longs to be a knight worthy of fighting in her father's army. She asks her cousin Tor for secret lessons, and she works diligently to master the arts of battle:

> She took pride, in a grim sort of way, in learning what Tor taught her; and he need not know the hours of drill she put in, chopping at leaves and dust motes, when he was not around. She made what she considered to be obligatory protests about the regular hiatuses in her progress when Tor was sent off somewhere, but in truth she was glad of them, for then she had the time to put in, grinding the lessons into her slow, stupid, giftless muscles. (pp. 44–45)

While she is in training, Aerin befriends her father's lamed warhorse, Talat. Although Talat has been put to pasture and assumed to be permanently disabled, Aerin patiently restores him to fighting condition and he becomes her steed. Aerin then discovers a recipe that makes her impervious to flames, which launches her career as a dragon-killer and allows her to exterminate the small but destructive beasts that infect the kingdom. However, there is one "old" dragon left in the kingdom—Maur, the black dragon. Aerin challenges and defeats the huge, malevolent dragon, but it nearly destroys her.

In both texts, the victims of the killings are either not human or are marauding forces that must be destroyed in order to save the realm.

Although this feat grants her respect and value, she can only be restored to health by visiting the land of a magical immortal, Luthe. Luthe cures her and tells her of her destiny; she is indeed gifted, and she is the only hope of saving Damar from the evil wizard Agsded. Although Aerin has fallen in love with Luthe, she knows that her destiny is to save her people. So Aerin climbs the Black Tower and confronts Agsded with her magical sword Gonturan (a gift from Luthe) and a drop of Maur's blood. In defeating Agsded, Aerin earns the Hero's Crown, a magical, protective artifact that was lost to the Damar kings years ago.

After defeating the wizard, Aerin returns to her homeland, only to find it under siege from the Northern armies. The Northerners are only partly human, but they are strong fighters. Aerin charges through the soldiers in order to get to the besieged castle, wielding Gonturan and its blue flame:

> The blue dazzled Aerin's eyes too, but it was a useful sort of dazzlement because it seemed to break the Northerners' clumsy movements into arcs whose sweep she could judge so precisely that as they tried to escape her she knew just where to let Gonturan fall across them. She did not think of how many she killed or maimed; she thought of them only as obstacles that must be overcome that she might rejoin her own people (p. 215)

Aerin successfully delivers the Hero's Crown to Tor, and together they defeat the Northern army. Tor asks Aerin to marry him, and she agrees, loving both Tor and her country. Moreover, because she has been made immortal by Luthe, she knows that some day she will return to him as well.

Referring back to the questions asked earlier, it is clear these 1980s texts have many similarities.

- *Do the girls wish to become killers, or is it forced upon them?* Both heroines absolutely do want to become warrior knights and fight for their king and country. They have no doubts about their commitment to this goal.
- *Is it difficult to become a killer, or does it come easily?* Both Alanna and Aerin have to work extremely hard to obtain the skills necessary to fight. They both are taught these skills by men they trust and will eventually love.
- *Who are the victims? Do they "deserve" to be killed?* In both texts, the victims of the killings are either not human or are marauding forces that must be destroyed in order to save the realm. Alanna only kills a group of evil spirits who are threatening to eat both her and Prince Jonathan, obviously in self-defense. Even in the later books in the series, Alanna only kills to save the people she loves from destruction.

  Aerin kills many creatures, beginning with small dragons that are terrorizing and killing the country people, and graduating to a huge evil dragon, an evil sorcerer, and a whole army of "Northerners," who retreat from the battlefield "fleeing as best they could, on three legs, or four, or five" (p. 219). And, of course, all of these creatures are threatening to kill Aerin's people.
- *What is the effect of killing on the psyche of the young women?* Both Aerin and Alanna are forced

to battle evil beings almost to the death, and it saps both their energy and their physical strength. They are wounded physically, but they suffer literally no psychic damage. They do not dwell on their killings, or explore the effect of the killing on themselves or on their enemies. In fact, the killings validate their long years of training and their commitment to their role as warrior.

- *Is there a "balance" or redemptive role to the act of killing that is required of the young women?* The two young women also have a corollary gift that balances their roles as killers: both are healers, although this is much more evident in Pierce's text. Aerin reveals her role as a healer by nursing the warhorse Talat back to health; also, after the battle with the Northerners, McKinley writes:

> Aerin and Tor were among those still whole, and they helped as they could. No one noticed particularly at the time, but later it was remembered that most of those who had felt the hands of the first sol, her blue sword still hanging at her side, or of the first sola, the Hero's Crown still set over his forehead, its dull grey still shadowed with red, recovered, however grave their wounds. (p. 220)

Yet neither Alanna nor Aerin seek out or expand their role as healer. They do not express guilt when they kill their enemies, nor do they feel a need for redemption for slaughtering other beings.

Later Texts: *Graceling* and *The Hunger Games*

How does this compare to the texts written 25 years later? Both *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and *Graceling* (Cashore, 2009) offer interesting comparisons. *Graceling* is set in a fantasy medieval world similar to that of Aerin's and Alanna's world, but *The Hunger Games,* the first in a trilogy, plays out in a dystopic American society of the future. However, the magic that infuses the other three texts is replaced by technology of the future that serves a similar function: it allows evil and greedy characters to attain inordinate power that calls warriors to fight against it. In all the books, the warrior is a young girl or woman who heeds the call.

Unlike the heroines of the earlier books, neither Katniss (*The Hunger Games*) nor Katsa (*Graceling*) want to be fighters and killers. Katniss is a teen who lives in one of the poor districts of a splintered, post-apocalyptic America, ruled by a small elite who won the civil wars. Katniss's district is so poor that the people are starving, and, when Katniss's father is killed in a mine accident and her mother sinks into depression, only Katsniss's hunting ability keeps her family alive. Katniss is a skilled huntress, having learned how to use a knife and bow from her father, and then developing more skill under the tutoring of her friend Gale. Her prowess becomes even more critical once Katniss's sister is chosen by lottery to participate in the titular "Hunger Games," and Katniss volunteers to take her place. The Games are a bizarre Romanesque spectacle that is hosted by the Capitol once per year. In the games, two young people from each of the subordinate districts are randomly chosen to fight to the death in an arena that is created and controlled by technology.

Katniss is terrified of the Games, and appalled by the thought that she will have to kill others. But her hunting partner, Gale, reassures her that she has the skills to fight:

> "Katniss, it's just hunting. You're the best hunter I know," says Gale.
>
> "It's not just hunting. They're armed. They think," I say.
>
> "So do you. And you've had more practice. Real practice," he says. "You know how to kill."
>
> "Not people," I say.
>
> "How different can it be, really?" says Gale, grimly. (p. 40)

Katniss's skills prove invaluable in the Games, and she does have to kill other young people. Her first victims are killed indirectly by her when she throws a deadly wasp's nest into a group of opponents, and two are stung to death. But Katniss's first real killing occurs after her ally, the young girl Rue, is speared by one of the male contestants:

> The boy from District 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood. (p. 233)

Katniss reacts to the killing of the boy by remembering Gale's question: "How different can it be, really?" She responds internally:

> Amazingly similar in the execution. A bow pulled, an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I don't even know. Somewhere his family is

> weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. Maybe he had a girlfriend who really believed he would come back. . . .
>
> But then I think of Rue's still body and I'm able to banish the boy from my mind. At least for now. (p. 243)

During the games, Katniss only kills one more opponent, the fierce competitor Cato; she wounds him, and he falls to be eaten by "muttations." Though Katniss has killed ordinary, blameless children, she has done so to save her own life. She balances the killing somewhat by her efforts to protect Rue and also by saving the life of her district partner Peeta, nursing him from horrible wounds inflicted by Cato. In addition, Katniss's motivation becomes political during the text when she realizes that her true enemies are the corrupt rulers of the Capitol who sacrifice children's lives for entertainment. She thinks:

She has suffered horrible psychological damage as a result of her killings, and she obsesses on them through nightmares and constant self-blame.

> Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol are no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence. There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there? (p. 236)

In the subsequent books in the trilogy, *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010), Katniss uses her status as victor of the Hunger Games to assist the districts in staging an uprising against the Capitol. In book two, she is once more sent into the Hunger Games, and she has to kill several innocent contenders. In book three, she becomes a "soldier" in the fight against the Capitol and leads troops into rebellious combat. More important, she expresses her determination to "kill President Snow," who is the leader of the Capitol. And, in a shocking twist, she assassinates the rebel leader Coin when she discovers that he engineered a surprise attack that caused many young rebels, including Katniss's sister Prim, to be killed.

Katniss escapes punishment because she is considered mentally unbalanced at the time, and indeed she is. She has suffered horrible psychological damage as a result of her killings, and she obsesses on them through nightmares and constant self-blame. In book two, *Catching Fire*, Katniss relects,

> Nightmares—which I was no stranger to before the Games—now plague me whenever I sleep. . . . I relive versions of what happened in the arena. My worthless attempts to save Rue. Peeta bleeding to death. Glimmer's bloated body disintegrating in my hands. Cato's horrific end with the mutations. These are the most frequent visitors. (pp. 53–54)

In book three, *Mockingjay,* Katniss leads a small group of rebels into battle, and most are killed. She anguishes,

> To believe them dead is to accept I killed them. . . . My plot to assassinate Snow seems so stupid now. So stupid as I sit here in this cellar, tallying up our losses, fingering the tassels on the silver knee-high boots I stole from the woman's home. Oh, yeah—I forgot about that. I killed her too. I'm taking out unarmed citizens now. (p. 323)

Katniss tries to kill herself, but is prevented from doing so, though she continues to entertain thoughts of suicide throughout the book.

Katsa, the young heroine of *Graceling*, is an assassin. Born with a "grace" that makes her a superior fighting machine, she discovers her unique power at the age of eight. While at court, she is accosted by a distant cousin who comments on her mismatched eyes, a sign that one is graced:

> She'd scowled at the man and turned away. But then his hand had slid toward her leg, and her hand had flown out and smashed him in the face. So hard and so fast that she'd pushed the bones of his nose into his brain. (p. 9)

Katsa immediately is feared by all. Whispers abound at court: "'Watch out for the blue eyed green eyed one,' they would whisper to guests. 'She killed her cousin, with one strike. Because he complimented her eyes'" (p. 10).

However, King Randa, Katsa's uncle and guardian, recognizes Katsa as a powerful asset. She is forced by him to intimidate, hurt, maim, or kill those who challenge his authority. Katsa is haunted by her fate: "She was picturing the arms she'd broken for her uncle. The arms, bent the wrong way at the elbow, bone splinters sticking through the skin" (p. 119). As a child, Katsa questions neither the king's power over her, nor her role as a killer, but she grows to hate her missions of bullying and torture. She reflects on her role:

> Randa would send her on another strong-arm mission. He

> would send her to hurt some poor petty criminal, some fool who deserved to keep his fingers even if he was dishonorable. He would send her, and she must go, for the power sat with him. (p. 119)

However, Katsa rebels as she matures. She creates a "Council" of friends who secretly assist those who have been wronged. And once Katsa meets another graced fighter, the Leonid prince Po, she realizes that she cannot keep hurting innocent people.

Katsa finally snaps when she is sent to force a noble to marry his daughter to a dangerous man. She resolves, "She would not do it. She wouldn't torture a man who was only trying to protect his children" (pp. 131–132). Po urges her to confront the king. Following Po's advice, Katsa successfully defies her uncle and leaves the court. Prince Po becomes her ally and lover, and together they confront and defeat a sinister ruler, King Leck, who is corrupting his kingdom. Katsa gradually comes to terms with her grace; she finds that it is more a gift of survival than of killing, and can be used for good as well as evil. Katsa decides that she wants to teach young girls to defend themselves, and train them throughout the kingdom. When challenged on why she would do that, she explains, "It seems better for me for a child to have these skills and never use them, than not have them and one day need them . . ." (p. 401).

So how do the heroines of these later texts compare to their earlier counterparts?

- *Do the girls wish to become killers, or is it forced upon them?* In stark contrast to the earlier works, neither Katniss nor Katsa wish to kill anyone. Katniss is forced to fight for her life when she takes her sister's place in the Hunger Games, and Katsa is born with incredible fighting powers. Both girls resist the killing act as much as possible, though when confronted with the need to kill, they do it.
- *Is it difficult to become a killer, or does it come easily?* The later heroines differ markedly from their earlier, hard-working predecessors. Both Katniss and Katsa are gifted killers. They excel at fighting, and do not have to work especially hard at it. Katsa, of course, is born with a fighting "Grace." And when Katniss is trained to join the rebel army, she is able to accelerate through the training because of her natural skill.
- *Who are the victims? Do they "deserve" to be killed?* In the more recent texts, the stories begin with the girls killing innocent victims. In Katniss's case, she must kill other young tributes to survive the Hunger Games, even though it repulses her. Katsa tortures, maims, and even kills citizens who have angered her uncle, believing that she must obey his commands. Clearly, their initial victims do not deserve to be killed, because they are innocent. In both texts, however, the girls also choose to assassinate in cold blood an evil ruler who they have discovered is a cruel tyrant. Both types of killings are chillingly different from the battle exploits of Aerin and Alanna, who kill to save their lands and people, usually in a battle against an obviously evil force or in a combat situation where they are fighting beside their companions-in-arms.
- *What is the effect of killing on the psyche of the young women?* The earlier heroines, Aerin and Alanna, do not seem to suffer any psychological damage because they kill; if anything, they feel stronger because of their service. On the other hand, Katniss and Katsa suffer constant trauma from the killing they have done. They have nightmares, obsessively remember their role in the killings, and experience self-hatred due to their acts. In modern psychiatric terms, they exhibit symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- *Is there a "balance" or redemptive role to the act of killing that is required of the young women?* In the two later texts, both girls are preoccupied with trying to repair the damage they have done. Katniss becomes a willing symbol of the rebellion because she knows it will help prevent future Hunger Games, and thus avoid the kind of killing she has experienced. Katsa creates an underground "Council" of brave comrades who try to right the wrongs perpetuated by her uncle. This is markedly absent in the earlier texts. Although both Alanna and Aerin do have healing gifts, they do not actively seek out ways to use them, and they do not feel the need for expiation. As a contrast, the redemptive role for both Katniss and Katsa involves not the typical woman's role of healing/nurturing, but is instead a leadership role in a political battle that seeks to end killing.

Summary and Discussion

So, in summary, how have the YA warrior heroine books evolved in 25 years, at least as seen through the lens of these four texts? And how does that inform the young American women who now are allowed to participate on the front lines, and who will be expected to kill enemy soldiers and, perhaps, innocent civilians as well?

Table 1 contrasts the texts under discussion. The texts written in the 1980s, *Alanna* and *The Hero and the Crown*, continued the long fantasy tradition of the brave knight riding into battle to save king and country. Despite America's recent military defeats in Vietnam during the 1970s, the books still hearkened to the idea that killing for one's country is noble and good. Thus, Aerin and Alanna, the warrior-heroines of those texts, accrued increased status and acceptance once they had equaled their male counterparts. The texts validate the choice of women to become soldiers and heroes, as long as they are battling what is clearly evil and "other." The girls have few self-doubts or recrimination about the killings. Moreover, it is clear that this change in gender role will require incredibly hard work and self-discipline, but that the girl will eventually make herself into the equal of a male hero, while still practicing the arts of womanhood—healing and nurturing—in addition to fighting.

On the other hand, the two books written in 2004 and 2005 paint a very different picture. The girls in these texts, Katsa and Katniss, do not volunteer to fight and kill (at least not initially), and they experience trauma and remorse for their killings. They seek to redeem themselves by politically leading the fight against evil and using their skills to teach others. Their goal is not so much to defeat evil, but to put an end to killing. They are equally (or more) gifted than their male warrior counterparts in the art of fighting, yet they detest the acts that they must perform.

How does this connect to the idea that the United States, for the first time, is allowing women into combat? The initial fantasy heroines, portraying young girls as noble and desirable warriors, surely contributed to and reflected the entry of women into the Armed Forces. As the United States shifted to an all-volunteer force in 1973, young girls joined up in droves, in all probability seeking the kind of heroine status so beautifully depicted by Pierce and McKinley. But the

Table 1. A snapshot of how warrior heroine books have evolved over 25 years

Question	***Alanna***	***The Hero and the Crown***	***Graceling***	***The Hunger Games***
Do the girls wish to become killers, or is it forced upon them?	Alanna desperately wants to become a knight, even pretending to be a male.	Aerin fervently wants to become a knight and trains in secret.	Katsa feels cursed by her "gift" of killing.	Katniss has no wish to fight anyone.
Is it difficult to become a killer, or does it come easily?	It is very difficult for Alanna to master the skills of her male peers.	Aerin has to work ceaselessly to learn the craft of fighting.	Katsa is born with a superb ability to fight and kill.	Katniss easily learns to kill animals and has natural abilities in fighting.
Who are the victims? Do they "deserve" to be killed?	All the victims are evil; in the first book, they are non-human.	Aerin only kills dragons, evil wizards, or partially human beings.	Katsa hurts or kills her uncle's enemies, even though they are innocent.	Katniss is forced to kill her peers, although they are innocent.
What is the effect of killing on the psyche of the young women?	Alanna does not feel guilt or shame; she is proud of her victories.	Aerin feels justified in her killings as they save her kingdom.	Katsa suffers terrible guilt and shame due to her actions.	Katniss endures nightmares and trauma because of her killing.
Is there a balance or redemptive role to the act of killing?	Alanna has a healing gift, though she does not seek to enhance it.	Aerin has gifts of healing, but does not use them often.	Katsa tries to atone for her killings by creating a council for the good.	Katniss becomes a symbol of freedom from oppression.

US military battles since 2001, along with the accompanying explicit media coverage, have undermined the myth of the untainted warrior. Everyone now understands the high cost of killing, especially when so many innocent civilians are inevitably harmed. How will girls handle the mental disorders and suicide attempts that plague returning veterans? Girls today need models like Katsa and Katniss to prepare themselves for entering combat. Innocent bystanders will be killed, there will be collateral damage, and there will be a high psychological cost to killing.

Jessica Stites, in her 2010 article "Kickass Girls and Feminist Boys," argues that:

> For many of us destined to become feminists, there's a period when gender roles become ill-fitting and maddening, but we're not sure why. At that crucial moment, certain books can offer refuge or escape—or provide our fist "click!" moment, when we realize the problem's not us; it's society, and we're not alone. (p. 36)

The warrior-heroines of early YA fantasies excited girls' imaginations and made them yearn to fight for country, glory, and adventure. They offered girls an escape from typical boundaries of gender restriction. On the other hand, the modern female killers of YA fantasy novels allow girls to understand and prepare for the actuality of becoming a combat warrior. They reveal the cost of killing, and the pain it can bring.

Marsha Sprague *is a professor of English at Christopher Newport University who teaches adolescent literature. A former high school English teacher, she is also the Director of Teacher Preparation at the university.*

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