

ANYBODY BUT BELLA!

By: Erin Mercer

The theme for this particular YA Hotline, Strong Female Characters, discusses strong female characters in various books and provides role models for young female teens. When the members of this group first decided to tackle the topic I asked a couple of people “What is a strong female?” More than once I received the answer of “A strong female character is anyone but Bella from *Twilight!*” That really got me thinking about what a character has to do to be considered a strong female. It is important for young adults to have role models that they can look up to and strive to be like. For those that love reading, books are a perfect place to find these role models. However, female characters are various in numbers and personalities much like their readers. Different people read and interpret books differently, thus it is very hard to define a strong female character.

In a world where many young females are subjected to overabundant media images of skinny, gorgeous and dim-witted women, a librarian feels the need to provide the young reader with something better. A young female character is considered by many to be strong, intelligent, independent, and is self-assured. This is a wonderful idea, but the first thing to consider about strong female characters is that this might not be what some readers want. Many young females may not feel like they contain any of these traits and they want to read a book where they feel like they can relate to a character. For example, it is comforting to read a book about someone that is going through the same problems. This character could be self-conscious, timid, selfish or a complete ditz and many would claim that this book is not about a strong female. Some librarians may try and influence these readers to pick up what they view as a book where a strong female is featured and this could prove to be very problematic.

Influencing ones belief of what a strong female character is and how she will act is very dangerous. This is because your young female reader may not have the same beliefs or views about what this particular female character brings to the table. For a young female reader they may view the ‘unacceptable’ or “not strong” female character as strong for various reasons. This might be because of the way this particular character acts, perseveres through her problems or

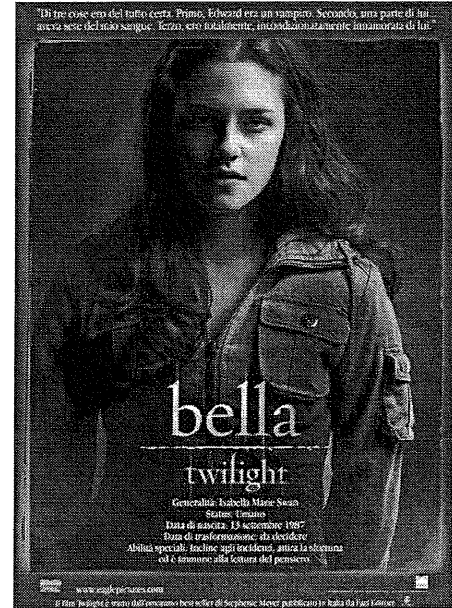


deals with a situation. The reader might think, “Wow, I wish I could have been brave enough to say that!” or “I wish I was dedicated to my family, friends, freedom, beliefs, etc. like her!”

When many read Jane Austen novels they see several of the characters as weak and only in search for a husband. Anne from Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* is a very good example of this intricacy. There are some readers that see Anne as too meek, a push over, persuaded too easily from what she wants, and just a plain, weak female character. However, another will read *Persuasion* and see Anne as a very strong female character. Anne has been treated poorly by her family since her birth, but she still loves and adores them. She desires to help her family even though they are troublesome because she sees value in her family; she loves them and desires to help them. She was persuaded to give up the man that she loves because of her family, but the whole story is about Anne finally realizing that her family has no actual power over her. She learns that she may get what she wants so she perseveres through her situation and shyness. Lloyd W. Brown believes Anne, in her own quiet way, questions assumptions. Anne questions her situation, inequalities of the sexes, society and education (Brown, 1973). Anne’s developing beliefs of how society has conditioned females to be tender and meek reflects beliefs held by one of the mothers of the feminist movement Mary Wollstonecraft (Brown, 1973). When one views the story in this way, Anne is a very strong female character because she still holds to her beliefs, but grows as a person and woman at the same time.

A more modern example of these differing of opinions of strong females is of the character Bella from the *Twilight* series. Bella is loved and despised by many readers and librarians. Bella is seen by many as ditsy, gullible, whiny, unrealistic, and these characteristics just so happen to perfectly describe myself when I was 16 and 17. One does not know why and how Stephanie Meyer developed her Bella character, but perhaps Bella was modeled for teen readers so that they could see themselves in Bella. One has to admit that Bella is fearless and knows exactly what she wants and how to get it. She will also protect those that she loves with her own life. Many teenagers will see these traits in her character as very strong. The beauty of

Bella's character is that she is realistic, relatable, and many young females will see aspects of themselves in Bella, both the good and the bad. Essentially, to some, Bella represents someone real. No matter how many times we seem to convince ourselves otherwise no one is perfect. Some young adults will view Bella's positive traits and may desire to have Bella's courage. To be willing to give up her life for her family without a second thought is strong and some might really value that. Different readers will pick up books, read, interpret and value different aspects than others. Many are drawn to *Twilight* because they can relate, even with humanistic vampires. *Twilight* contains much more than sexy vampires, but contains realism in a tale about the unrealistic.



Thus, as librarians we must not groan when someone asks for a book from the *Twilight* series or any other book that we have deemed to contain weak females. Others read and interpret characters and scenarios differently. This happens to be the beauty of reading. As librarians we must also recognize that different people value different things and ideas than us. Books and the imagination are perfect partners that work beautifully together. Librarians are supposed to support this, not hinder it. Even if one does not value certain female characters as strong, one must be aware that these characters are loved and value by others. Librarians should value what different female characters bring to readers, because female characters are as varied as the people that read them.

For librarians that are asked specifically for recommendations of books that contain strong female characters they should provide a list of titles with various situations and various dynamic female characters to create a balance of personality traits and beliefs.

References:

Brown, L. W. (1973). Jane Austen and the feminist tradition. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 28, 3: 321-338.