# STRONG FEMALES ON THE SMALL SCREEN:

FROM BUFFY TO BLAIR

By Charlotte Anderson

Since the advent of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the 90s, it has been taken for granted that there are strong female teenage characters on television for young adults to look up to, characters who are both vulnerable, facing issues every young female faces, such as boys and love, fashion, not fitting in, parents, and abuse, but who also have the strength of mind and self to get through these situations in a way which supplies a valuable role model. Buffy slayed vampires, but she also fell in love with an older man and after she lost her virginity to him and the relationship got abusive, she dealt with it. Granted, the average teenage girl would not be able to stake her boyfriend, but there are valuable lessons simply in the learning that these situations do happen and teens can both take lessons on what to do and what not to do if they find themselves in similar circumstances. The example of Buffy shows who had the backs of teenage girls in the late 90s, but a decade later, who is there for young female women to emulate? As librarians, we realize that personal strengths are subjective, but we also understand that a lot of teens are not willing to take out self-help books related to many problems teens have, and not everyone is willing or able to read a novel and understand the lessons to be learned there. Television offers a different medium of similar substance, and though these shows are entertaining, many of them subtly guide teenagers through issues like relationship abuse, date rape, alcoholism, drugs, sexuality, and growing up. These characters may not be physically strong like Buffy, but many of them have mental strength, strength of self, or possibly simply the ability to admit they were wrong about something or that they need help. For criteria, I am looking for 2 things: the ability for a normal teenage girl to identify with the character and the character undergoing trials a teenage girl might experience (and persevering).

STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS ON TELEVISION
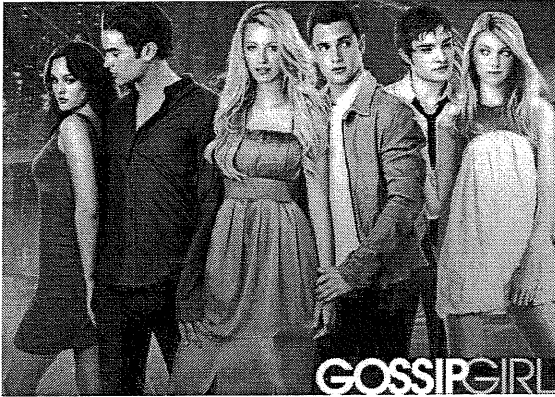
Gossip Girl: 2007 – Present

At first glance, Gossip Girl might appear to be more about lack of morals and giving into peer pressure than strong female characters, but each of the main female characters – Blair, Serena, and Jenny – are empowering in their own way.

See Also: *The OC, One Tree Hill, Privileged, 90210,*

Blair Waldorf – Blair is a recovering bulimic who struggles to keep her eating habits healthy. Her parents recently got divorced, her father is living in France with his gay lover, and her mother rarely pays her any attention. Blair maintains a poised demeanour which she uses to exert control over her life.

Serena van der Woodsen – Serena ran away from her problems before season 1, but in the first episode she has decided to face them instead. She is very forthwith and friendly, but is trying to change from a party girl to someone she can respect more.

Jenny Humphrey – Jenny is skirting a thin line between expressing herself and giving into peer pressure. The choices she makes are not always the best ones, but lessons can be learned both from her victories and her failures.

Themes: High School, family, peer pressure, eating disorders, facing problems

Recommended Reads: *Gossip Girl* by Cecily von Ziegesar, *A-List* by Zoey Dean, *Clique* by Lisi Harrison
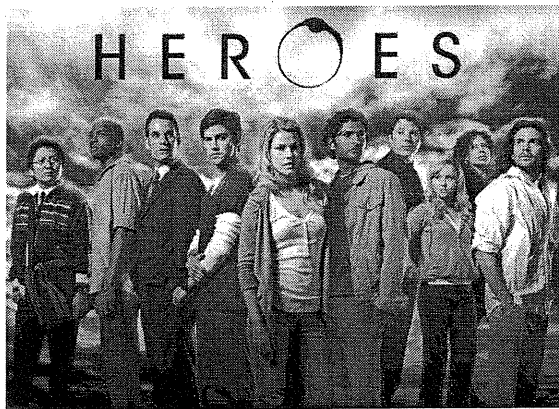
Heroes: 2006 – Present

See Also: Smallville, Veronica Mars, Terminator: Sarah Connor Chronicles,

Claire Bennet – Claire may have been born with superpowers, but that does not mean she was born a hero. She is trying to earn the right to be called a hero by protecting the people she loves, saving lives, and finding out more about her heritage. Claire may have powers, but she also faces issues surrounding her adoption, finding her real parents and family, and accepting her body.

Themes: Family, fitting in, Fantasy/Scifi, empowerment, self-search

Recommended Reads: *Mediator Series* by Meg Cabot, *A Great and Terrible Beauty* by Libba Bray, *City of Bones* by Cassandra Claire

Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles: 2008 – Present

See Also: Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Heroes, Smallville

Cameron – Cameron is a strong female character more in the literal sense of the word. She is physically strong because she is a robot sent from the future, but she also has to learn how to navigate high school, experience emotions and life, and protect John Connor.

Themes: Empowerment, fitting in, Fantasy/Scifi, first experiences

Recommended Reads: *The Host* by Stephenie Meyer, *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld



90210: 2008 – Present

See Also: The OC, Gossip Girl, One Tree Hill

Annie Wilson – She has just been displaced from home, moved halfway across the country for her father's new job, and now has to deal with making new friends, figuring out old feuds, and fitting in: all under the supervision of her father, principal of the school.

Erin "Silver" Silver – Silver suffers from Bipolar Disorder.

Themes: Drama, displacement, fitting in, high school, mental disorders.

Recommended Reads: *Talented* by Zoey Dean
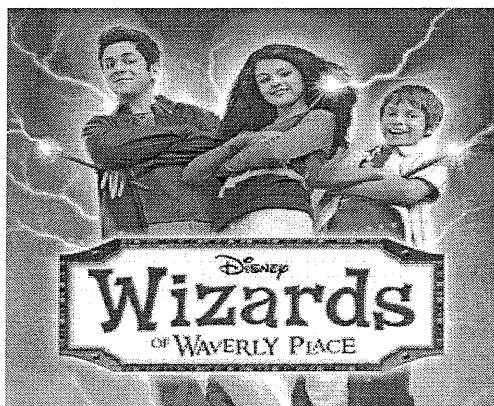
Wizards of Waverly Place: 2007 – Present

See Also: Sonny with a Chance, iCarly

Alex Russo – Alex is a wizard in training who is clever and street-smart, but also gets herself into trouble by using her magic – something she is forbidden to do without a parent present, but a rule she is constantly breaking. At the end of the day, there is always a lesson to be learned.

Themes: For younger teens, magic, mischief, family, learning lessons

Recommended Reads: *Harry Potter* by JK Rowling, *Jinx* by Meg Cabot

STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS ON DVD

VERONICA MARS(2004-2007) – Veronica, a high-school student with a private investigator for a father, utilizes the skills she has learned while working with him to solve mysteries in her day to day life and brought to her by friends. She is driven by the murder of her best friend and her social ostracism, and she is determined to find out who killed Lilly and restore her father's good name. Veronica is courageous and smart, and she deals with personal issues such as her friend's death, her mother's alcoholism and subsequent divorce from her father, standing by her father despite the town ostracizing them, and being drugged and date-raped at a party. Picture Veronica as a modern Nancy Drew, a headstrong young lady with good morals and ethics but also a willingness to bend a few rules to get to the bottom of the mystery.

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER (1997-2003) – Buffy proved herself to be a strong character who empowered teens through not only her superior physical strength and heroics, but also through her every day life, during the show's 7 seasons. She slayed vampires, but she also dealt with the emotional upheaval of Angel's betrayal in season 2, her mother's death in season 5, the aftermath of her own death and resurrection in season 6. Plus, she also saved the world (a lot). Buffy made a lot of mistakes along the way, such as running away from home, getting involved with the wrong men, or hiding her nocturnal activities and subsequent injuries and dangers from her mother, but these were always learning experiences for both the character and the viewer. The show was cutting edge when it first came out, particularly starting in season 4 with Willow turning gay and finding love with another woman, a character who was introduced as a regular on the show. Many teens will find something in Buffy the Vampire Slayer to identify with, and the show is still relevant today, more than a decade after it first came out.

Honourable Mentions: One Tree Hill, The OC, Gilmore Girls, 7th Heaven, Smallville, Dawson's Creek, Roswell.

This doesn't take into account television shows with strong female characters who aren't teenagers, but might be watched by teenagers. Currently, Smallville and One Tree Hill both have strong female characters who aren't teenagers (but in previous seasons were) There are also Echo from Dollhouse, Sarah from Chuck, and the female cast of Lost, for example.

Future Titles: Vampire Diaries, Melrose Place (2009 version), Lily Rhodes (Gossip Girl spinoff).