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Gender Understanding in Young Adult Literature: Reading Jill McCorkle's *FERRIS BEACH*

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by Barbara Bennett

When Robert Cormier was preparing to publish *The Chocolate War* with Pantheon in 1974, his editor convinced him that he should publish it as a novel for young adults. If, he was told, it was published for adults – Cormier's presumed audience – his editor said it would be just one more book on a long list of adult novels that might or might not be noticed. As a young adult novel, though, it had a better chance of selling. Cormier reluctantly agreed. The editor was right, and *The Chocolate War* has become a bestselling young adult classic.

Cormier's initial reaction, though, was shock, "followed by a month-long writer's block" (Donelson and Nilsen 6). Why would an author fear the "young adult" label so much, especially considering that as a young adult writer, he would certainly be in good company? Many of the books now considered young adult classics were written for adults and published in the adult market: *To Kill a Mockingbird, Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies,* and most recently *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel (published by Random House in 2001 to great acclaim and in 2004 released in paperback by Harcourt as a "student edition"). With ardent fan bases in both the adult and the young adult worlds, such titles illustrate that the *best* young adult fiction is as complex and compelling as any adult novel. And if these books are included in schools' curricula, not only will they sell *more*, but they will sell *longer*. Finally, while the best of young adult novels are enjoyed by adults as well, young adults are very often not interested in novels written exclusively for adults, limiting these books' audience. Yet, every adult I've encouraged to read Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak,* and Gary Soto's *Buried Onions*, for example, has read, absorbed, exploded with the need to discuss, and passed along to someone else these amazing books.

Perhaps authors are afraid to be pigeonholed as a young person's author, or perhaps they fear being perceived as less important or complex. The great

irony of all this is that in our society, which is aggressively youth-oriented – full of people trying to look, act, and think younger and where movies, music, clothes, and television are all aimed at teenagers – authors are often squeamishly hesitant to market their novels to this huge and influential market segment for everything *besides* books.

It is obvious that just as bad adult fiction manages to get published, so does bad young adult fiction. If only the pulp didn't sell – but it does – and sometimes alarmingly well. In the young adult world of literature, it is easy to find the equivalent of the adult romance, for example, novels bought and read by teenage girls who want to believe that fairytales still exist, that "good" girls – typically willowy, blonde, and clear-faced – find "princes" and live perfect lives. Sometimes these girls even solve crimes. Little can be done about books like these – the ones written either for adults or for teens – except not to encourage their reading and to offer better books for teens to read, written by authors of substance and style, with themes that are both relevant to young adults and universal to all human beings.

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According to Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, authors of the genre-shaping textbook *Literature for Today's Young Adult*, the best young adult novels have certain things in common; for example, they come from the point of view of a young adult, parental figures are usually missing (so that the young adult has to learn to survive on his/her own), they contain powerful ideas and messages with ultimately an optimistic perspective, and the protagonists possess (or learn to possess) a sense of worthiness about the role of young adults in our world 24-51). I would add to these characteristics that these good books contain convincing characters, powerful language, and ideas about what matters to humans of all ages. Looking back at the "classics" listed earlier, *To Kill a Mockingbird, Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies,* and *Life of Pi,* it is clear that these traits hold true, as they do for *The Giver, Speak, Buried Onions*, and a large number of other books currently in favor with young people and their teachers.

As a university professor who teaches a young adult literature course to future high school teachers, I am always looking for new "adult" titles that fit these criteria to use with young people – especially those teens on the cusp of moving to adult fiction and who may be in need of transition literature. Since these readers demand mature topics while teachers fear the explicit nature of much of the adult fiction available, it is a challenging task to find appropriate books that have relevant connections to adolescent life and can lead to good discussions. In particular, I try to find books with female protagonists, since so many novels taught in high schools have male leads: *Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies, A Separate Peace, Of Mice and Men, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Red Badge of Courage, The Chosen, The Great Gatsby, 1984* – the list goes on and on. The exceptions include *To Kill a Mockingbird* (where the girl is actually a tomboy with a boy's name), *The Awakening*, and *The Scarlet Letter* (both of which feature adulteresses – and while I consider both Edna Pontellier and Hester Prynne heroic, students should be exposed to female characters whose strength arises from characteristics other than infidelity). Of course, there's also Alice (of Wonderland) and Dorothy (of Oz), but both of these girls have adventures that turn out to be only figments of their imagination, and as every child knows, what Dorothy learns from her experience is that she should never have looked farther than her own backyard for her heart's desire. (Of course, the books by L. Frank Baum show a different experience for Dorothy, but since most people know only the MGM film, that version has become accepted as the culturally recognized story.)

It is for this reason that I like to include Jill McCorkle's *Ferris Beach* in my young adult literature class. *Ferris Beach* is the coming-of-age tale of a young

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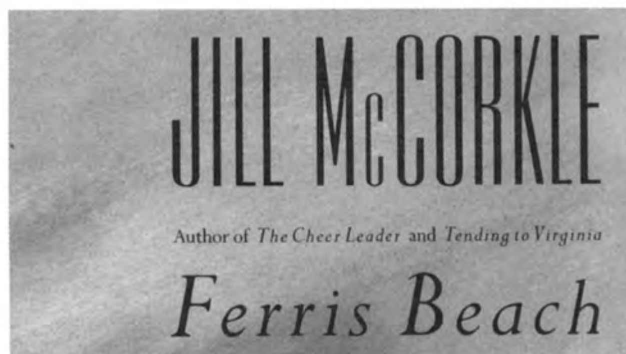

girl in a small town in the South during the early 1970s and delves deeply into the female tale of initiation but also includes many topics of interest to young males. Including the female experience in the high school English classroom would seem common sense; unfortunately, it is not done often enough. In the core curriculum of Wake County High Schools (Raleigh, North Carolina), for example, my own research shows that of the required novels and plays, the ratio of male to female protagonists is almost 3:1. The reason is probably much more tradition than logic, but the list remains the same – even though it would be just as easy and pedagogically beneficial to teach *My Antonia* rather than *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or *Jane Eyre* rather than *Great Expectations*.

Roberta Seelinger Trites, in her book *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*, claims that "teachers are still choosing masculinist texts . . . over feminist texts for fear of alienating male readers. The reasoning goes something like, 'Well, the girls will read anyway, so we'd better pick books that will appeal to the boys'" (141). The female experience is considered limited in our society (and in fact by *most* societies in the world). The general consensus, however false, is that only females are interested in what happens in the woman's world, but the male world is a universal one, interesting to both sexes. Because of this hierarchy, generally boys *and* girls will read "boy books" but boys are *not* interested in reading "girl books." Unfortunately, it is the same in the adult world, as advertisers know well. Women, for example, will buy "male" cigarettes (think Marlboro), but men wouldn't dream of buying a pack of Virginia Slims. Women can dress like men, but men dressing like women is usually deemed comic or even perverted. The argument follows, then, that women will read *Huck Finn*, but men resist reading *Little Women*. And teachers of both sexes have unconsciously bought into this system. Reaching the future teachers, then, is paramount in changing how future high school students respond to cross-gender stories – and *Ferris Beach* is one novel that can interest both sexes.

Another explanation for the lack of gender balance might be in our approach to teaching literature, as Perry Nodelman suggests: teachers have been trained to focus discussion on the narrator and encourage students to identify with him/her, but Nodelman warns that "[i]n training children to identify, to read only about themselves, we sentence them to the solitude of their own consciousness" (184). It would be better to ask students to see the wonder of diversity in experience by stepping into the lives of people unlike themselves, including, of course, characters of the opposite sex. "To do any less," claims Trites, "is to cheat our students of half the world" (141).

Including stories with strong female characters alongside stories about strong males should be a necessity in the schools of today. Mitzi Myers claims that "critics can no longer assume that important narratives deal with war or whales," and Virginia Woolf once claimed that most readers regarded a book as "insignificant" if "it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room" (Myers 67). Heroic girls – in or out of the drawing room – have much to teach both sexes, especially in the twenty-first century when hope and optimism are at a low ebb. In *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope note that the "male central characters of contemporary literary works usually are anti-heroes in a hopeless and meaningless world; they view themselves and all humanity as powerless victims of metaphysical nothingness and technological, bureaucratic society. In contrast, female characters are increasingly hopeful, sloughing off the victim role to reveal their true, powerful, and heroic identities" (13). While this assumption is certainly more applicable

to adult literature, there is some evidence of this in young adult fiction as well (consider the theme and tone of *Lord of the Flies*, for example), and it is worth attempting to include in the classroom more female experiences that offer a sense of hope. This is yet another reason *Ferris Beach* works well in today's classroom: while the topics of the novel are sobering – death, rape, poverty, adultery, disillusionment – the ultimate message of the novel is the limitlessness of possibilities, a hero with a world of potential in front of her. (Note that I use the term "hero" rather than "heroine." As Pearson and Pope have explained, "heroine" connotes passivity and objectivity rather than activity and subjectivity. Therefore, I use the term hero to refer to both male and female protagonists.)

Once good books with female protagonists are found, they should be taught the same way as books with male leads rather than putting them in a separate category of "female" or "feminist" fiction, a marginalization that often leads young men to categorize the works as irrelevant or inferior. And very often, the same archetypes and patterns found in traditional texts with male heroes are present in books with female heroes, as they are in *Ferris Beach*, allowing McCorkle's novel to be taught alongside other "classics" in the classroom, and letting students see similarities in literature of different kinds, regardless of the gender of the hero. But rather than merely substituting a female for a male – what Lissa Paul calls a "hero in drag" (199) – the main character, Kate Burns, explores what it means to be a female hero in a male-dominated world, more particularly, in the male-dominated culture of the American South.

In his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell defines the archetypal pattern followed by heroes on a quest – that is Departure, Initiation, and Return. In modern texts, the heroes are usually less imposing than, for example, Ulysses, their stories more personal, their departures more metaphysical, and their monsters more psychological, but they are heroic nonetheless. And even though Campbell seems to have male protagonists in mind, his pattern is an excellent way to introduce *Ferris Beach* to young adults, especially if they are familiar with this structure in other stories such as *The Odyssey, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Lord of the Flies, Great Expectations*, and so many others. *Ferris Beach* is a female *bildungsroman* of the most classic kind: McCorkle's female hero is Kate Burns, who moves from innocence to experience, from childish illusion to mature realization, and from ignorance about romance and sex to an understanding of love and acceptance.

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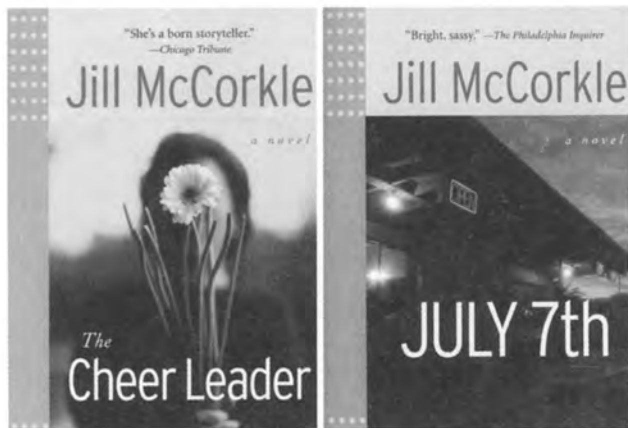
Kate is a hero who wears her tragic flaw physically on her face – rather than within her character: a wine-colored Italy-shaped birth mark Kate describes as her "weak spot, like a bruise" (McCorkle 56), a mark she instinctively reaches up to cover every time she feels humiliated, vulnerable, or frightened. Like all heroes, Kate must learn to overcome this weakness – which for her is a symbol of her insecurity and her feelings of dependence on others – in order to discover her true, heroic self. Kate exemplifies the contrast between female and male heroes: traditionally, the male hero "falls from power because of hubris" but females, "educated to be inferior and agreeable, are more often destroyed through insecurity than through pride" (Pearson and Pope 10).

Both male and female protagonists often begin their journeys as orphans, searching for an identity and a new family. For young adults, it may be much easier to develop an adult identity and learn life lessons if they are unencumbered by parental expectations and



Courtesy of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

McCorkle made her literary debut with two novels published in the same year, July 7 *and* The Cheerleader *(Algonquin Books, 1984). These two novels, like* Ferris Beach*, are enjoyed by both teens and adults.*

Courtesy of The North Carolina State Archives

NCLR *Editor Margaret Bauer presented Jill McCorkle with the R. Hunt Parker Award for "a lifetime achievement's worth of books in only a relatively few years [and] while [she is] still young enough to produce another lifetime's worth of North Carolina literature," 18 Nov. 2005.*

pressures. Sometimes "orphaning" is accomplished when the protagonist goes away to school – as in *A Separate Peace* – or by landing the young people on an adult-less island – as in *Lord of the Flies*. Or, like Jane Eyre and Huck Finn, the young adult can, in actuality, be an orphan. Sometimes, though, orphaning is accomplished figuratively: either the parent is emotionally absent or the child considers her/himself alone. In the case of Kate Burns, orphaning is simply her wish and fantasy because she sees her own mother, Cleva, as unacceptable and unlovable – having "sharp edges" like her Boston accent and a "severe" personality much like the gray bun of her hair (McCorkle 3). Perhaps even the birthmark on Kate's cheek is symbolically the unwanted mark of her own birth given to her by her biological mother.

Rather than becoming an orphan through the death of parents, Kate consciously "self-orphans." First she imagines herself as the Little Match Girl, whisked out of this world by a kindly white-haired lady with the soul of a poet. Next, because she has determined that her own mother is "more captor than rescuer," she searches for "a positive, powerful, nurturing female mentor" who will "give her a sense of self-worth, who will validate her femaleness, and who will serve as a role model" (Pearson and Pope 185). While male heroes are very often loners who face their dragons alone, writers of books with female heroes "often use the common conception of women strengthening each other within relationships as a focal point" (Trites 80). And once Kate denies her own mother, she surrounds herself with three female role models in her quest for identity: Angela, her father's niece; Mo Rhodes, her best friend's mother; and Perry Loomis, a girl in her class. Each, she believes, is far superior to her own mother.

Angela is the family's prodigal daughter, irresponsible with money and unlucky in love. But Kate is drawn to her for several reasons: Angela is a true orphan and therefore seems dramatic and romantic; Cleva does not approve of Angela; and most of all, Angela sweeps in and out of Kate's life, filling Kate's mind with illusions about love and visions of romantic dreams. As she matures, Kate begins to understand Angela and see her selfishness, irresponsibility, and domestic failure, but this knowledge and its acknowledgement take a very long time to develop.

The second role model is Mo Rhodes, who is everything Kate wishes her own mother could be: creative, bold, trendy, and free-wheeling. It takes the revelation that Mo is an adulteress who deserts her family before Kate can let go of this particular idol. And finally, Perry Loomis is a beautiful and sexually attractive but economically and culturally deprived schoolmate whom Kate sees "in the same way [she] saw Angela, the way [she] had seen Mo, glittering and shining, rare like a jewel" (McCorkle 141). This third role model topples off *her* pedestal when Kate inadvertently sees her gang raped by neighborhood boys. "[D]reams of womanhood and sexiness" are "ripped and torn apart" (McCorkle 219), leaving Kate with the realization of the sometimes-curse of beauty and sexuality and the fragility of a female in a male world. Without her mother, without her three role models, Kate truly feels like an orphan, left alone without any community to support her.

According to Joan Schultz, self-orphaning for Southern girls like Kate can be an attempt to signal oneself as "resisting, refusing, or rejecting the kind of family identity, family roles, and family ties with the past or the present considered so vital to the Southern

way of life," and to indicate that the young woman prefers "to risk solitariness, exclusion, estrangement, even isolation" rather than "absorption in the family of the past or present" (92). Kate's mother refuses to leave Kate to face life alone, however, recognizing the need for a community. Though not a Southerner herself, Cleva encourages and even forces Kate to participate in groups like Children of the Confederacy. Kate, however, partly in rebellion against the mother she has determined is unsuitable, rejects her mother's attempts to connect, resisting and mocking this organization and the traditional roles it represents.

"'Wouldn't you love to have peacocks in your yard?' Mrs. Rhodes asked, and turned to me. Her thick dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail as she stood there barefooted in cropped jeans, her toenails painted pale pink." (*Ferris Beach* 10)

In the modern South, regional history and family lineage have become less important to young people like Kate (and trendy people like Mo Rhodes) than popular culture that includes movies, television, and music. Mo Rhodes, for example, names her two sons after the dead icons James Dean and Buddy Holly rather than after dead relatives (as a more traditional Southern woman would do), and Kate's understanding of relationships and love comes from rock and roll lyrics and movies rather than family or church teachings. It seems that Kate wishes herself an orphan not only from her family but from her culture as well.

By orphaning herself, Kate can embark on Campbell's first stage of the quest: Departure or Separation. In contemporary literature, this departure can be a figurative one – emotional estrangement, for example – and for Kate, this initial separation is from one parent only, following the traditional pattern of the hero in which "both men and women dissociate themselves from the mother at the beginning of the heroic quest. The traditional quest is a search for the father, who will initiate the hero into the world" (Pearson and Pope 177). Rejecting the mother-figure for boys is a way of rejecting childhood, which was quite standard in books before the Women's Movement of the 1960s and '70s. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, a popular type of young adult novel took the form of "school stories" in which the young protagonist experiences independence by going away to school. Boys' school stories (*The Hoosier School-Boy* [1883], *The Andover Way* [1928], *Tom Brown's Schooldays* [1857]) were "premised on the exclusion of females. . . . Excluding mothers and girls – boys were even chary of admitting that they had sisters – lent the boys authority" (Clark 5). Girls' school stories, in contrast (*The Making of A Schoolgirl* [1897], *For the School Colours* [1918], *A Popular Schoolgirl* [1920]) would more likely "probe the disjunction between school and family, illuminating the subversive potential of school. . . . In part the emphasis on family counters the possibility that a girl might find some independence at school. Yet also girls were never supposed to enter that world outside but to cycle back to the family – or a family – after school" (Clark 15).

The absence of females in boys' stories and the focus on the female role in girls' stories serve to highlight the difference in messages sent to the sexes through adolescent literature. The mother symbolizes the domestic sphere with its protections and directives as well as the "soft" shields of childhood, and so to become an adult, a young boy must leave this shelter behind, facing the perils of the real world without the security that a mother instinctively gives and is loath to relinquish. If a boy does not cut himself off from his mother, it is believed, he will never become a true man.

For a young woman, this situation is more complicated. Simply cutting herself off from her mother is not acceptable, nor does it accomplish adulthood. As Schultz points out, it is a father who customarily indicates to his daughter what her identity in the patriarchal world will be (89-92), and if *Ferris Beach* had been set before the Women's Movement, Kate might not ever need to separate from her father. Instead, she would remain in her mother's world and come to understand that her only access to power in the patriarchal world would come *through* a man – her father, her brother (as in *To Kill a Mockingbird*), her husband. McCorkle, though, is part of the new

generation of women writers, and therefore she offers a lovable but fallible man who cannot shelter his daughter from minor disappointments or from major catastrophes like his own death. Many fairytale princesses (Snow White and Cinderella, for example) and fictional protagonists (like Scout Finch) are motherless; McCorkle, in contrast, kills off the father and leaves the mother to work out differences with her daughter. But having rejected her mother and being left without a father figure, Kate must develop within herself "the heroic qualities [such as courage, skill, and independence] society has seen as male" (Pearson and Pope 177).

Development occurs in most stories during the Initiation phase of a quest. As a potential hero is exposed to dangers, inconsistencies, and truths of the world, she/he grows in awareness and changes, usually, into a wiser human being through trial, pain, and disillusionment. Huckleberry Finn, for example, discards society's ethics and develops his own: he sees the cruelty that exists in ordinary people; he sees hypocrisy, greed, and goodness; and he develops his own morality. Ralph, in *Lord of the Flies*, weeps "for the end of innocence [and] the darkness of man's heart" and realizes he didn't appreciate the "true, wise friend called Piggy" (Golding 202). And Scout Finch learns, among other things, that her father was right when he said "you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them" (Lee 279).

"'We all want a fairy tale, Kitty,' she whispered. 'Nobody wants the truth. But sooner or later you learn that there are no fairy tales; there is no glamorous mother hidden on a faraway island, no prince on a white horse, no treasure chest full of jewels. . . . That's the real story and the truth is that I'm sorry that's the truth.'" (*Ferris Beach* 270-71)

The insights achieved by McCorkle's Kate Burns are relevant to young readers of both sexes, but perhaps especially for young women raised on the fairytales of youth. Perhaps the awareness of the danger of confusing illusion with reality is the most important theme in this novel (it is a typical McCorkle theme, which she explores in many of her short stories and novels). In this novel, Kate is bombarded – like most young girls – with images of ideal love that define her expectations. When a boy first holds her hand, she can relate her feelings and her actions only to lines from current songs like "*Hold me like you'll never let me go*," and "*Did you write the book of love?*" Her self-image comes from *Glamour* magazine and television shows of her era, such as *That Girl*. Her idealization of her cousin Angela originates from their first meeting when, knowing that Cleva does not approve of Angela, Kate's father secretly takes Kate to meet Angela at Ferris Beach, where both Angela and Ferris Beach attain icon status for Kate: "It was that very day that I attached to Angela everything beautiful and lively and good; she was the easy flow of words and music, the waves crashing on Ferris Beach as I spun around and around because I couldn't take in enough of the air and sea gulls as they swooped and whined" (McCorkle 6-7). Her eventual disillusionment with Angela – as well as with Mo Rhodes and Perry Loomis – is a necessary step on Kate's way to seeing love and relationships realistically. The demise of her own first serious relationship, with a young man named Merle Hucks, and the unexpected death of her father further this evolution.

The final stage for any hero is the Return – even though this is the one phase that is sometimes assumed but not explored. Instead, the author might imply that the young person will return to home and family, filled with new knowledge and wisdom – as in Lowry's *The Giver*. Some stories focus on one particular initiation, intimating that there are more to come. In the final paragraph of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, Huck refuses to return to his home town, deciding instead "to light out for the Territory" (366). Huck's initiation phase, it seems, is not over yet. More experiences and more lessons await him, and thus we never see his return. In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding ends the story with the arrival of the British naval officer who will take the boys home. We do not see their return or its effect on the rest of their lives. We can only imagine. Sometimes the return is presented as a retelling from the new perspectives gained through elapsed time, as in *A Separate Peace* and *Life of Pi*. The intervening years (between the events narrated and the recounting of them) are omitted in the novel in favor of the wisdom that comes with distance and age.

Ferris Beach does not fit precisely in any of these categories, and it is perhaps this stage of the quest that delineates this novel as a female quest rather than a male one. Unlike heroes such as Odysseus, who returns to Ithaca, clears his home of potential suitors for Penelope, and takes his rightful place as ruler, a female hero (and a male hero who is relatively powerless because of race or class) "masters the world by understanding it, not by dominating, controlling, or owning the world or other people" (Pearson and Pope 5). She does not "feel the need to kill, subdue, conquer, master, dominate, or marry a symbol" of wholeness and courage (Pearson and Pope 14). Instead, a female hero either literally or symbolically searches for her father, but "discovers instead that it is her mother with whom she seeks to be rejoined" (Pearson and Pope 68).

Heroes of both sexes need to realize that though some specific aspects of the journey may differ, the destination is the same: identity, independence, understanding of where we came from, and a healthy plan for where we are heading.

As a young girl in the 1970s, Kate is on the cusp of the feminist movement – which arrived in the South later than in other parts of the country. She probably half-believes that her father is her hero, but McCorkle's removal of the father leaves Kate to face a new kind of heroic awakening. She does not merely *grow up*; instead, she "grows in power," as described by Roberta Seelinger Trites: "No longer a passive 'good girl' who grows into the prescribed and circumscribed social role" that her mother seems to want for her, she "learns to recognize and appreciate the power of her own voice. Her awakening is not bestowed on her by a male awakener; instead she wakes herself and discovers herself to be a strong, independent, and articulate person" (7-8). She learns that "[n]o knight in shining armor comes to save" her, and that strength is gained by "rejecting stereotypical expectations" and "by exploring [her] own choices" (Trites 24).

Part of her growth comes in the acceptance of her mother in spite of their differences – something absent in nearly all male heroic tales, but a process young men should be made aware of. Kate has been consciously and methodically removing her mother from her life, but she returns to her mother once she has lost the two strong male figures in her life – her father and her boyfriend – and once she has become disillusioned with her three female role models. This move may be out of desperation and loneliness, but it is the first step in understanding her mother and their relationship. Early in the novel, Kate comments that her parents "never looked like they went together" and that in their wedding photo, she keeps expecting "the real spouses to step in from the wings on either side" (McCorkle 3). Like the nursery-rhyme couple she compares her parents to – Jack Sprat and his wife – they seem out of sync because physically they don't match. Judging their marriage on appearance alone, as she initially does with many other relationships, is one of the major mistakes that leads to Kate's misconceptions and her focus on the illusion of romance instead of the reality of love. But when Kate's father unexpectedly dies, she witnesses her mother's grief and is faced for the first time with a true picture of a loving relationship: one that has nothing to do with external appearances or romantic lyrics. In the car, while her mother cries, Kate finally asks the question for which she had always assumed a negative answer: "You really did love him, didn't you?" (McCorkle 342). Although it is far from the ideal relationship Kate has imagined love to be, her parents' love in the end proves to be the one that endures, and Kate is forced to reexamine her own definition of love and her opinion of her mother as cold and unlovable.

Kate begins to articulate her acceptance of Cleva as both her physical and spiritual mother: "My mother never mentioned that day to me, and though we often talked our way around it, it seemed I could never get close enough to tell her I was sorry I had ever wished her away. That I *was* my mother's daughter, and that for every time she had misjudged me, I had also misjudged her" (McCorkle 341). Frequently, reconciliation with

the mother is crucial to a successful quest for female heroes because a woman's identity is so often more closely tied to her mother's than to her father's identity. A girl certainly does not have to *become* her mother – and probably shouldn't try – but she needs to understand and accept her mother as a woman before she can successfully define her own identity in her mother's realm. And by reconciling with *both* parents – or at least with the idea of both parents – a female hero, according to Pearson and Pope, "integrates the best qualities associated with each sex role" (205).

And just as it is important for young women to understand the need for a boy to search for his father, it is important for young men to understand the complex relationship between girls and their mothers. Therefore, it is as important – maybe *more* important – for boys to read books with female protagonists. Females are shown the male world constantly, but boys need to be shown the female world to help them understand it. Boys need to understand that "feminine" doesn't connote "inferior" and that our shared human experiences outnumber our narrower, "gender-limited" ones. Males should be exposed to the fact that girls and women undergo many of the same life changes as boys and men. Most of all, perhaps, boys need to learn not to fear the feminine.

Ferris Beach is an excellent novel to teach in a high school classroom for many reasons – its timeless themes, its relevance for young adults forging their own paths through parental conflict and the search for identity, McCorkle's accessible (yet poetic) style – but perhaps the most compelling reason might be the necessity for gender understanding, the opportunity for young men to see the world through the eyes of a young woman and to try to understand that different perspective. Heroes of both sexes need to realize that though some specific aspects of the journey may differ, the destination is the same: identity, independence, understanding of where we came from, and a healthy plan for where we are heading.

Jill McCorkle signing books after her keynote address at East Carolina University's second annual Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, 15 Oct. 2005, in Greenville, NC

Photography by Jim White, NCArtists.Com © 2005

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