

# women in Fantasy



a zine about female strength

This zine is dedicated to the strong women we admire: Chimamanda, RBG, Tavi, Beyonce, Dr. Jane, Amanda Hughes, and each other.

# What Are Zines?

Welcome to our zine. Zines are self-made, self-published mini magazines. Zines are motivated by a desire of self expression, and therefore, profit is never the intent of zine publication. When it is difficult to see our ideas reflected in mainstream media and culture, we can use zines to express ourselves and spread our ideas in a creative, personal way. Zines come in all shapes and sizes, and often focus on social justice issues. The earliest zinester we can think of is Thomas Paine, who distributed a self-published mini-publication called “Common Sense.” Paine’s early zine ultimately helped spark the American Revolution. Zines are revolutionary!

## Feminism and Intersectionality

This zine focuses on women and feminism in fantasy fiction. *Feminism* is defined as “the advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men.” Do you believe that women and men should be equal? Great. You’re a feminist. *Intersectional Feminism* is the idea that women experience oppression in different ways and in different degrees of intensity. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, the professor who coined the term intersectionality in 1989, “cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity.” If you are confused, think of it this way. The oppression that white women face is different from the oppression that non-white women face. Women of color may face both misogyny *and* racism. Throughout our zine, we have tried to address issues of intersectionality within fantasy literature. Fantasy books and films often conform to both patriarchal ideas *and* white supremacist ideas, and we recognize that as three white women, we can easily access fantasy characters who look like us in a way that non-white women cannot. We hope to call attention to women’s issues throughout this zine, but we also hope to call out racial biases. Feminism is nothing without intersectionality.

## About This Zine

Our names are Clara Roth, Eliza Klein, and Lestra Atlas. We are young women living in Cambridge, Massachusetts and created this zine as part of our graduation project at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. Throughout the spring of 2015, we have examined how women access power in fantasy fiction (as well as sub-genres of high fantasy and urban contemporary fantasy). We created this zine as a way to showcase our work, our thoughts, and our passion surrounding female strength and fantasy. We hope that this zine sparks important, thoughtful conversation throughout our community and beyond. You can find our zine on tumblr at [www.womeninfantasy.tumblr.com](http://www.womeninfantasy.tumblr.com).

# Finding Empowerment Through Fantasy

by Lestra

For years I saw myself as a minor character in my own story. Let me tell you, there is nothing bleaker than the powerlessness of feeling like a minor character in your own life. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon sentiment for quiet, insecure, teenage girls.

It was this feeling of insignificance that initially drew me to the genre of fantasy. Everyone is important in fantasy. Everyone has their role. The main characters are those who thought they were nobody, only to wake up one morning to realize that *they* were special and the world needed *them*. I could imagine my face as theirs, their deeds as my own. Reading their stories gave mine a little more importance and provided me with an escape, my very own wardrobe into bizarre and intriguing worlds.

Starting in fifth grade I could go through one thousand books a week. I read at home, in the car, at school, during recess, and at swim practice. I was single minded in my determination to immerse myself in new worlds and, maybe in some ways, hide from my own. I especially liked series as there were no endings and no goodbyes. The characters I loved could stay with me for years and years as I waited for the next book to come out. With each book, I knew the characters a little better; I grew up with them, saw them grow and mature. No endings, no goodbyes.

At first, my parents encouraged my little obsession. Before fifth grade, I had never been that big of a reader, and it thrilled them to see me taking an interest in any kind of book. Eventually my single minded consumption of fantasy, and only fantasy, began to worry them. They prompted me to read non-fiction or at the very least a few 'classics', and although once in a while I would comply with their wishes, I would always switch back to my series afterwards. I remember getting into huge arguments with my parents as they fruitlessly tried to get me to branch out. Their constant recommendations and judgment ultimately had the opposite effect; I dove into fantastical worlds with more fervor than ever before.

When I was 13, I met Annabeth Chase. Annabeth was everything I wanted to be; witty, outspoken, confident, smart and good with a sword. The daughter of Athena in Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief*, she did not have any special powers like her friends, other than her intellect, but she was one of the most valuable members of the demigod gang. I saw myself, and the person I wanted to be, in her. Really strong women like Annabeth are, unfortunately, few and far between in fantasy. I remember reading and rereading *The Lightning Thief* in bed. Only the first book in the series had come out when I read *The Lightning Thief*, but I eagerly bought the subsequent book in the series when it came out the next March and the next, and the one after.



Often the women I met in fantasy novels had to change themselves, to stay alive, for a man, or because of societal pressures. Not Annabeth. She knew who she was. She was not the same black and white character that I had become accustomed to. She could be scared and sensitive at times, and it did not make her any less strong or impermeable. The kinship I felt for Annabeth and the process of reading the books did not redefine or change the way I saw the world, but she did help me to redefine myself and the complex and powerful person I could be. No longer was I afraid to be 'bossy' or 'too smart'. I discovered my voice and began to use it.

I have since moved on from fantasy, and thus have broadened my exposure to different types of literature and worlds. While I am still quiet, my silence now holds power, not insecurity. While I am still young, I do not let my relative inexperience curb my enthusiasm and confidence around others. I am the person I am today because of these stories and these characters. Fantasy, though based on the impossible and the fabricated, can have a very tangible message and impact. I am not Annabeth, and I still have my faults and insecurities, but what hero does not? I am no longer a minor character along for the ride. I now have the power, the knowledge, and the privilege to direct my own story.



# Race bent Hermione

The woman. The myth. The legend. **Hermione Granger** is the Harry Potter series' fierce heroine. She overcomes countless obstacles and uses her intellect to aid Harry, the protagonist, in his quest to root out evil and defeat Lord Voldemort.

Yet despite Hermione's strength, she exists in a world that constantly tells her she doesn't matter. And although readers, popular culture, and the Harry Potter movie franchise commonly portray Hermione (and, to be honest, most characters) as white, there are multiple indications that Hermione's story would make more sense if she wasn't white. Or at least, there are indications that we shouldn't automatically assume whiteness.

Throughout the series, Hermione is persecuted because of her *blood*. She is frequently called "mudblood," a slur used to degrade muggle-born witches and wizards. She is furthermore teased on account of her unique frizzy hair.

There is no reference to Hermione's race in the series. In the BuzzFeed article "What A 'Racebent' Hermione Granger Really Represents," internet blogger Alanna Bennett claims that the only direct mention of Hermione's skin color that she could find occurred in the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, when J.K. Rowling writes, "They were there, both of them, sitting outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor - Ron looking incredibly freckly, Hermione very brown, both waving frantically at him."

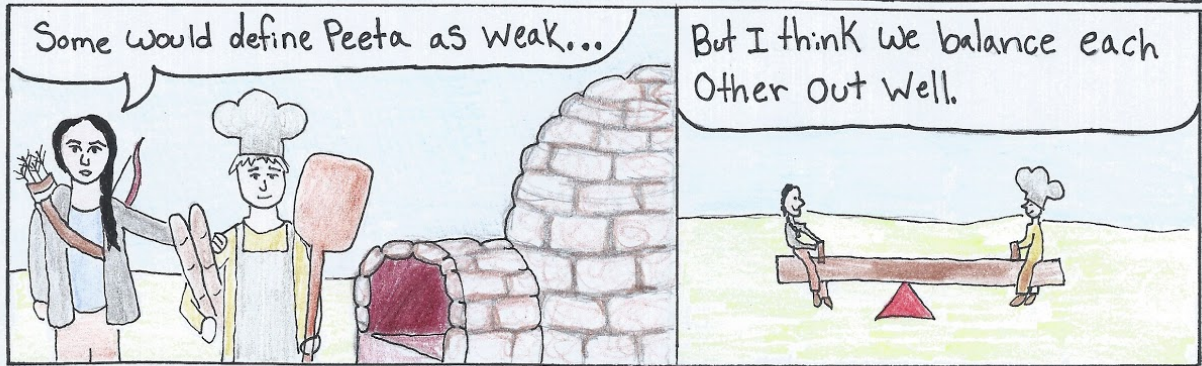
All of this seems to indicate that Hermione very well could be - and arguably should be - a woman of color.

There are over 200 characters mentioned in the Harry Potter series. Few of them are women. Very few of them are people of color. Why? Why isn't Hermione portrayed as a woman of color? Even further than that, when introduced to a fantasy character, why do many readers assume whiteness? Have we really internalized the white supremacy and racism that is so pervasive in western literature and culture? And why is there a lack of people of color in the fantasy genre as a whole?

I don't have answers to these questions. I don't know how to fix black and brown erasure in fantasy fiction. I *do* know that as a white reader and human, I must constantly check my privilege and recognize that I live in a world where I can access characters who look like me. Not everyone can say the same.



# Fantastic Female Figures (Part I)



Who you are is not defined by Who you Love.

Four simple stick figures are drawn in a row at the bottom of the page.

## The Great Goddesses: Women in Mythology

In fourth grade I was first introduced to the Greek and Roman Gods as part of the social studies curriculum. My friends and I were all quick to pick favorites. Zeus was too much of a jerk. Hera was too jealous. Hades was too cold. Ares was too vain and violent. I quickly decided that the tricky and clever Hermes was my favorite; I envied his winged helmet and sandals. He was not bound to anything, like Zeus was to the throne, like Hera was to her



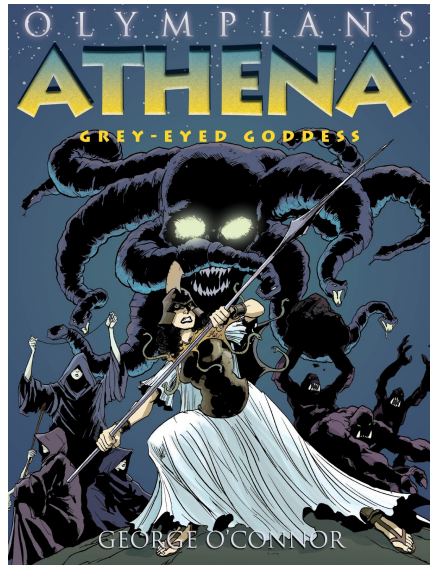
family or Hades was to his dark realm. He was not bound to a wife, he was not bound to the truth, nor even to the ground. Hermes took no sides, he was merely a messenger. I could not see myself in any of the Goddesses. I could not see myself in their jealousy, their need for revenge. They were petty. While powerful they were chained, bounded by their own vanity. Their power should have been attractive to me, a young impressionable female, but they were not. I liked them, don't get me wrong; I admired Athena's level headedness and Artemis's skill with a bow. But, generally, I was still most intrigued by male gods.

It was only in my junior year of highschool that I really began to question what I read and how women were portrayed in books and popular culture. And all of a sudden, like a switch had gone off I could see the inequality. I began to read with more wariness. I questioned everything, and the one question that kept coming up was; why do I connect to male characters more? It did not make sense. Perhaps, I told myself it is because you like boys, you are attracted to the characters and that is why you like them more. But, when I talked with straight boys that read the same books, they too liked the male protagonists. Perhaps, I began to think, female characters are written in a different way than male characters. Since then, I searched for female characters that intrigue me; that are real. Women that are strong and impermeable, but human in their weaknesses and faults.





Just this year, when I was sitting in my school library looking for something to read in the last hour of class, my eye fell on the shiny, colored covers of George O'Connor's comic *Athena: Grey Eyed Goddess*. I picked it up hesitantly and within 45 minutes I had read the entire thing. In this version Athena was not the jealous fury that turned Arachne into a spider nor the cool detached and cynical mother of Annabeth, in Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief*, she was a woman. True, not a normal woman, her mother was eaten by her father, and she was born out of her father's head, however she still had to struggle through the loss of a friend, she had to prove herself to her siblings and to her father, and though she was generous she had a mean streak when provoked. Though a goddess, she was human. O'Connor brought nuances to the character of Athena that I had never considered before. I quickly checked out two of his other comics, *Aphrodite: Goddess of Love* and *Hera: The Goddess and Her Glory*. Previously, I had never really liked these two goddesses. And while these books did not change that completely, they helped me to see them in a new light. The greek goddesses though divine are people, and sometimes storytellers don't show that side of them. They try to make them into black and white deities, like the Christian God and the Devil. While Aphrodite may be the Goddess of love, she is still one of the most powerful olympians. Hera might be jealous, but she has a right to be, because Zeus was a horrible husband. Women are not cardboard cutouts. It is important for writers of original stories and writers of ones thousands of years old to consider this when creating characters. Likewise, it is important for readers to consider this when meeting characters. No woman is only one thing, not even a Goddess.



# Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Importance of Complex Female Figures

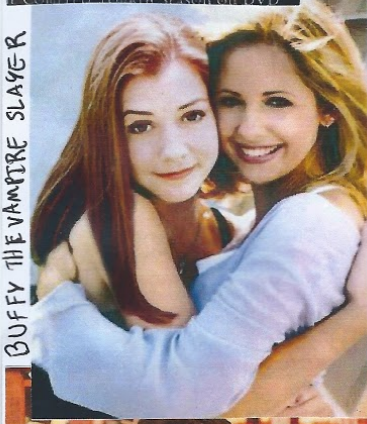
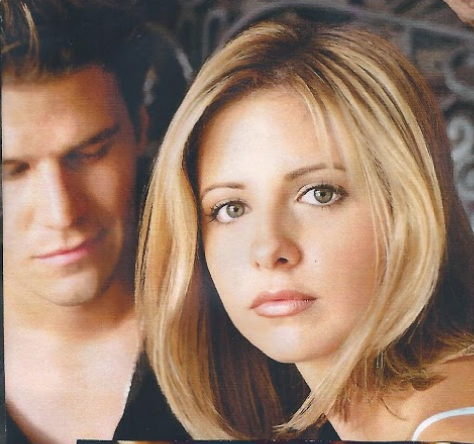
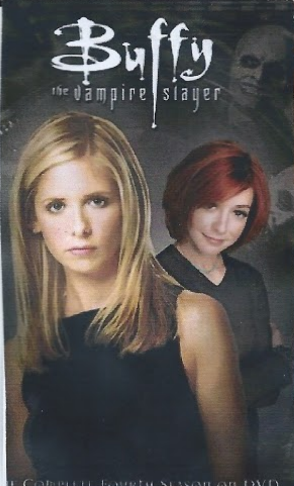
By Clara

I began watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reluctantly. For the better part of a year I had seen a few of my friends become deeply immersed in this show which they loved intensely. They would beg me to watch it, claiming that even though they knew that fantasy TV wasn't really my favorite, that I would be able to get so much more out of this iconic show that had become so meaningful to them. So I began watching, thinking that there was little possibility that I would get anything significant out of a show which centered around fantastical beings and supernatural powers. Fortunately, I was proven wrong.

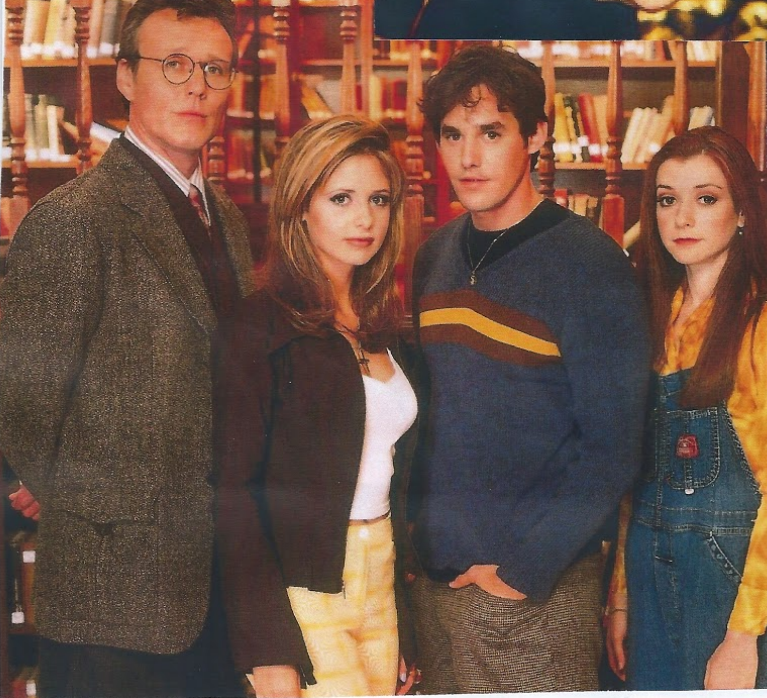
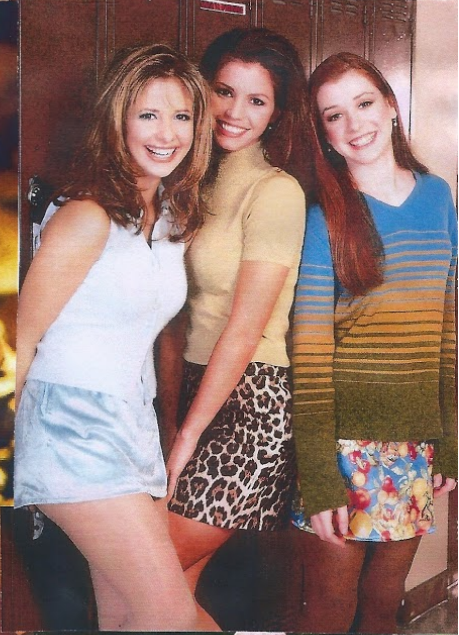
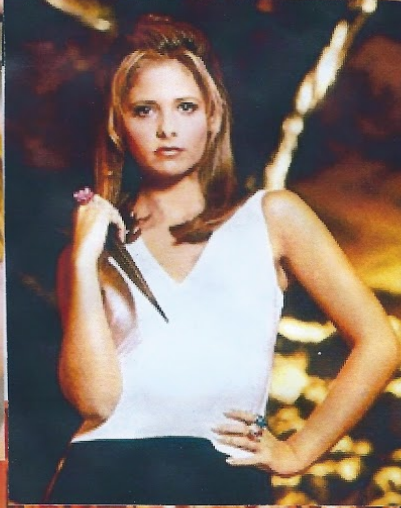
Buffy Summers is a young woman with a unique responsibility. She is the slayer, the one girl in the world who has the innate talent and power to slay the vampires which haunt the living world. Having this power has meant that Buffy has had to sacrifice many normal aspects of teenage life; the show opens with her move to Sunnydale after her expulsion from her old school. While she anticipates a fresh start, she soon realizes that Sunnydale is a breeding ground for supernatural evil and Buffy quickly is forced to slip into her old role with the help of new friends.

Buffy offers a female adolescent audience something unique: a main character who is unmistakably a teenage girl. For better or for worse Buffy experiences and displays all the complexities of adolescents. Her character experiences the conflicting and complex raw emotions which are sometimes irrational but are always justified. She devotes her time not only to relationships with men, but to real friendships with people who support her in her endeavors. She is immensely flawed and refuses to play the good girl because she realizes that there is more to her personality than that. She carries the weight of the world on her shoulders because often it is up to her to save Sunnydale from the supernatural beings that plague it. She struggles to ask for help, but frequently learns the lesson that not everything can be accomplished alone. She is no angel and has off days in which she is cruel to those who love her the most. She fights with her mother and fulfills some aspects of the typical teenage rebellion, but at the end of the day knows how much her mother has sacrificed in order to provide her with a good life. She struggles to fit into the world but does her best to carve out a significant place for herself. Her character, unlike so many other teenage girl characters, does not try to be representative of every possible quality a young woman could have. Instead, she has a specific personality which is unique to her, but remains inherently relatable because she experiences the twisting road of emotions that most adolescents are subject to.

Buffy is not a character without flaws. She is not perfect and doesn't pretend to be. But this to me, and to many others is what makes her not only an exceptional character, but an inspirational female figure.



BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER



## How to reconcile feminist literature that isn't really feminist at all



*Above is a depiction of the heroines in Fairest, as shown on the comic book's cover*

The *Fairest* comic is a spinoff of Bill Willingham's series, *Fables*. It illustrates the histories of Fabletown's female characters, including Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, and Cinderella.

*Fairest* seemingly celebrates the nuances and experiences of strong women. Sounds empowering, right? Yet in reality, *Fairest* is problematic in many ways. It objectifies women, contains racist undertones, and conforms to the patriarchal master narrative that renders female voices invalid.

### **Female Disempowerment in *Fairest***

Throughout *Fairest*, women are continually objectified, over-sexualized, and illustrated with unrealistic proportions. This unrealistic comic was created by a male illustrator, which reinforces the idea that men and patriarchy have the power to dictate what women *should* look like; what beauty *should* look like. Of course, this issue is prevalent in many comic books, not just in *Fairest*.

In addition, women in *Fairest* are disempowered as all of the story *telling* is done by men (like Jonah the imp and Ali-Baba). In allowing men to narrate these female stories, women are still being oppressed by the master narrative. They are still silenced. They are not given a chance to tell their *own* stories. This is a fundamental form of erasure.

Female reviews of the comic have noted its silencing nature. One online review of *Fables* read, "it turns out to be about men in the *Fables* universe viewing and living the women's stories." Another online review of *fables* writes, "I was particularly underwhelmed by the 'female centric' plot, in fact I felt as though the main character for a lot of this story was a man." Finally, throughout the comic it feels as though most of the women are portrayed as most *powerful* and independent when they act like *assholes*. In order to be strong and confident, women don't have to always be harsh and rude. Female characters can be just as bad-ass and fierce when they are kind, compassionate, and yes, traditionally feminine.

## Intersectionality in *Fairest*

*Fairest* contains racist undertones which negate the comic's attempt at empowerment. Throughout the comic, Ali-Baba, a Muslim non-white male character, is portrayed both negatively and stereotypically. He is continually shown treating women with disrespect. Being the essential only person of color, Ali-Baba's dehumanizing characterization is very problematic. Even further than his negative portrayal of POC and specifically Muslims, Bill Willingham (the comic's creator) himself has expressed racist ideologies, and has self-described as fanatically pro-Israel. One internet review argues, "Bill Willingham is a government-groveling, hypocritical, nationalistic, sexist and openly racist scumbag who injects his views blatantly and consistently in his comics, often out of the blue, thus betraying the integrity of the original premise of the characters, and all with absolutely zero shame." Thus, he definitely doesn't seem like an author who can perpetuate empowering feminist messages. Feminism is NOTHING without intersectionality.



← Evil Patriarchy

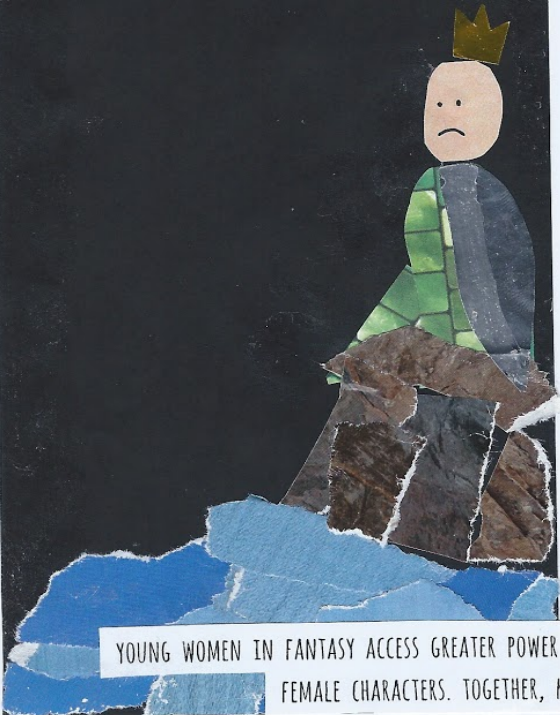
← #bye

## What does this mean?

I'm wary of judging this comic for its feminist merits. I think too often, feminists caught up in whether a work is "feminist" enough (hello, Taylor Swift and Beyonce - two absolute sheroes who face incessant criticism). To me, feminism is about being awesome to all women... so maybe part of why I feel fine about criticizing the empowerment of *Fairest* is that it was written by a man. In Roxane Gay's novel, she argues that there is no such thing as a bad feminist. I love that idea, but I also think it's somewhat problematic when a group of (presumably white) men write stories about women that are covertly sexist and objectifying. This comic claims to empower women and focus on female stories, but it also promotes all kinds of harmful messages. I'm not trying to ban *Fairest* from the bookshelves, or argue that we should avoid all literature with bigoted undertones... yet it is so, so important to read with a critical eye. When we don't think critically about these messages, we begin to internalize them.

IN KRISTIN CASHORE'S FANTASY NOVEL *GRACELING*, GRACED FIGHTER AND FEMINIST HERO KATSA DEVOTES HERSELF TO RESCUING BITTERBLUE, A YOUNG PRINCESS LIVING UNDER THE OPPRESSION OF HER FAMILY'S ABUSIVE PATRIARCH: THE KING OF MONSEA.

BEFORE KATSA IS PRESENT, BITTERBLUE IS SHY, INSECURE, AND CONSTRAINED DUE TO HER AGE AND GENDER. SHE IS AFRAID OF MEN AND REFUSES TO LET HER VOICE BE HEARD, EVEN WHEN KATSA AND PO COME TO RESCUE HER. BITTERBLUE DEEMS HERSELF WEAK BECAUSE NO ONE HAS EVER BELIEVED IN HER STRENGTH... UNTIL KATSA COMES ALONG.



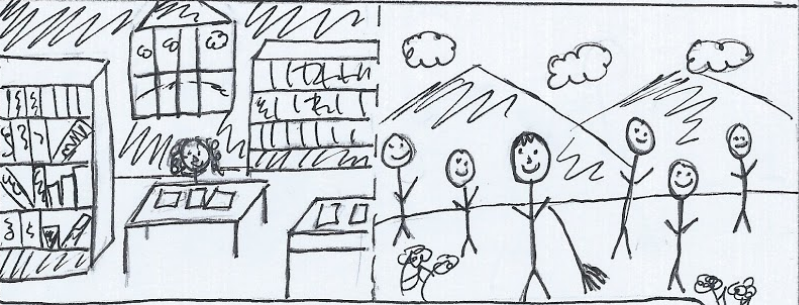
AFTER SPENDING MANY WEEKS WITH KATSA, BITTERBLUE BECOMES MORE EMPOWERED AND UNINHIBITED. KATSA TAKES BITTERBLUE SERIOUSLY AND DOESN'T TRIVIALIZE BITTERBLUE'S OPINIONS. BECAUSE OF BITTERBLUE'S STRONG FEMALE ROLE MODEL, SHE LEARNS TO USE A KNIFE, DEFEND HERSELF PHYSICALLY AND VERBALLY, BELIEVE IN HER OWN INTELLECT, AND EXPRESS HERSELF FEARLESSLY WITH POWER AND PRIDE.



YOUNG WOMEN IN FANTASY ACCESS GREATER POWER WHEN THEY ARE ENFORCED, SUPPORTED, AND BACKED BY OTHER STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS. TOGETHER, KATSA AND BITTERBLUE CAN SMASH THE PATRIARCHY!

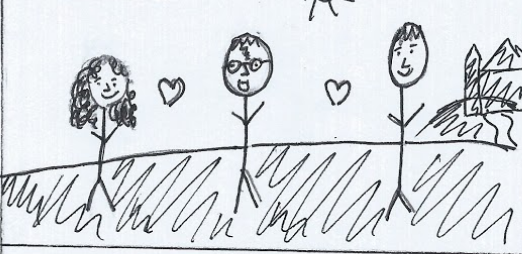
# FANTASTIC FEMALE FIGURES (part II)

In the Wizarding World



In school, Hermione and Ron were very different...

They had only their friend Harry in common



Over the years, Hermione realized that even though she was smart, she was allowed to be human

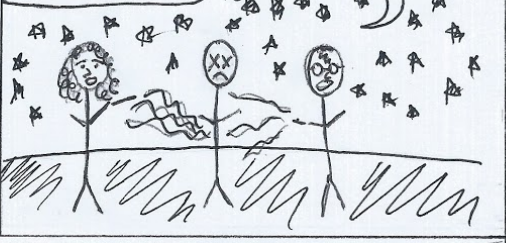


Her first experience with love was with Victor Krum...

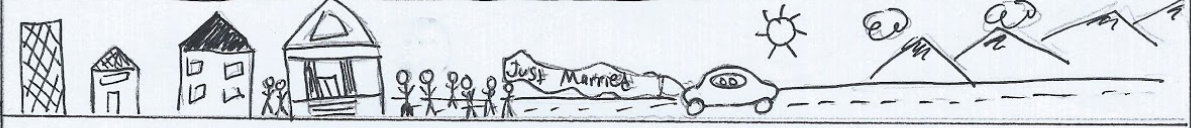
But he wasn't the one and she wasn't ready for commitment



So Hermione devoted her time to helping Harry defeat Voldemort



But unexpectedly, she fell in love with Ron. Ron didn't challenge her emotionally, but that didn't mean she couldn't love him.



Who you are is not defined by who you love ♥

## Where are the Women and People of Color in Tolkien's World?

I think I was about 12 when I watched the *Lord of the Rings* for the first time. I was watching TV and I happened upon the three film movie marathon; I started watching at the beginning of the second movie. While I was confused by the general premise, I was immediately enthralled by the sprawling landscapes and awesome fight scenes. The next time the films were shown on TV, I watched them again. Eventually I got my Mom to rent the DVDs for me. It was with great pride that I, at the age of 14, could recite the entire first two movies.

None of my friends had watched the *Lord of the Rings*, and at the beginning that was okay. Eventually, I reached the point where I had memorized all the movies, watched all the behind-the-scenes extra features, and owned my own copy of the soundtrack by Howard Shore. It was at this point that I started trying to get my friends and my family to watch the films. Through them, I was able to watch the movies again for the first time. I got to share my love of the characters, the landscapes and the story-line.

My sister latched on to the films immediately. We would giggle together talking about better ways to enter Mordor, about Aragorn's hotness, and about that time Legolas took down a whole elephant. My friends were more wary. I wanted them to appreciate and love the characters just as much as I did. The last thing I wanted to hear was, "Isn't it a little weird that there are so few women and people of color in it?" I had never considered it before.



There was Arwen, Eowyn, and Galadriel, and the people on the elephants looked like PoC. But where were the others? It made me mad. It made me mad that I had not noticed it before. It made me mad that this world that I loved did not love me or people like me. Even though this world was fantastical, a place in which anything was possible, the home of hobbits, elves, dwarves and orc, it was still populated and controlled exclusively by straight, white men. In this world of uncountable creatures there was actually very little diversity.



I still love *The Lord of the Rings*. I have yearly marathons with my sister and recently watched all three movies with my friend Elsa. I can still appreciate the story line and the characters, but the key is that I am more wary.

I challenge you to think about books and movies you love, and just notice. How many women and people of color are main characters? What is their purpose for the story? Who are the 'bad guys'? Who are the 'good guys'? Questioning movies and books you like and finding shortcomings in them does not mean they are not worthy of your interest. You can like stories that have little diversity, you just can't ignore their problems.



# The Witches by Roald Dahl: Three Reflections

## *Witches as the "Other" - by Clara*

I had never read Roald Dahl's "The Witches" as a child and though this book was meant for a child audience, I found some of the content to be very adult. The most prominent scene in this book was the initial description of witches as told by the grandmother at the start of the novel. This in depth exploration of what it means to be a witch within this story set the stage for the surprisingly cold and sadistic actions performed by them. Dahl shows no sympathy for witches and leaves no room for interpreting their personalities. *They* are described as a collective whole, the only differences being their nationalities and the distinction of the "Grand High Witch".

What stuck out to me the most was how alienated the witches are made to appear from "normal" society. Dahl clearly makes witches 'the other' in this story and by doing so makes them utterly terrifying. In describing the witches Grandmother says " A REAL WITCH gets the same pleasure from squelching a child as *you* get from eating a plateful of strawberries and thick cream" (Dahl 4). This line so clearly draws the line between what is normal, human behavior and how a witch would be expected to act. That a witch is supposed to get a delicious pleasure from ridding the world of children, something which most people would find horrifying, is a harrowing and distinctly alienating detail. There are many more of these comparisons which make it so evident that not only are witches inherently bad, that they are so *bad* because they enjoy horrific things that "normal" women or people would be greatly disturbed by.

These details all lead up to the main point that witches are simply not human. Grandmother says "You don't seem to understand that witches are not actually humans . They *look* like humans...But in actual fact, they are totally different animals. They are demons in human shape" (26). I found that because there was no room to interpret whether witches were truly human, there was absolutely no space to empathize with them or consider them as anything but 'the other'. The book is effective because witches become a mutual enemy for the reader and characters within the story. Naturally children will connect more with a child character than with the dastardly witches that terrorize him. However, while reading this book as an older reader, I found it prominent how alienated the witches are *supposed* to be from their audience. We are not supposed to have any feeling other than anger and fear towards the witches and I wondered how this might affect a child's perspective of how they are supposed to treat "the other" - anything that is unknown and scary to them.

I also found myself wondering how this alienation worked with the fact that in this novel witches were only women. Dahl writes "A witch is always a woman. I do not mean to speak badly about women. Most women are lovely. But the fact remains that all witches are women"(5). I do not feel that the purpose of this description was to lash out against women or to prove a point about their personalities. However, I do find it problematic how easily, especially in a child's brain, that dots can be connected between the awful acts of witches and a feeling towards women, especially those who do not fit the particular standard of a society. I doubt that for children, this connection would be as prominent or as meaningful as it is for me, however I do feel that these ideas could be internalized.

I think that deeper in this connection exists the portrayal of the grandmother versus the portrayal of the witches. The grandmother, who has fulfilled an appropriate role for a woman in her life, is kind, gentle and a source of protection for our young narrator. We, as readers are supposed to trust her, and I found myself multiple times wanting the narrator to run into her warm loving embrace and become shielded from the witches. The witches who are described as hating children are so unnatural *because* their life goals are to destroy children, instead of loving and raising them. I wondered while reading if the greater connection could be drawn that witches are so unnatural because they do not fulfill the specific standard of femininity which comes from motherhood and other nurturing characteristics. These are qualities that women are supposed to embody and supposed to want for themselves. The witches in this book do not fit that standard of nurturing and clearly do not want to conform to these standards therefore they are considered unnatural. For me this is where the real harm is in this portrayal; we should be afraid of women who do not elect to fulfill standards of motherhood which ultimately shape the femininity we should *want* to have in our society.

## *Breaking Stereotypes - by Lestra*

Rereading *The Witches* was a shock. This book is scary, violent, and disturbing. I initially read *The Witches* during my Roald Dahl phase as a kid, during which time I did not realize how bizarre his stories were. They sort of made sense in their ridiculousness.

In this book, the main villains are the titular witches; inhuman creatures that look vaguely like women except for their bald heads, toeless feet, clawed hands and blue spit. They are able to blend into society by hiding their true features and intentions. However, their main goal is to exterminate children using their magic. While the magic disconnects them from the acts, these women are murdering children, stripping away lives and potential. This, the protagonist stresses, is their

most terrifying trait. It makes sense, as the ability to bear children is what makes every woman a woman. The fact that these 'women' reject this motherly aspect of female nature immediately others them. They can never be *real* women. While the witches do not conform to the desire of other women to have children, because of this and their murderous tendencies they must conform to other female standards. They must blend in by wearing itchy wigs, pointy shoes, and gloves. They must suppress their true appearances to continue to do what they want. Are the witches empowered because they get to murder children, or are they oppressed because they have to hide their true selves?

Despite the whole 'murdering children thing'. These witches don't seem too bad. They are motivated, they have grit, and they care for each other. Witches, despite their different values and appearances have many traits which are admired in both men and women in our society. Perhaps they are scary because they break down stereotypes, they do not fit into one gender category.

### *Witches Need Empathy, Too* - by Eliza

*The Witches* is a story of internalized dehumanization in a society that refuses to accept nonconformist women. When the grandmother initially describes the witches, she illustrates their ruthlessness, their brutal nature, and their murderous habits. Yet she also details their grisly appearance - an appearance that fails to meet conventional female beauty standards. The witches are bald, and thus must wear itchy wigs to be tolerated in a patriarchal society. They possess square feet and claws, and subsequently must cover these imperfections with tall gloves and cramped, uncomfortable shoes. Evidently, this story is not just about barbaric women; it is also about marginalized, oppressed outcasts who are unable to feel a sense of belonging in their world.

When the narrator encounters a meeting of witches, he inadvertently observes the sense of empowerment and camaraderie they feel in their all-female space. Describing the plight of The Grand High Witch, he writes, "I knew immediately, of course, that this was none other than The Grand High Witch herself. I knew also why she had worn a mask. She could never have moved around in public, let alone book in at a hotel, with her real face. Everyone who saw her would have run away screaming" (67). The narrator's explanation might explain where some of this seemingly young woman's anger stems from. She is unable to be accepted as her true self. The narrator also writes that her voice "filled the room and bounced around the walls" (67) According to this explanation, The Grand High Witch is powerful and competent; positive qualities that are overlooked due to her demonization and status as a witch, including her "dreadful rotting worm-eaten face" (68).

The witches are anxious to find a place of inclusion. Dahl writes that as the meeting of witches began, "everyone in the room was peeling off her gloves" (68). Clearly, the individuals are desperate to feel a sense of belonging; they are *peeling* for acceptance; they are aching for it. As the women are told that they can remove their shoes, the narrator hears a "sigh of relief going up from all the witches in the room as they kicked off their narrow high-heeled shoes.". He then describes their feet as "revolting, as though the toes had been sliced away from the feet with a carving knife" (69). Indeed, these women have been violently stripped of their humanity, as the narrator so accusingly describes. They have evidently faced much abuse and have had to live with the horror of these uncomfortable masks. Finally, they can be free.

Abruptly, the body of witches is told that they can remove their wigs and "get some fresh air into your spotty scalps" (70). Their heads are *literally* suffocating; hidden away; eclipsed under a wig that accommodates the societal standards they are unable to meet. When the women are told that their heads can be alleviated, they release another sigh of relief. They can finally exist without hiding. The narrator writes that "There now appeared...row upon row of bald female heads, a sea of naked scalps, every one of them red and itchy-looking from being rubbed by the linings of the wigs. I simply cannot tell you how awful they were, and somehow the whole sight was made more grotesque because underneath those frightful scabby bald heads, the bodies were dressed in fashionable and rather pretty clothes. It was monstrous. It was unnatural." (70) Though the narrator is judgmental in this moment, he also recognizes that these women are hurting; their heads are "red and itchy," as they have been *physically wounded* by the wigs. Only in their all-witch space can this group feel at peace with their "unnatural" figures. It is a space of empowerment, of acceptance, of inclusion. They need it.

And in terms of the implications of this societal oppression? These women clearly have low self-esteem and feel the need to self deprecate. The Grand High Witch calls the witches "miserable," "useless," "lazy," and "feeble" (71). *Feeble* is interesting because it is a traditionally female insult. They are trying so hard to conform that even their insults fit the male gaze. Society has ignored them, has victimized them, and they have internalized this demonization; quite literally, the witches have *become* the demons that patriarchy wants them to be. These women are malicious toward children because they want to be heard. They are destructive because they need to scream; they need to shout; they need to cry "HEY WORLD, LOOK AT ME. PAY ATTENTION TO ME." For ugly women in this twisted world, nothing else has worked. Maybe all the witches need in order to change their brutal habits is a little bit of empathy.

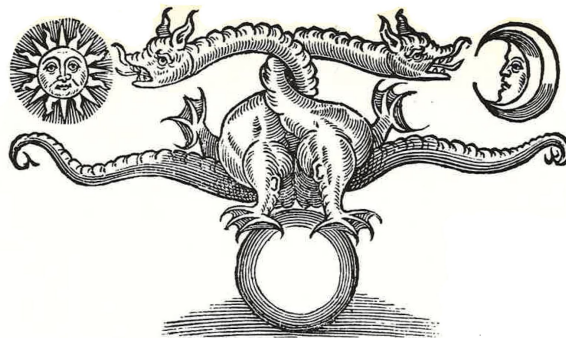


# Cooking: A Modern Form of Alchemy



Witches stand over a cauldron. The potion, a exact combination of ingredients, writhes over the high heat. It is not clear what they are making; only they know. Their final product could turn the tides of war, make a person mad, or create artificial love. They hold the power of the world in their hands.

Today, cooking is not so mystical. Women for centuries have been confined into their domestic sphere, the home. And cooking has evolved from a female skill, a cult, to another form of oppression. Yet although because cooking and domesticity have been used as a way to oppress women, they are not inherently demeaning. Cooking is hard; it is based in math and sciences. It involves making something valuable out of nothing. Cooking should be empowering. And we can make it powerful again. It is time to reclaim cooking and redefine it, not as a vintage form of domestic oppression, but as a modern cult of science, alchemy, and power.



## A Few Runic Recipes

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### Occult French Pancakes

These thin pancakes are compared by many to french crêpes (though slightly thicker). They are a wonderful addition to your Witch's Sabbath.

|          |                |
|----------|----------------|
| 1/2 cup  | Flour          |
| 3 tbl.   | Powdered sugar |
| 1        | Large egg      |
| 1/2 tsp. | Salt           |
| 1/2 cup  | Milk           |

1. Mix dry ingredients
2. Add milk
3. Stir
4. Add egg
5. Beat thoroughly
6. Ladle onto hot griddle with sizzling butter

## Sorcerous Shortbreads

A fun and easy recipe with assured delicious results. Great for every amateur alchemist.

|                  |                                             |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| 1 cup (2 sticks) | Unsalted butter, room temperature           |
| 3/4 cup          | Sifted confectioners' sugar                 |
| 1 tsp.           | Pure vanilla extract                        |
| 2 cups           | Sifted all-purpose flour                    |
| 1/2 tsp.         | Coarse salt                                 |
| 1/2 cup          | (Optional) Finely chopped dried cranberries |

1. Preheat oven to 350°F
2. Put butter, confectioners' sugar, vanilla, flour, and salt in a large mixing bowl. Stir together until combined but not too creamy. Stir in dried cranberries
3. Press dough evenly into an 8-inch square pan. Bake until firm and pale golden. About 30 minutes. Let cool on a rack for 20 minutes.

## Enchanting Apple Crisp

A great fall recipe with a sugary crunchy top. Perfect for midnight gatherings.

|         |                                    |
|---------|------------------------------------|
| 6-8     | Large apples (peel, cut in chunks) |
| 1/3 cup | Sugar                              |
| 1 tsp.  | Cinnamon                           |
| 1/4 cup | Butter                             |
| 1/4 cup | Crisco                             |
| 1 cup   | Dark brown sugar                   |

1. Mix cinnamon and sugar. Mix apples into the cinnamon and sugar
2. Place in a 9x9x2 square pan
3. Mix the rest of the ingredients in a separate bowl and sprinkle them over the top
4. Bake at 350°F for 45 minutes



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# An Interview with YA Fantasy Author: Chris Abouzeid

## 1. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your career!

I'm an author, part-time bookseller, and full-time lover of Middle Grade and Young Adult fiction. I've published one young adult fantasy novel, and am currently finishing up a teen thriller.

## 2. What responsibility do you feel as a male author to subvert patriarchal ideas in your writing?

I feel a tremendous responsibility. I grew up with two smart, strong-willed... older sisters and a very intelligent, energetic mother. Since my father was rarely around, ... most of what I know about the world came from the women in my family. To write stories where women are portrayed as less than me, or as mysterious creatures that can never be trusted or understood, would be a betrayal of those who've helped me most.

## 3. What responsibility do you think YA authors have to empower (and not disempower) their young female readers?

As much as I wish every YA author would create empowering characters and stories, I don't think it's a matter of responsibility. An author unconcerned with female readers or unable to see women in anything but traditional roles is never going to create empowering female characters. An author who cares deeply about these things will automatically strive to make his/her characters and stories as empowering as possible.

The greater responsibility lies with editors and publishers. If they choose books that empower female readers, then that is what will be on the bookshelves. ... Luckily, the male dominated world of publishing is slowly changing over to a female dominated one, at least in children's and YA fiction. So I'm optimistic the number of empowering books will grow.

## 4. What do you think are the qualities of a strong female character in fantasy fiction?

It's always nice to see strength, intelligence, leadership, a warrior spirit, etc. But the most important quality, I think, is complexity. Male fantasy characters are allowed to be short and fat and cowardly and selfish, while also being brave and resourceful (e.g. Bilbo Baggins) ... So why do female fantasy characters always have to be attractive, brilliant and strong? Characters like Katniss Everdeen and Alanna are inspiring, but it's just as important to show that women can be powerful without being perfect. Plump, nerdy heroines, weak, selfish heroines, women who struggle and overcome the odds in a myriad of ways, not just by being beautiful and waving a sword—fantasy fiction needs these characters as much as it needs warrior queens. Otherwise, female characters will continue to be seen as second-class citizens in the world of fiction.

## 5. Why do you think there are so few female characters and people of color in mainstream fantasy fiction?

These are two separate questions, really. There are a lot of female characters in mainstream fantasy fiction. They're just not usually the main character. That is shifting. If you compare the percentage of YA books with female heroines today with the percentage you would have found ten years ago, you can see a huge increase. And in the older end (15-18 years) of YA books there are actually more female main characters than male. Why? Probably because teen girls tend to keep reading, while the number of teen boys reading drops off over time.

As for books with people of color as main characters, the situation is still abysmal. There are almost none in fantasy fiction, and very few in YA fiction in general. There are probably a lot of historical reasons for this, but the main stumbling block still seems to be a lack of diversity in the publishing world ... There are a lot of other factors, of course: who can afford to write, who has had the educational advantages, who has connections, who can afford to buy books, etc. But it would take two or three doctoral theses to go into all that.



# Fantasy Books Featuring LGBTQ Characters

## ● Lesbian/Bisexual Female Characters:

- Circle of Magic by Tamora Pierce
- Huntress & Ash by Malinda Lo
- The Steel Remains by Richard K. Morgan
- Chronicles of Tornor by Elizabeth A. Lynn
- When Women Were Warriors series by Catherine M. Wilson
- The Saga of the Renunciates & Thendara House by Marion Zimmer Bradley
- Lythande by Marion Zimmer Bradley
- Elemental Logic series by Laurie J. Marks

## ● Gay/Bisexual Male Characters:

- Rain Wild Chronicles by Robin Hobb
- The Books of Outremer by Chaz Brenchley
- The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller
- The Tale of the Five Omnibus by Diane Duane
- The Last Herald Mage series by Mercedes Lackey
- Nightrunner series by Lynn Flewelling
- The Steel Remains by Richard K. Morgan
- The Wode Series by J. Tullos Hennig
- Mordred, Bastard Son by Douglas Clegg

## ● Other Sexuality:

- Vows and Honor series by Mercedes Lackey (*asexual female protagonist*)
- The Fire's Stone by Tanya Huff (*features asexual mage princess*)
- Banner of the Damned by Sherwood Smith (*asexual female protagonist*)
- The Deed of Paksenarrion by Elizabeth Moon (*protagonist may be read as asexual*)
- Jacob's Ladder series, Elizabeth Bear (*asexual protagonist*)
- Assorted short stories by Ursula Le Guin (*polyamorous marriages*)

## ● Gender Non-Binary and Transgender Characters:

- Farseer Trilogy by Robin Hobb (*gender non-binary major character*)
- Eon series by Alison Goodman (*trans woman as side character*)
- Bloodhound by Tamora Pierce (*features a trans woman*)
- The Bone Palace by Amanda Downum (*major trans female character*)
- A Story of the First History series by Mary Gentle (*gender non-binary protagonist*)
- Children of the Triad series by Laurie J. Marks (*gender-neutral character*)
- Micah Grey series by Laura Lam (*bisexual intersex male protagonist*)
- The Drowning Girl by Caitlín R. Kiernan (*protagonist has transgender girlfriend*)

Find more fantasy books featuring LGBT characters at [perplexingly.tumblr.com/bookrec](http://perplexingly.tumblr.com/bookrec)



# Reading List

OUR FAVORITE FANTASY & SCI-FI BOOKS FEATURING POWERFUL WOMEN

*Graceling* by Kristin Cashore

*Wicked* by Gregory Maguire

*The Goose Girl* by Shannon Hale

*Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling

The *Alanna* series by Tamora Pierce

*Circle of Magic* series by Tamora Pierce

*A Wrinkle In Time* by Madeleine L'Engle

*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

*The Country of Ice Cream Star* by Sandra Newman

*The Olympians* graphic novels by George O'Connor

## Other Recommendations

NON-LITERARY FAVORITES

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

A TV series starring a teen girl who uses her powers to subvert evil vampires and the patriarchy.

*Game of Thrones*

Based on a book series, this TV show centers around seven kingdoms containing strong women.

*Orphan Black*

A TV series starring 12 clones, all of whom are strong, complex, and deeply flawed women.

*Once Upon A Time*

A TV series featuring childhood feminist fairy-tale characters struggling to survive in our world.

*The Hex Girls*

A powerful, talented, all-witch eco-goth rock band in Scooby Doo.

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No witches were harmed in the making of this zine



