

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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In this thesis, I discuss the uses of two different forms of young adult novels for relaying messages about adolescence and femininity to adolescents from adult authors. I explore the traditional and organized quest narrative as written by Anne McCaffrey in her Harper Hall Trilogy with a young female hero. The requirements for the quest make the hero both isolated and above average, which in turn causes the hero to portray a complicated view of femininity and a linear adaptation of the adolescent journey. I then discuss the requirements and allowances of realism in Carolyn Mackler's *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things*. The result of the realistic novel for young adults is proof that there is no clearly defined reality, adolescent path, or femininity. The protagonist is left to choose her own definitions and manipulate what she sees and hears from others. I conclude that the form of the novel directly dictates the wisdom passed from adult to adolescent, and the explanation of the adolescent journey for young women differs as a direct result of form.

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A Form with a Message:
Didacticism, Adolescence, and Femininity in Young Adult Novels

by
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Mattie R. Davenport, Author

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A FORM WITH A MESSAGE: DIDACTICISM, ADOLESCENCE, AND FEMININITY IN YOUNG ADULT

INTRODUCTION

The genre of young adult literature is often overlooked by scholars. The audience usually grows out of it, and writers of young adult literature rarely reach academic esteem. However, young adult literature is a thriving market popular in book stores since *The Catcher in the Rye*. Similarly, the adolescent condition has been increasingly researched by fascinated psychologists, with something of a movement in psychology for adolescents culminating in the 1990's. Literature written for adolescents is of utmost importance because that is one of the ways adults can reach adolescents to teach them the ways of the world. However, every adult has a different perception of how an adolescent should grow up or who an adolescent should become once he or she reaches adulthood. Also, since most adolescent literature is written by adults, the authors are removed from the condition of adolescence and view it retrospectively. They may have forgotten how adolescence feels, or they may see it differently as an adult than they did in their teens. In this thesis, I not only want to know who is writing for young adults (mature adults), but I also want to know what is being taught through these books and how the information is being relayed. Understanding that these novels may play a role in helping young women to mature, it is important for teachers, parents, and communities to know that what is written for young adults carries a message for the younger generation. It is for these reasons that I choose to study how the forms of the quest narrative and social

realism affect the didacticism of the novels both for the adolescent reader and for the feminist reader.

An issue with authors of young adult literature is that they are writing for a generation that is not their own. While anyone can talk to adolescents to find out what is interesting or what concerns them, there is no way to fully identify with a different generation. It is thus impossible to study young adult literature as if I were a young adult. Because of this rift between the researcher and the researched, there is very little discussion of reader response in this study. Much like my problems in studying this genre as an adult, what I have come across in young adult literature is that the authors try to impress upon their readers their generational opinions of femininity and adulthood. Most young adult novels are an adult's advice to children on their way to adulthood. Novels where the authors try to appear entirely adolescent seem forced and somewhat foolish. Thus, like most media, young adult literature is written by the older generation for the younger generation's consumption. The ideas in young adult novels are, therefore, often asynchronous with the growing generation's ideas. There exists a disconnect between what is written *for* adolescents and what is the reality of adolescence presently. For instance, what Anne McCaffrey (an author studied in this thesis) writes for her readers carries her ideals and beliefs about femininity and growing up from what she remembers as an adolescent and what she sees in the adolescents she writes for, but her advice and observations may not be relevant to a younger generation. However, there are some things, like the quest narrative McCaffrey uses to convey her message, that are internalized for all generations and can therefore cross the boundaries of age.

Anne McCaffrey's Harper Hall Trilogy consists of *Dragonsong*, *Dragonsinger*, and *Dragondrums*. The first two novels are step-by-step quest narratives, each of which require Menolly, the lead character, to grow both mentally and physically in her isolation as a hero (necessary for a quest). Menolly fights her way through physical and social trials while she tries to gain respect as a woman who loves to play music but is forbidden to do so by her current community. This is relevant to McCaffrey's feminist and adolescent agenda because Menolly is forbidden to use her voice, and she must discover her strength and the capacity to use her voice to change opinions. In the first chapter, I explore how the tradition of the quest in the trilogy forces Menolly into specific roles and actions that are an ancient yet steadfast tradition of quests, and McCaffrey adheres to them closely. The third book in the trilogy covers the aftermath of Menolly's quests and portrays the passing of the heroic torch to a new hero, as per the perpetuation of the quest. For the purposes of explaining and detailing the necessities of the quest, I turn to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

McCaffrey's texts, although written in the late seventies and early eighties, are still read because they are not entirely obsolete. The quest narrative and fantasy world keep the characters and story from showing obvious trends from the seventies. However, another problem with studying young adult literature is that it is often fleeting. What is popular for one group of adolescents is often considered old news to the next group. There are a few novels that withstand the rapid turn-around for young adult literature (*The Giver*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Outsiders*, for instance), but most books

enjoy much less time in popularity. In fact, upon talking with local librarians¹, I found the staff generally does not keep books for long, and their webpage constantly rotates the most popular books (the latest vampire books change almost weekly). The next book in this study contains elements specific to present-day adolescents. The details in the story are specific and realistic to readers only for a specific period of time before they become obsolete. The price to pay for writing a realistic fiction is that it is not realistic for long. However, the temporal nature of such young adult literature is not grounds for its dismissal. It is Carolyn Mackler's attempt to depict adolescence at this historical moment that makes her worth studying. Mackler is a part of the constant battle to appeal to adolescents through use of "real" world descriptions and situations.

The second chapter discusses Carolyn Mackler's *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things*. While parts of Mackler's novel are realistic, I explain that through the guise of realism, Mackler shows her readers that there is no such thing as "real." Virginia, the lead character, narrates through observation, which is integral to realism, but she is also a participant, so her subjective observations are far from fact. Her perceptions about the perceptions of others lead the reader through a maze of different realities in what seems at first a fairly believable novel. In this way, Mackler manipulates the idea of realism to show that to an adolescent, there are many realities and sources for reality. One of the biggest false realities for Virginia is consumerist culture. The novel consistently appeals to the capitalist nature of media and portrays a world of images and advertising no doubt familiar to the present-day reader. For this chapter, initial concepts

¹ Many thanks to the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library.

of realism are given by George Becker's *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* and Lilian Furst's *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction*.

In each chapter, I discuss how the respective books portray adolescence. For instance, in the Harper Hall Trilogy, adolescence is a quest or a journey. In Mackler's novel, adolescence is a state of receiving and creating reality. I question whether or not the books empower adolescents and how. Also, I explore how the forms of the novels contribute to the portrayal of adolescence and the didacticism from the authors in choosing such forms. In essence, I want to know how the authors try to help the readers grow up.

Part of the process of growing up for girls involves recognizing gender roles and deciding what is true, real, and logical for women. While young men have to go through the same process of finding identity through already-fabricated molds of gender, the books in this study either foreground a female character or focus on the condition of females through adolescence. For any adolescent, gender identity takes a major role in the overall identity of the individual, and young adult novels often address the issues of forming an identity in spite of, in accordance with, or because of gender. Therefore, a section is reserved in each chapter to discuss the aspects of femininity in the novels as it relates to the forms of the novels. I have three questions for each author as criteria for judging how femininity is handled:

1. Does the story empower women?
2. Does it promote equality?
3. How is femininity portrayed?

I ask these questions of each of the authors, and I find that depending on the form of the novels, the answers change.

CHAPTER I

THE HARPER HALL TRILOGY

The quest narrative is by no means new to literature. The quest is an archetypal story told and retold by countless generations and diverse civilizations and cultures. The quest is a story understood and related to by all. The basic structure is also easy, even natural, to replicate and reuse. Despite the often fantastical elements in quests, Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, explains the quest narrative is applicable to anyone who hears it:

The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale. Therefore it is formulated in the broadest terms. The individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls. Who and where are his ogres? Those are the reflections of the unsolved enigmas of his own humanity. What are his ideals? Those are the symptoms of his grasp of life. (121)²

In a grand sense, the quest portrays step-by-step account of a human life, and the human in question is always isolated, always her own hero. Thus, the authors of quests are taking the processes of life and using them as fuel for mythical heroes and imaginative journeys. While the quest is indeed common, there are several conditions that must exist

² Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973. (All subsequent references will be page references only. See Bibliography for the list of references)

in a story to propel it into a quest, and still other conditions to ensure it continues. Campbell outlines these conditions and requirements for a quest, and they will be discussed and exemplified within this chapter.

As an example of quest, I have chosen three books written for young adults by fantasy and science fiction writer Anne McCaffrey. The first two books, *Dragonsong* and *Dragonsinger*, display two quests with different intents yet similar patterns. The third book, *Dragondrums*, is for the hero a post-quest resolution following Campbell's template for the hero's return and perpetuation. As far as young adult literature is concerned, the setting of the books provides entertainment for young adults seeking escapism, yet the quest narrative details the steps adolescents might take as a process for finding themselves, their place in society, and their adulthood. For girls, this trilogy displays persistence in the place of sexism and gender stereotypes. Menolly, the hero, must surmount the obstacles in her path, most of which stem from her or others' perceptions of gender, in order to secure her place among the pantheon of heroes on her planet.

The latter half of this chapter is a critical look at McCaffrey's use of the quest as it pertains to didacticism for young adult growth and femininity. I question what the Harper Hall Trilogy teaches about adolescence through the necessary conditions of the quest narrative and what promises the trilogy makes for adolescents on a quest for adulthood or, simply, survival within the adolescent condition. Then, I question what the books teach about femininity. Do they empower women? Do they promote equality? Is femininity promoted positively? In short, what does the quest narrative in McCaffrey's

Harper Hall Trilogy say about the conditions of adolescence and femininity? After investigating the books based on the above criteria, I believe the quest narrative is a good way of showing adolescents that growing up is a transitional journey with steps toward completion (although growing up never really ends). However, whether or not the books carry a feminist agenda is not entirely clear, as McCaffrey does empower women, but only a certain kind of woman who answers the call for the quest.

The Harper Hall Trilogy as Quest Narratives

Anne McCaffrey's Harper Hall Trilogy follows a clear quest format as suggested by Joseph Campbell. She includes the necessary elements for the plot to be driven twice into the quest narrative and at the end into a post-quest narrative. The two quests mentioned in the introduction are quests for different things; they still follow the same path. Menolly's first quest in *Dragonsong* is to further isolate and understand herself, and the second in *Dragonsinger* is to, despite her isolation, become a part of a society of like-minded people.

The first requirement for a quest narrative is, obviously, the requirement for a quest. Something in the hero's life or society is unbearable to the point where the hero leaves; "the familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (Campbell 52). At this pre-quest point, the hero recognizes her isolation and recognizes she does not fit in with the present condition. In Menolly's case, she does not fit into her community at Half-Circle Sea Hold in *Dragonsong*. Menolly is in appearance and

physical ability much like a boy. Within the first pages, her inability to fit in becomes apparent to the reader: “Menolly was only a girl: too tall and lanky to be a proper girl at that” (1). McCaffrey introduces the reader to Menolly by saying that she is not “a proper girl,” which begins to explain physical expectations of women in Menolly’s community. Girls are supposed to be small, fragile, and proportionate in order to look proper. Menolly’s lanky appearance, although it could be contributed merely to adolescence (she is fifteen years old), is seen as a negative attribute and therefore makes her improper as far as feminine appearance is concerned. Even by the first page, Menolly is an outsider to these expectations through no fault of her own. Sella, Menolly’s sister, reminds Menolly “that she was only a girl, too big for a proper girl, and the youngest of a large family, therefore of least account” (37). Her appearance and her age, things she cannot control, make her an improper and insignificant girl in the eyes of Half-Circle.

Menolly’s issues in *Dragonsong* are essential for her character development as a hero. As Campbell claims, the hero has either outgrown (Menolly is physically too tall) or no longer fits into the current community. Menolly’s talent for music also serves as a reason for her to leave. Despite her abilities, her surrounding community (and Menolly, as well) thinks because she is female, she cannot play music. She argues with her teacher:

“Women can’t be harpers,” she’d said to Petiron, astonished and awed.

“One in ten hundred have perfect pitch,” Petiron had said in one of his evasive replies. “One in ten thousand can build an acceptable melody with meaningful words. Were you only a lad, there’d be no problem at all.”

“Well, we’re stuck with me being a girl.”

“You’d make a fine strong lad, you would,” Petiron had replied exasperatingly.

“And what’s wrong with being a fine big strong girl?”
(*Dragonsong* 4)

The combined problems of her appearance, age, and capabilities create an atmosphere conducive to a quest. Menolly is not happy where she is, she is not herself at home, and she must leave Half-Circle in order to shed her unhappiness. McCaffrey sets up the quest in *Dragonsong* with Menolly’s awkwardness as a “proper girl” and her inability to practice music without reprimand.

In *Dragonsinger*, the pre-quest conditions take a much shorter time to mature. Also, the decision that she does not belong in her home community comes from others instead of Menolly. At the end of *Dragonsong*, Menolly stays at Benden Weyr for a time. However, Masterharper Robinton insists, ““Lessa will not tolerate *nine singing* fire lizards in her Weyr,”” and he claims that the place for Menolly is Harper Hall (*Dragonsong* 175). Robinton assists Menolly in realizing that where she resides right now is not the best place for her, which, again, sets the stage for another quest as the previous one ends. It is necessary for Menolly to realize she is out of place and must embark on another quest in order to reach her potential. Robinton serves as a catalyst for Menolly’s next quest. *Dragonsinger* begins with Menolly “crossing the threshold” into her quest to find a place for herself in Harper Hall.

Starting the quest is never easy for the hero. Often the possible obstacles or dangers outside of the hero’s home serve as deterrents, and many would-be heroes never make it to the first steps of the quest. Campbell explains, “The usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds, and popular belief gives

him every reason to fear so much as the first step into the unexplored” (78). Menolly must twice, once for each book, decide that leaving the protection of the familiar is necessary. Campbell’s “threshold” is the moment when the hero must stand in between the two worlds of home and quest, where “beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant” (77). For Menolly, this is the exact case of her first threshold. She decides to leave her parents, who forbid her from practicing music and teaching the children. Although she seems content in leaving her parents, there exists also the threat of Thread (a natural threat from the outside), which strikes fear in the hearts of Menolly’s community. The required obstacle of Thread creates unbreakable rules for maintaining order and safety for all community members. Menolly not only leaves her family behind as she walks through the doors of the Hold for the last time; she also breaks the rules of safety upheld by everyone else in the society. As Menolly realizes she is not going to stay in her Hold any longer, she muses, “where would she go when there was Thread in the skies? [...] Why, everyone had to return to the Hold at night! The Hold, any hold or cot or weyr. Seven Turns had Thread been dropping from the skies, and no one had travelled far from shelter” (65). Menolly weighs and considers the validity of the rules for returning to the Hold and whether or not they are actually necessary. What she decides is she would rather risk the danger of being caught out during Thread than go back to her community. Based on what has been said of Thread and the fears within society, Menolly’s decision seems much more desperate. Her decision is necessary for her label as hero and for the plot of the quest. Heroes do not stay in the comfort of their homes. Menolly braves what is seen

by her community as insurmountable and certain death. Her decision to leave the comfort of home for the uncertainty of the wilderness is the quest-related instance of “crossing the threshold.”

In *Dragonsinger*, crossing the threshold results in an assisted action. Because the quest in *Dragonsinger* is more about Menolly as an individual learning to coexist with other individuals instead of the previous quest about embracing and understanding her individuality, Menolly must decide she needs to join a group of people. Menolly is familiar with the way of life at Benden Weyr at the end of *Dragonson*. Although a different place, her role would be recognizable and easy for her there. She would probably assist the other women in cooking, cleaning, and tending to the myriad of household chores. To begin the next quest at Harper Hall, it is necessary for Menolly not to settle into her life at Benden and instead opt for the unfamiliar life at Harper Hall. She does not know the life of an apprentice, her role when she gets there, and she does not know how to interact with a large group of musicians. In her book on adolescent literature, Roberta Seelinger-Trites notes, “For some characters, self-reliance and a refusal to silence their inner voices strengthen their public voices. [...] Often characters recognize the dialogic nature of voice: their voices exist only in dialogues with other people” (48). That is Menolly’s quest in *Dragonsinger*. The act of crossing the threshold in this novel requires Menolly be willing to add her voice to the conversation currently going on at Harper Hall. She must understand that her voice is worth sharing, and although Harper Hall is new for her, she belongs there. A friendly dragonrider reminds Menolly she is ready to cross the threshold into the next quest: ““you’ve lived holdless,

outrun Thread, and Impressed nine fire lizards. What's to fear from harpers?"

(*Dragonsinger* 4). Although Menolly is certainly afraid of moving to a new place and trying to make friends with new people, she must go to Harper Hall so she can contribute her voice and continue her quest as a hero.

The main part of all quests is the “road of trials.” As Campbell explains, “dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed—again, again, and again. Meanwhile there will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies, and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land” (109). Of course, dragons are good in the Harper Hall Trilogy, but the concept remains: Menolly must struggle through the gauntlet of physical and mental difficulties in order to maintain her hero status and continue with her quest. In *Dragonsong*, Menolly’s road of trials begins as she leaves the comfort of home and ventures into the wilderness. In learning to care for her nine young fire lizards by herself, Menolly learns that she can live holdless and rely on her own strengths to survive:

As the days went by their appetite drove Menolly to lengths she wouldn’t have attempted for her own comfort. The result was that she was kept entirely too busy to feel either sorry for or apprehensive about herself. Her friends had to be fed, comforted and amused. She also had to be fed, comforted and amused. She also had to supply her own needs—as far as she was able—and she was able to do a lot more than she’d suspected she could. In fact, she began to wonder about a lot of things the Hold took for granted.

She had automatically assumed, as she supposed everyone did, that to be caught without shelter during Threadfall was tantamount to dying. No one had ever correlated the fact that the dragonriders cleared most of the Thread from the skies before it fell—that was the whole point of having dragons—with the idea that as a result there was very little Thread to fall on the unsheltered. Hold thinking had hardened into an inflexible rule—to have no shelter during Threadfall was to experience death. (85-86)

Menolly experiences many difficulties as a necessity of being a hero on a quest. By the end of her trials, she cares for herself and nine child-like animals. Her independence and self-sufficiency are solidified by her capabilities in the wilderness. Thus, the road of trials in *Dragonsong* is where Menolly gains and practices her independence. Although she was isolated before in her Hold and is isolated for the rest of the trilogy as a requirement of being a hero, she uses her isolation as a means of introspection once she steps out on her own. Because of her independence, she looks back at her home and realizes the things the non-heroes held as important do not mean as much as she thought. The culturally accepted beliefs (like the danger of Thread and the weakness of women) she unquestioningly adhered to throughout her childhood are wrong. In learning to care for her fire lizards and herself, Menolly discovers she can venture beyond “the narrow outlook and straightened thinking of the isolated group” and, relying only upon her wits and strengths, survive quite well on her own (*Dragonsong* 79). The “road of trials” in *Dragonsong* frees Menolly from the physical boundaries of society and the mental grip of societal expectations.

McCaffrey continues this tradition of a coming-of-age quest in *Dragonsinger*. Menolly thinks much of the time she is not worthy of a position as musician either because of her gender or her ability. She claims at the beginning of the book, “what could a girl, even one who had taught her Hold’s youngsters their Teaching Songs and Ballads, do at a Harper Hall from which all teaching songs originated?” (2). Although the other girls at Harper Hall contribute to Menolly’s road of trials by bullying her and spreading rumors, much of Menolly’s problems stem from her own mind. Menolly must

learn to rethink the way she thinks about herself to succeed in this quest. Thus, according to Campbell, “the agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth. Art, literature, myth and cult, philosophy and ascetic disciplines are instruments to help the individual past his limiting horizons into spheres of ever-expanding realization” (190). A necessity of the quest is for the hero to grow mentally, much like Menolly does in the first book, and music, her art, is a constant aid in her self-expression and growth. McCaffrey ensures Menolly discovers through her love of music that she is capable of doing all of the things previously reserved only for men.

Unlike the first book, though, Menolly does not alter her thinking on her own. In *Dragonsinger*'s road of trials, “the hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region” (Campbell 97). Before her quest in *Dragonsinger*, Menolly meets Masterharper Robinton, who pushes her towards the quest to begin with. Later, he assures her, ““You’re overyoung to appreciate the value of nuisance”” (*Dragonsinger* 21). While this seems cryptic to Menolly at the time, this advice foreshadows much of the following road of trials. She is a nuisance to many people in Harper Hall (the young girls, the woman in charge of the girls, several old harpers), and her quest is to surmount the feeling of isolation she feels as a nuisance to others and find a place for herself in Harper Hall. In realizing she need not please everyone, Menolly grows as an individual and becomes more able to function in a community of other individuals—some like her, and some do not, but what matters is that Menolly becomes a functioning adult as a result of her quest.

In keeping with the theme of isolation necessary for the hero on a quest, Menolly is isolated from fully joining any one group at Harper Hall. The most obvious form of isolation occurs whenever Menolly tries to interact with the females in the novel. Menolly recalls and questions her friend's advice from earlier: "There might be nothing to fear from harpers, but the women in the Harper Hall were certainly possible enemies" (105). When she arrives, no place exists for her in the Harper Hall community. There have never been any female harpers, and the only girls at Harper Hall are paying students, not apprentices (they are not talented enough to be there for free). The other girls bully Menolly because she is brighter and far more talented than they are. Since she is not a student, but there are no other female apprentices, Menolly is isolated and singled-out as atypical. McCaffrey therefore continues to encourage the lone hero on a quest. As in *Dragonsong*, Menolly is described here as much more rugged and rough than the other girls at Harper Hall. A young woman of action rather than words, she tends to solve feuds not by discussion or subversion via rumors or gossip, but by physical action. She consistently proves the girls' rumors wrong by her innocent and honest actions. More strikingly, she finishes the feud between herself and Pona, the most powerful of the girls, with a fistfight. Pona tries to tell a merchant that Menolly has stolen the money the Masterharpers gave to Menolly. The insult is too much for Menolly. Rather than let Pona soil her reputation, Menolly physically wrestles with Pona and her entourage (*Dragonsinger* 190). Menolly's isolation from the girls and her difference in talent and behavior not only isolate her and set her apart as a hero with a road of trials involving social interaction, but also fuels the plot for the end result and the lesson of the

story. When Menolly arrives at Harper Hall, the male inhabitants “put the girls in an inferior category” (*Dragonsinger* 47). However, Menolly, the isolated hero, shows that girls are worth a chance and deserve an equal place in society to men. It is necessary for the quest that Menolly not be a part of the greater population of girls at Harper Hall. She is set apart from them in order to show the isolation and extraordinary traits of the hero. Menolly is there to show the community not only her own power, but the potential power of women.

After the road of trials, the quest must reach some sort of resolution. The hero “still must return with his life-transmuting trophy” (Campbell 193). In paraphrase, the hero must share whatever she has found/discovered/won during the road of trials with the community awaiting her return. This happens in the first two novels in much the same way, but with different results.

In *Dragonsong*, Menolly is rescued from the wilderness during a Threadfall by a dragonrider. The dragonrider, in essence, stops Menolly’s “road of trials” and brings her back to the world of humans. Were it not for the events necessitating her return, Menolly’s trials could go on and on and she could live in a cave until her death. If that were the case, she would be no hero—just a hermit. Deliverance from Thread propels the story further into the quest narrative. Campbell claims this is a common way for quests to turn: “The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him” (207). When the dragonrider delivers Menolly safely to Benden Weyr, Menolly says, “I can’t thank you enough for finding me. I thought Thread would get me” (*Dragonsong* 110).

Here, McCaffrey manipulates the quest narrative. It seems that T'gran, the dragonrider, serves as a temporary hero for Menolly. He "finds" her and rescues her from possible death. Although he is not on a quest that the reader is aware of, he becomes the one who is bringing a boon back to the world. This could be a different definition of "hero" than is described by Campbell. T'gran as a hero is flying around doing good deeds and saving people. Menolly is a hero on a mission, a trajectory toward an ultimate end. While T'gran may be a hero in the way soldiers and fire fighters are heroes, Menolly is a hero as Beowulf or Frodo are heroes. And, as is often the case in quests, the hero must be rescued or pulled out of the road of trials by a hero from the outside.

The rescue from without is important for McCaffrey's quest plot. T'gran represents the pull of society, and Menolly, the isolated hero, returns to society after living in physical isolation so she can share what she gained from her road of trials. She emerges with confidence in herself and knowledge of how to live on her own and care for fire lizards, which become a valuable commodity on Pern. She finds throughout the next book that what she gained can be used to benefit society and help her find a place where she can practice music and contribute to the needs of the community. This return from the quest fortuitously leaves Menolly in a position for the quest to come in *Dragonsinger*. What she gains in *Dragonson* (her independence, knowledge of fire lizards, and stronger musical skills) will be integral to the plot of the quest in the next novel.

After Menolly shows the girls in *Dragonsinger* she does not need to behave like them to succeed socially at Harper Hall, and after she shows the Masters she is talented enough to deserve the honor of studying there, she crosses the "return threshold" from

apprentice to journeyman. The initiation ceremony for becoming a journeyman requires walking from one set of dining tables to another. She is helped, literally, to walk from one life to another by her friends at Harper Hall. This accomplishment means she moves hierarchically within the Harper Hall system and is now above the girls who bullied her and closer to a colleague to the men who teach her. The end of the quest is not Menolly's mastery of the system, but rather her mastery of learning to adapt to the system.

McCaffrey, in leaving room for improvement by the end of Menolly's quest (she is not yet a harper), lets her readers know this is a lifetime effort. There are small victories, like Menolly's promotion, but each victory brings new trials where others have been conquered. She now knows she can do whatever she must to succeed. She exclaims as she stumbles from one table to another, "I can walk, [...] I've even got harper boots. I can walk anywhere!" (*Dragonsinger* 239). With the skills and courage she has gained in her previous two quests, Menolly is confident she can tackle whatever comes next. She makes an impression on everyone in Harper Hall, and her readers will likely notice that her success is due to being true to herself while still being kind and open to the help and encouragement from others. As for the other girls and the old harpers, they are necessary to the structure of the quest. They are the trials Menolly must face in order to be a hero, and she will likely encounter them throughout her life.

An explanation of what happens in *Dragondrums* requires some retrospective. In Pern's history, men and women dragonriders were employed to keep Pern safe from Thread. However, for a lengthy period of time, Thread did not fall. Thus, the dragonriders were forgotten and disregarded. Thread, of course, returned with the

Pernese ill-prepared for the fall. Thankfully, one queen dragon egg remained and Lessa, “a strong woman,” became the queen’s rider. Lessa discovered that she could teleport through time to the past to collect dragons and riders from the time when Thread stopped falling (*Dragonsong* xi-xiii). Lessa is the most recent hero of Pern. Joseph Campbell notes, “The boon brought from the transcendent deep becomes quickly rationalized into nonentity, and the need becomes great for another hero to refresh the world” (218). For the time that Thread did not fall, the people of Pern did not appreciate or actively remember the dragons and their riders. They chose not to persist in sustaining the heroes who kept Pern safe for centuries. Lessa, then, became the necessary reincarnation of the hero who is not only the new hero, but also the bringer of more heroes. Pern therefore experiences heroes not only as dying and reborn, but also crossing the boundaries of time altogether. This theme of the ebb and flow of heroes recurs throughout the trilogy. It may be a result of the passing of time and generations, but it is also a perpetuation of the quest and hero legacy. As society forgets one type of hero, like the dragonriders, a new one takes his or her place and re-educates the community of the need for a hero and the benefits of heroism. Menolly is the hero for her generation and her demographic. Although not a dragonrider, she is a hero for musicians and women, and her gift to the planet is her voice. Piemur takes a place as the next reincarnation of the hero, and Menolly is there to guide him through his quest, as perhaps knowledge of Lessa, the female dragonrider, encouraged Menolly when she decided to cross the threshold.

The evidence that Menolly is no longer on a traditional quest in *Dragondrums* begins with her relationship to Sebell, a fellow journeyman. When Robinton tells Piemur

he will be working for Menolly and Sebell, Piemur replies, ““Menolly *and* Sebell?”” Menolly puts a stop to Piemur’s assumptions: ““I’m not sure I care for that emphasis,” said Menolly in a mock growl, subsiding as the Harper threw her a quieting glance” (11). Piemur’s comment is, of course, an allusion to Menolly and Sebell as more than just friends. This is a part of Menolly’s life still confusing for her. While she has reached a position of authority and lives her dreams as a harper, she never once mentioned love or desire for a man in the previous two books. The only emotions present toward males in *Dragonsong* or *Dragonsinger* are jealousy, resentment, or respect. Her quest required isolation, and in her isolation, she could not seek a relationship too intimate as to open her up to others. It was necessary for Menolly to be alone during her individual roads of trials, and while she receives help from others, she does not have a partner in either of the first two books. The relationship between Menolly and Sebell is often awkward, but Menolly moves in the direction of partnership.

Menolly is in a state of becoming “master of both worlds” according to Campbell, who explains,

Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back—not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other—is the talent of the master. (229)

While Campbell’s definition applies to heroes who have gone into another world and come back successfully, Menolly participates in several quests and masters many skills. She lives in and experiences many worlds: the Sea Hold, the wild, Harper Hall as an apprentice, and now the wide world of the travelling harper. However, she does not

move from one to the other without bringing one *into* the other. The worlds Menolly experiences are mixed together to create the person she is in *Dragondrums*. Her position requires she know how to navigate a boat, which she learned as a young girl. Although she trains as an adult to perform music, her skills from her past come in handy when she helps Sebell, who does not have a good sea sense when they embark on a journey to the Southern Continent to find Piemur: “The ominous creak of the boom swinging across the cockpit warned [Menolly] just in time to pull him back against her” (*Dragondrums* 177). She must also know about fire lizards and surviving in the wild for the adventure she embarks on for the sake of Piemur. As a harper, she needs the skills she learns at Harper Hall for her job; she has clearly mastered those:

Her voice was richer now, Piemur notices with a critical ear, the tone better sustained. He couldn't fault her musical phrasing. Nor should he be able to after three Turns of severe instruction by Master Shonegar. Her voice was so admirably suited to the songs she sang, he thought, and more expressive than many singers who had even better natural voices. As often as Piemur had heard the “Fire Lizard Song,” he found himself listening as intently as ever. When the song ended, he applauded as vigorously as everyone else, only then aware that he had been equally captivated. Putting words to music was not Menolly's only talent; she put her music in the hearts and minds of her listeners, too. (58)

So, Menolly manages to come out of her quest to share her discoveries through song with the people of the planet. Her mastery of several worlds allows her not only to be a well-rounded individual, but she also possesses skills in a combination few other individuals boast on Pern. Most people are taught a specific skill or trade, and they practice that for the rest of their lives. Menolly's quests have given her skills to make her competitive in many areas.

The fact that Menolly is a master of several worlds in the final book decreases the chances of her embarking on yet another quest for self. She continues to grow, but she no longer needs isolation in order to sort herself out or create a place for herself. After her adventure with Sebell to find Piemur on the Southern Continent, Menolly results as roughly the same person she was before she left. Instead, her previous quests live on in Piemur, who is now the age Menolly was when she went on her quests. On several occasions as Piemur scrambles out in the wild, he remembers what Menolly said to him about living on her own. Her voice in his head tells him fishing tips (142-143), how to gut fish, how to make oil for his fire lizard's hide (145), how to behave when his fire lizard hatches (147), and what to feed her (149). This is again an example of Campbell's notion that heroes are reborn and the quest story relived. Menolly passes the initiation into a community and develops the skills to navigate through nearly any societal issue, but Piemur has begun his initiation quest and can use what he knows of Menolly's life to aid him on the Southern Continent. This final book also ensures the quest narrative is not exclusive to males or females. While Menolly's trials are particular in some aspects to those of oppressed women, Piemur appears young and lost, much like Menolly in *Dragonsong* and *Dragonsinger*. Thus, *Dragondrums* appeals to adolescents of both sexes as a quest into adulthood and independence.

The Adolescent Journey

The quest format is an analog of the journey of an adolescent. In fact, many quest stories throughout time involved a boy becoming a man by the end of his quest. It

appears often as a type of initiation story into adulthood. The quest is portrayed in a linear fashion where one stage must happen in order for the other to happen. For instance, if Menolly were happy with her life at Half-Circle Sea Hold, she would never have felt the need to cross the threshold into the unknown. If she were not rescued from Thread by T'gran, she would never be able to share her experience with others or become a part of society. If she did not agree to go to Harper Hall, then she would stay at Benden and never learn to play the music that she loves. If the girls and the teachers were not cruel to her at times, then she would not work so hard to prove them wrong and be one of the strongest journeymen at Harper Hall. All of the stages are conditional, and all of the stages are required. When compared to the journey of adolescence, the quest is quite similar. Adolescence is by nature an uncomfortable time in a person's life, both physically and mentally. Although adolescents have no choice as to whether or not they embark on this quest, they move forward through the discomfort of the unknown. The "road of trials" portion of adolescence differs with each individual, and again hearkens back to the quest narrative. Isolation is a common feeling among adolescents, and the time during adolescence is spent finding identities, trying them on, and deciding what fits best. Just as Menolly needs isolation in order to perform as a hero, adolescents must be isolated in order to think through the social expectations of them and decide how to rejoin society after the road of trials. Ideally, young men and women emerge from adolescence (either on their own or with the help of an adult guide) adjusted adults capable of contributing to the community. Perhaps, like Menolly, they become comfortable with other people and trust others enough to form intimate relationships.

McCaffrey uses the quest narrative as a didactic tool for teaching young adults that adolescence is a linear quest or journey. Just like some of the adults in the Harper Hall Trilogy, like Sebell and Masterharper Robinton, serve as guides and assistants for Menolly's growth, McCaffrey attempts the role of guide for adolescents who read her book. She, as an adult who survived adolescence, passes down her wisdom for the younger generation. In the trajectory of the quest from isolation to intimacy, McCaffrey encourages that the end result of adolescence is not only a voice, but a voice empowering more than the self. Roberta Seelinger-Trites suggests,

The literature of the fantastic for young adults covers the same emotional territory as historical and contemporary fiction, exploring issues of voice, autonomy, and empowerment in as much depth as more realistic young adult literature. Like these other genres it attempts to mediate between the needs of the self and those of the community. (128)

Menolly's first quest begins with her lack of agency in her family, then moves to a search for independence, then results in her empowerment in knowing what she can accomplish on her own. The second quest refines her voice for public consumption and contribution. So, what McCaffrey teaches in her quest narrative (often used in "literature of the fantastic") is adolescents will eventually reach a point where they become heard and understood, and reaching that point takes work and perseverance.

Therefore, a final point McCaffrey teaches with Menolly as the hero is persistence. Menolly must refuse to give up on her quests. At times, it seems there exists no other option but to move forward, and this is no mistake from McCaffrey. Adolescence is not a choice. Whether the child is ready or not, or whether the young adult wants to stop or continue to grow, they must keep pushing through to adulthood.

Menolly cannot go back to Half-Circle, just like she cannot live at Benden Weyr. She is a reluctant hero, as are countless adolescents. However, Menolly recognizes the fact that she cannot go back and she therefore becomes an active participant in her quest. She studies her music, she learns to fend for herself, and she tries to make allies within Harper Hall. McCaffrey attempts to show through Menolly persistence in one's own growth yields positive results.

McCaffrey's use of the quest is a good representation of adolescence and an archetypal way of telling adolescents they are going to survive. The linear form of the quest indicates everything that begins will end, and eventually, everything will turn out alright. While this may not be the case for all adolescents, this form of didacticism is somewhat accurate for the purpose of empowering adolescents and encouraging them not to give up on their search for agency and a voice. By showing that the discomfort and the "road of trials" are necessary, McCaffrey assures her young readers adolescence will pass, and, like Menolly, they can be successful and respected within their communities.

The Feminist Agenda

In outside research and observations about the Harper Hall Trilogy, most studies claim one of two things: the Harper Hall Trilogy is a feminist trilogy that empowers women, or that Menolly is too masculine to prove that women are equal to men. Ultimately, a case stands for both. Based on my criteria for whether or not the work carries a feminist agenda, the Harper Hall Trilogy is both empowering and problematic. The traditional quest narrative is male-centered. In fact, Campbell's examples of people

who “refuse the call” are mainly women (59-68). McCaffrey, in order to use the quest narrative effectively, makes allowances and surrenders some of the characteristics that would have made Menolly more feminine. The fact that McCaffrey is writing a female quest hero is a relatively new development in literature, and while McCaffrey manipulates the quest to accommodate a female hero, some aspects of femininity are lost in the process.

My first question is whether or not the novels empower women. Considering that Menolly is a woman and she succeeds in her quests, this answer seems simple. However, what of the other women in the novels? The girls who bully Menolly in *Dragonsinger* are not empowered and left unchanged by the end of the novel. McCaffrey paints an ugly picture of the girls at Harper Hall. In fact, they seem vain and superficial:

“[...]And *when* are we going to have a chance to learn that music Talmor sent us today? We’ve got rehearsal tonight, and it’ll go on and on because those boys are always—”

“The boys? Just like you to blame it on the boys, Briala,” said Audiva. “You had plenty of time this afternoon to practice your lessons, same as the rest of us.”

“I had to wash my hair, and Dunca had to let the seams out of my red gown...” (*Dragonsinger* 69)

While Menolly works hard to live her dream and complete her quest, the other girls argue with each other and spend more time on vanities than on their studies. Although Audiva eventually leaves the group of girls to study with Menolly to become a better musician, the group as a whole is negatively portrayed and frowned upon by the male population in the novel (*Dragonsinger* 222). This means two things for the empowerment of women in the novels. First, women trapped by vanities and superficialities may not succeed if they

embark on a quest. As has already been explained, the people who are too comfortable with the status quo fail to cross the threshold into a quest. The girls at Harper Hall are comfortable with preserving the current tradition in the novel of girls looking beautiful so they may find husbands and live their lives, sans adventure, comfortably without a challenge to learn anything or contribute beyond the needs of a housewife on Pern. This is not projection; in McCaffrey's world, the women who are not dragonriders are homemakers who cook, clean, care for children, and tend to other domestic needs. The second meaning in McCaffrey's portrayal of the girls is women who *do not* follow the beaten path of the traditional woman's life grow up to accomplish things beyond what is asked of the common crowd. Because Menolly is not happy doing the work of the women in her Hold, she goes on a quest to accomplish much more. Therefore, McCaffrey is showing women are only empowered if they act as active participants in their empowerment. She does not show the girls in a positive light because they do nothing to better themselves past the surface level. Perhaps they have refused the call of their own quests.

Something that further complicates this subject is the idea of empowerment in general. By whose standards are the women in the novel empowered? Seelinger-Trites notes that "Girls in young adult novels often learn to validate themselves through a male's opinion" (88). McCaffrey is showing Menolly's empowerment through the male-centered opinion. She is strong *because* she can do all that a man can (possibly more). She is not strong because she is a master of bearing and raising children or coordinating Hold feasts. She succeeds in a man's position and is seen as successful by men; for

example, Sebell tells her toward the end of *Dragonsinger*, ““it’s been so hard for you, Menolly, to appreciate how important your songs are”” (202). While many of the men appreciate her talent and skills, the women usually find that Menolly is crass and vulgar, or else an oddity, and will have nothing to do with her. Therefore, the women in the novel do not necessarily feel empowered by Menolly’s actions, but the female reader may note the differences McCaffrey shows between Menolly and the other girls, and chose to be a more active participant in her quest.

Next, I judge whether the books promote equality between genders. This, too, has many angles of interpretation. In *Dragondrums*, Piemur goes on a quest just like Menolly does in *Dragonsong*. McCaffrey shows that the quest narrative is not discriminatory. While the road of trials for Menolly is different from Piemur’s because of gender barriers, they are both capable of completing their quests and becoming strong adults. However, the setting for the novels and the character descriptions make equality something of a washy subject. Much like the comparison between Menolly and the girls for the sake of empowerment, the portrayal of the girls versus Menolly, and who succeeds, carries undertones of commentary about equality. According to Anne Cranny-Francis, who has written a study on Anne McCaffrey’s characters, Menolly is “constantly reminding the reader that this is actually a male role” (71). What this means is that Menolly is trying to fill a man’s role instead of succeeding in a woman’s role. This certainly promotes equality, since Menolly is fully capable of doing everything the men can do. By reminding the reader that she is doing man’s work, Menolly shows that the roles that are currently assigned to either sex on Pern are purely cultural and not law.

Lessa, the lead dragonrider, also proves that women are powerful on a level greater than or equal to men. But, does equality have to mean that women do all the things men do? Can it not mean that everyone has the equal opportunity to pursue his or her interests and desires regardless of social stereotypes? Also, not all of the women in the trilogy are equal to men. The girls are not equal, the maids and hold women are not equal. They must still perform their functions as they are expected. Only Menolly breaks her mold and becomes an equal to the men. Thus, Menolly's quest helps her to reach equality, and McCaffrey encourages women to go through their own personal quests for equality, but it seems that the other women in the novels are left behind.

Finally, perhaps the most difficult question for McCaffrey's feminist agenda is whether or not she portrays femininity as a positive characteristic. I have already mentioned that Menolly is not considered "a proper girl" because of her appearance and her interests. While it is ultimately the individual reader's interpretation of what is feminine and what is not, the culture in the novel largely considers Menolly to be a not-so-feminine girl. However, it is necessary for her quests that she be first strong enough to endure the road of trials physically, and isolated enough to feel alone and accomplish her quests. As a hero, she must be singled out and ostracized, and the logical reason for her isolation in the novels is that she is not what people expect of girls. Also, a typical trend in quest-like narratives in science fiction and fantasy is the warrior-woman. Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair note in their study of young adult literature that "The female heroine is a fairly new development in literature of the fantastic. The best known quest stories all have male protagonists, and some critics have charged that the female

protagonists who more recently have appeared in the genre are, to borrow a phrase from Lissa Paul, ‘heroes in drag’” (139). The fact that the quest *requires* the hero to be different from others requires that she be seen as more masculine than the average girl. It is for this reason that the structure of the quest narrative may be seen as problematic for some feminists. Menolly, as a hero, cannot be feminine and cannot succeed by doing the chores *expected* of women. Since gender stereotypes are based on cultural expectation, the things that her home Hold at Half-Circle expects of women are considered feminine. Thus, since Menolly is not meeting the cultural expectations of women, she is not feminine and is therefore not portraying femininity well. She is shedding it. Thus, Menolly is teaching the readers to ignore the social stereotypes for gender as needed. She needs to go on a quest, so she decides not to adopt feminine attributes. She asks her teacher in Half-Circle, ““And what’s wrong with being a fine big strong girl?”” (4). Indeed, one of the lessons throughout the book is that there is nothing wrong with being different from what is expected. The difference may even lead to success. The other girls, who are agreeing to the culturally-scripted expectations, are portrayed negatively and do not get to go on quests and learn new things. Thus, McCaffrey shows that unquestioning conformity, not femininity, is the culprit in the failure of others.

McCaffrey’s feminist didacticism in the Harper Hall Trilogy is unclear at times. She empowers women, but in doing so, she makes them more like men. Although being more like men leads Menolly to equality, McCaffrey is showing that equality is synonymous with women being like men. She does not leave room for praise of average women, perhaps because of the necessities of the quest format—Menolly must be

different from others, isolated, and stronger-than-average. Therefore, the rigid structure of the quest forces Menolly into a more masculine role than the other females in the books, but her position may be showing that she is not favoring masculinity but instead favoring freedom from expectation.

Conclusion

Anne McCaffrey's Harper Hall Trilogy follows the timeless trajectory of the quest narrative. Menolly does not fit into her current surroundings at the beginnings of the first two quests, and she must decide to leave the comfort of the familiar and cross the threshold into the quest. Once she embarks, her first quest is a road of trials that lead to her becoming comfortable and confident in herself and her abilities. The second quest requires that Menolly become a member of a community and learn to work with others. While the second quest is not fully resolved, it serves as an example that the trials of the social individual are never over; there are merely small, individual victories.

McCaffrey, in writing for young readers, shares her wisdom of adolescence and adulthood through the format of the quest. She shows that this stage in life is linear, with a beginning and an end. The beginning involves discomfort and isolation, while the end involves adaptation, confidence, and trust in others. While the quest narrative may or may not be a realistic representation of the adolescent journey, it is encouraging for readers who may be questioning the purpose and extent of their discomfort as adolescents. McCaffrey also demonstrates that the quest requires persistence and confidence. If Menolly were to give up during her quests, she would not achieve her

dreams and live in the community where she knows she belongs. The quest requires work and possibly restructuring thought and understanding.

Finally, because of the requirements of the quest, McCaffrey's feminist message is unclear at times. While Menolly is a woman who succeeds, she is a woman who succeeds because she aspires to fill the role that is culturally reserved for men in her society. She also succeeds because she is unlike the average woman. Therefore, McCaffrey is not empowering *all* women. She is only empowering the women who decide to leave the aspects of femininity behind. However, this does not have to be a binary: one can be both masculine and feminine. Menolly gives up what her community calls feminine because it does not suit her needs as a hero. Rather than championing the masculine woman, the "hero in drag," McCaffrey may instead be negating the necessity of such gender roles.

THE EARTH, MY BUTT, AND OTHER BIG, ROUND THINGS

The concept of realism is not difficult to grasp, but is almost impossible to concretely define. Upon first impressions, “realism” means any portrayal of something “real.” However, what is “real” to some may be false to others depending on point of view and personal experience. In essence, there is no such thing as “real” as it is portrayed in art or literature. It is someone’s conception of what is real. However, a genre of literature exists for which the authors attempt to make the characters, events, and settings within their work reflect what they think the readers will accept as “real.”

Realism as a literary movement began, although arguably, in the mid-1800’s (Becker 7). It served as a counter-argument to Romanticism, in which authors glorified imagination and fabrication (Becker 24). Realists, conversely, chose to try to portray the world exactly as it is presented in real life. Many realists sought only to write what they saw. The texts were factual, observational, and as objective as the authors could manage. However, as the movement progressed, writers allowed themselves to resolve with a general observation about life and the possible future of humanity (often their views were pessimistic or, sometimes, nihilistic) (Becker 36). Although the concept as a movement has somewhat fallen out of fashion, many of the particular characteristics of the genre thrive in modern literature.

There is always a disconnect between reader and writer because each person interprets reality differently (which is why earlier realists sought to be as objective as possible). However, the author of realistic fiction seeks to make the reader comfortable with the world presented in the work and to make the world as believable as possible.

The readers must “play along” with the writer and assume that the reality the author writes is the reality that the reader knows. In a chapter entitled “Let’s Pretend,” Lilian Furst explains that the reader’s agreement upon the form of reality presented “is indispensable to the reading of realist fiction, insofar as it forms the basis for the organization of readers’ perceptions. The construction of the text by readers who proceed as if they believed in it leads to the actualization of the text as realistic” (33). Thus, the definition of “realistic fiction” is dependent upon not only the author but also the reader. The author must try to perceive the reader’s knowledge of the world and the reader’s willingness to believe that the events in the book could actually happen. This is where writers of young adult literature walk a precarious route. They must try to capture what is believable for adolescents, but also make the novel entertaining enough to read and deliver whatever message the author wishes to convey.

The novel in this study, Carolyn Mackler’s *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things*, by using a learn-from-my-example technique and by assuming the reader can see the problems Virginia faces from the outside, combines an element of education for real life along with a somewhat believable representation of modern adolescence for many readers. Thus, the novel could fall under the category of “social realism” defined by Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair in *Disturbing the Universe*:

sometimes categorized as ‘problem novels,’ the protagonist may find strength by confronting current issues such as sexual harassment, racism, or AIDS; she may become empowered by coping with teen pregnancy or by engaging in political causes. She may emerge stronger by turning from cultural standards of female beauty and accepting her own body, however imperfect, or by resolving conflicts with family and friends. (81)

Mackler's novel contains commentary about many of the issues suggested by Brown and St. Clair. In fact, Virginia's sources for empowerment are confronting the issues she has with her body and her family, along with issues of rape, racial tokenism, representations of beauty and relationships in the media, and the social structure of her school. *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things* can therefore be considered "realistic" because of its appeal to life that is comparable in space and time to present day, and also "social" because of its concern for current issues that teens must confront as they mature.

As is a side effect of realism, Mackler's book is not altogether realistic. She asks her readers to indulge her in many instances, as will be discussed in this chapter. She also writes events and characters that upon investigation are quite unrealistic, but necessary to the plot and function of the novel. As I have done in the first chapter, I will discuss the aspects of didacticism on both an adolescent and feminist level as posed by Mackler in her novel. The result is that her purpose is clearer than McCaffrey's, yet at the same time muddled, because of her realistic approach to an adolescent girl's thoughts.

***The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things* as a Realistic Novel**

The basis for a realistic novel is observation. The narrator, the observer, must catalog everything that is happening in order to give the reader an accurate account of life. The more details the speaker gives, the more the reader can visualize the event, setting, or character. Thus, the format, purpose, and lesson in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things* revolves around Virginia's observations. This is where the realistic aspect is subverted, however. Virginia is an adolescent girl, and her observations

are filtered and digested through her subjective opinions. Her data for the reader is soiled because she is not only the narrator, but also a participant in the story. She has feelings, opinions, doubts, and aggressions. While the novel assumes a form of reality, that reality is based on a young adult girl's observations.

Many of Virginia's observations are observations of herself from the outside. She views herself by way of what she assumes other see of her. This is an interesting spin on realism, because Virginia is basing her assumptions of what is real on her interpretations of other people's observations. For instance, many of Virginia's assumptions about body image and expected physical appearance come from her mother. When Mrs. Shreves takes Virginia to the doctor to talk about Virginia's weight, she tells the doctor, "It's so hard being overweight. I want to do everything I can to make life easier for Virginia" (Mackler 80). This puts Virginia in a precarious position. She is compelled to agree with her mother and believe what she says because Mrs. Shreves is supposedly concerned for her happiness. She assumes that her mother will deliver an accurate form of reality because she wants her daughter to understand the "real" world. Mrs. Shreves implies that because of her weight, Virginia's life is hard. Since her mother frets over her daughter's weight, Virginia thinks that she must feel bad about herself because her mother feels bad for her. It is through observing her mother's observations of her that Virginia "knows" she must feel bad about how she looks.

An even more scathing example of Virginia's observation of someone observing her is when she camps in the bathroom during lunch at school, and she overhears the popular girls talking about Virginia and her attractive brother:

“Virginia *who?*” asks Brie.

Ouch. I know Brie and I reside in different universes, but still. We’ve been going to Brewster since sixth grade. And we’re in three classes together, for god’s sake.

“Virginia Shreves,” says Briar, cracking up. “That chubby girl.”

“No way!” Brie shrieks. “I never knew they were related.”

“Of course they are,” says Briar. “It’s not like Shreves is a common name.”

I bite down on the flesh inside my cheeks. *That chubby girl.*

After a moment Brie says, “All I can say is, if I were that fat, I’d kill myself.” (36)

Virginia’s feelings are understandably hurt at Brie’s comment. She assumes that because the “Bri-girls” are popular and cool, their opinion of her is truthful and realistic. She compounds their comment onto other things she’s heard in a list that she thinks of as factual:

1. The Bri-girls would rather commit suicide than look like me.
2. No one ever believes Byron and I are related because he’s cool and attractive and I’m, well, not.
3. If they filmed another Babe: Pig in the City, I’d get cast in the leading role.
4. If I eat a slice of pizza on the sidewalk, strangers give me nasty looks, like I’m supposed to live on lettuce until I’ve whittled down to the size of a chopstick.
5. Relatives don’t send me clothes because they’re scared to guess my size, so I have more gift boxes of nail polish than the Revlon factory.
6. Whenever I picture myself squeezed into a black leather bustier and fishnets, I get violently ill.
7. If I were thin, maybe Byron would have invited me to the Virgins and Sluts party—or at least been happier to see me at his dorm. (69-70)

Virginia’s observations are listed in a concise, matter-of-fact way both on paper and in her head. However, she must learn that the reality presented to her by people around her is not necessarily correct. Although the point of realism is to observe and document what is seen, what Virginia observes and documents is what she thinks is happening based on the evidence provided to her and her own insecurities. Also, the real situation as

presented to the reader is manipulated to be the reality from the standpoint of an adolescent girl. So, what Virginia's reality portrays is that everyone thinks she must be thin. Mackler's reality claims that this adolescent girl *thinks* everyone thinks she should be thin.

Now that it has been established that there can be multiple realities in "realistic" fiction, it is clear that some of the observations that make up the reality are meant to be wrong. In order to form a more accurate representation of what is real in the novel, Mackler includes a few voices of reason in Virginia's observations of people observing the world. One of Virginia's solid "fact" observations is that Byron, her brother, is infallible. Virginia describes him as nearly perfect: "He's incredibly handsome—supposedly the spitting image of Dad when he was in college—with tousled brown hair, maple-syrup-colored eyes, and a confident Shreves jaw." Byron is attending an Ivy League university, "where he's the star of the debate team, a rugby god, a total Don Juan lover-boy, and a straight-A student" (17-18). Byron's character at the beginning of the novel is too good to be true. Mackler sets him up on a pedestal *so that* he may fall from it. There are hints throughout the novel, before and after the reader learns that Byron has date-raped Annie, that Virginia's allegedly factual representation of Byron is wrong. For example, Virginia's sister, Anaïs, is doubtful of Byron's prestige: "Anaïs snorts about anything related to our brother [...] Anaïs is the only person I know who snorts in reference to Byron" (17). Anaïs's perception of everyone else's reality is that they are wrong. What she sees is that everyone is allowing Byron to be the way he is because they assume he is perfect, but she notices that he is not the man Virginia thinks he is.

Anaïs's concept of reality, however, is seen as confusing and disruptive to the rest of the family. For a family so obsessed with body image, Anaïs is contradicting the necessity of being judged by appearance, which is how, of course, Virginia judges almost everything: "[Anaïs] would spout feminist theory about how men shouldn't judge women by their body type" (Mackler 47). Of course, there is no way that Anaïs can convince her family not to judge based on body type, and Virginia finds Anaïs strange for proposing such an idea. In fact, Anaïs, as the voice of reason against Byron and the stereotypes of women, is restricted in the novel to hearsay. She lives in Africa during the period in which the book takes place, and the only references to her are in flashbacks or conversations about her rebellious behavior. Therefore, the reality that Anaïs sees takes a secondary position to the reality described by Virginia.

Another example of Virginia's reality gone awry is when she goes to visit Shannon, her best friend, in Seattle. Shannon knows what Byron has done, and she and Virginia talk about it one night while they are staying in a hotel room. Although this is in hindsight for Shannon, she claims that she never thought Byron was as wonderful as Virginia perceived:

"I never considered date rape," Shannon says. "But I can't say I thought he walked on water, like you did. Maybe it's different because he's not my brother, but I'd hear things he'd say to you or watch the way he'd blow you out all the time."

"I know, Shan. I've been thinking about that so much recently." I choke up, making it hard to talk. "It's just... I don't know... it's just confusing to see this all so clearly for the first time." (204)

Again, Shannon sees through the reality that Virginia has built for herself and for the reader. She shows that Virginia is not a reliable narrator, and her altered reality is not

reliable, either. However, this is necessary for Mackler to show that there is no one version of what is “real.” Although Mackler herself is trying to invent a story that could be considered realist, she shows within that story that what is considered real by one is in fact a fantasy to others. Like Anaïs, though, Shannon is banished to the outskirts of the book. She lives on the other side of the country (Virginia lives in Manhattan), and aside from the quick trip to Seattle, Virginia interacts with her via internet. This allows the voices in praise of Byron to be louder and closer than those that recognize his perfidiousness.

As the novel progresses, Virginia recognizes that what she once considered reality has changed and she must re-evaluate what she considers “real.” This is another way for Mackler to show that reality is not concrete. The relevance of realizing that there are several ways to view reality is that adolescents often try to see themselves as others see them. They try to fit molds and try on different pre-fabricated identities. However, eventually adolescents must re-evaluate what they think is necessary and appropriate. Having to reassess what we think is real is part of growing up. For Virginia, one of the grand realizations is that her brother is not the center of the universe:

This is so confusing. For as long as I can remember, I’ve looked up to Byron more than anyone in the world. If he’s the sun, I’m a planet revolving around him. Everything I’ve done in my life—from where I chose to go to high school to how I feel about myself—has been because of my big brother.

But now that Byron has done something this horrible to a girl, I don’t know what to make of anything. I mean, if you take away the sun’s light, the planets won’t know where to go or what to do. (144-45)

Although the process is painful for Virginia, she must realize that what she thought was fact (like the fact that the planets revolve around the sun) is untrue, and what was real is

real no longer. In this way, Mackler is writing a commentary on “realistic” fiction.

While Mackler may try to incorporate details and pieces of what the reader may recognize as reality, she must still allow that perceptions change and events happen that make the previously real a fantasy. Therefore, by making Virginia a narrator and foregrounding her ideas and perceptions, Mackler manipulates the genre of realistic fiction into a collection of givens, challenges, and allowances that cycle from one to another to forbid a steady, concrete reality.

Despite Virginia’s subjective observations and the impossibility of a clearly defined reality, Mackler must show her readers that the world in the novel is comparable to the world they see and not like, for instance, the fantasy world of McCaffrey’s *Pern* with dragons, Thread, and fire lizards. To return to Lilian Furst’s explanation, realism hinges on the assumption that “the construction of the text by readers who proceed as if they believed in it leads to the actualization of the text as realistic” (33). In order for the readers to trust Mackler’s reality, she must give indicators or clues that lead them to think that Virginia’s privileged teenage life in Manhattan is plausible.

Possibly the most obvious signifiers of reality are the brands and items Virginia interacts with. For instance, Virginia chooses to enjoy Twinkies and a copy of *Seventeen* magazine while she sits in a bathroom stall during lunch (Mackler 33). She uses email, instant messaging, an ATM card, and makes Rice Krispie treats. Most, if not all, of these items are known to present-day girls. Mackler uses these items to familiarize her readers and make them comfortable with the world in the novel.

However, Virginia is in a position of privilege that is not familiar to all readers. She lives in Manhattan and has wealthy parents. While some of Mackler's readers may be in Virginia's position, this way of life is far from reality for, perhaps, a girl living on a tobacco farm in Tennessee, or the daughter of Mexican immigrants. Other readers can only assume that the life that Virginia reads is realistic. If there is nothing known comparable to Virginia's life in Manhattan, then how are the readers to know that Virginia's position is not a lie fabricated by Mackler? Mackler makes enough references to general conditions that lead the readers to assume that Virginia's life is plausible. For example, she has parents who want her to be better at everything. While not every girl experiences this, the chances are great that the reader knows someone in this position. Similarly, Virginia has siblings who have accomplished many things and who are praised immensely. She goes to school, where there are popular kids and unpopular kids. She studies math, English, and a foreign language. All of these fairly general conditions are common conditions that seem more believable than Menolly's world of harpers, fire lizards, or strict gender roles.

While generalizing makes the story more applicable to more readers, the act of generalizing characters makes them, on second or third glance, less believable. Byron and his father are similar enough to a brother and a father that the readers recognize their real-world counterparts (many fathers and brothers), but in making them vague and general, Mackler also forces them into a two-dimensional role that is unrealistic in real life.

In order to make the Shreves men recognizable to the reader who can then agree that they are realistic, Mackler must contort them into the stereotypes of themselves. They are “typical,” shallow, appearance-driven men. This way, readers can identify them with what they have either heard of men in the media or what they have seen of men whom they do not know very well. If Mackler were to spend more time building their characters, both Byron and his father would probably show various emotions and have educated conversations. However, this is a book about empowering women, and to do that, Mackler must use the two-dimensional characteristics which she has written for the men to counter the full range of emotions she writes for some of the women in the novel. Anaïs gives a mocking example of how the father and brother interact that shows how single-minded the men are portrayed: “Anaïs lowered her voice and scratched her chin mannishly. ‘You need sex ed, son? Here’s a pack of condoms. Go out and get some’” (18). Since Anaïs is one of the voices of reason, it is she who is able to show a plausible exchange between her brother and her father. However, she is also quite the radical feminist, so her version of reality puts the men in this position. Virginia’s observations of them are, again, through their observations of her. When her father tries to compliment her and encourage her to diet at the same time, Mackler shows how two-dimensional he is: “‘You’ve got a great face, Ginny. Think how much prettier you could be if you lost twenty or thirty pounds’” (Mackler 83). Instead of helping Virginia feel good about who she is at present, he assures her that she will be beautiful if only she is thinner. Likewise, Byron considers women to be lower than he is, and he belittles them through his language and his actions. When Virginia asks him who he will be taking to

the “Virgins and Sluts” party at his college, he replies, “just a girl” (67). Of course, because he considers Annie Mills to be “just a girl” and not an equal human being, he rapes her after the party, at which point his credibility as a character plummets. Mackler turns Byron into the closest character to the antagonist in the novel. He cannot redeem himself after the date rape, and Virginia reduces him from the sun in her solar system to barely worth speaking to. If Mackler intended to give Byron the chance to share how he feels or redeem himself, she would have developed his character further and allowed him more time to speak. As it stands, Byron is a looming entity, and Virginia wrestles more with her formerly “realistic” conception of Byron than she does with the actual character. The book is not about Byron the date-rapist; it is about Virginia learning that what she assumed to be reality is actually based solely on perceptions and assumptions garnered from other people’s voices.

Beginning with the characters, Mackler’s appeal to reality begins to dissemble into a novel *about* reality. Virginia makes so many assumptions as to what is real and what is not that her reliability comes into question. Her influences on reality are themselves unreal, for much of her information comes from sources that are, like Mackler’s male characters, one-sided and surface-level. For instance, it has already been said that Virginia reads *Seventeen* magazine. It is because of this and other magazines (among influences from her family) that Virginia feels poorly about her physical appearance. In order to establish a goal for herself, she chooses women in *Fitness* magazine as role models:

I turn the page and stare down at a picture of a waify young model. Her upper arms have the circumference of my pinky. I tear out the page. Then

I thumb through the rest of the magazine, ripping out the skinniest girls, the ones I'm most aiming to resemble. [...] I carry the magazine scraps to the kitchen and stick them to the refrigerator door with magnets. (89)

Virginia assumes that the women in the magazine are what everyone wants her to be, and she must therefore strive to be like them. She does not consider that the models in *Fitness* may actually be impossible due to Photoshop and other image-altering computer programs³. What she is consuming as real is in fact far from reality. She has mistaken fantasy for realism.

Similarly, Virginia hears things from the media and catalogs them as law. The basis for the following "Fat Girl Code of Conduct" is a joke that she heard on the radio:

Question: What do a fat girl and a moped have in common?

Answer: They're both fun to ride, as long as your friends don't see you.

(21-22)

While the joke is meant for entertainment and does not entirely reflect realistic life (nor is it true for everyone), Virginia assumes that it is real. She therefore creates another one of her lists that she considers infallible law for overweight girls:

1. Any sexual activity is a secret. No public displays of affection. No air-kisses blown across the cafeteria. No carefully folded notes passed in the hall. No riding the moped in public.
2. Don't discuss your weight with him. Let's face it. You both know it's there, so don't start bemoaning your body and pressure him into lying, i.e., "What are you talking about? You don't look fat at all."
3. Go further than skinny girls. Find ways to alert him of this, such as slutty comments peppered into the conversation. If you can't sell him on your body, you'd better overcompensate with sexual perks.

³ For an example of efforts to show girls that images on television or in magazines can be false, doctored, or unfair, see Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty (<http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/>).

4. Never, ever, ever, ever, ever push the relationship thing. Everybody knows that guys hate discussing relationships, so make it easy on him. Same goes for dates to movies and school dances. Bottom line: Let him get the milk without having to buy the cow. (22-23)

Virginia's inaccurate grasp on reality is in the process of turning her into a purely sexual, unemotional woman. She is conditioning herself not to get attached to men and to assume that she deserves no respect because of her weight. Mackler is showing the detrimental effects of this so-called "reality" coming from the media and infiltrating girls' lives. Nothing is wrong with Virginia. She does not need to look like the Photoshopped women on her refrigerator, nor does she need to pretend that emotions do not matter in a relationship and she can just be sexual without being emotionally involved. However, her interpretation of reality through the media tells her that she is wrong, she is ugly, and she is inadequate. The realism on Mackler's end is that most girls actually do feel this way in the face of so many negative influences. Many readers of this book likely feel the same way about themselves. Through Virginia's misinterpretation of the "real," Mackler's book becomes more realistic.

Perhaps one of the most unrealistic moments in the novel is the climax, where Virginia goes to Byron's school to meet Annie Mills, his date rape victim, and apologize. The actual circumstances of Byron's crime and the nature of rape would make this meeting highly unlikely in real life. However, for the purposes of Mackler's social realism, Virginia must encounter the true victim of Byron's crime. The interaction between Annie Mills and Virginia is not altogether unrealistic, although it is treated as a moment of enlightenment for Virginia, a moment that changes her outlook on life and her way of viewing herself. In this way, Mackler and McCaffrey are relaying similar

messages to readers: adolescence is a journey with small victories that help to propel the individual forward toward adulthood. Also, Mackler is bound to another type of literature that sidesteps realism. Young adult literature has an unspoken obligation to encourage readers. Robert Seelinger-Trites explains,

All but the bleakest of YA novels, however, affirm the adolescent's ability to grow at least a little. [...] adolescent literature is at its heart a romantic literature because so many of us—authors, critics, teachers, teenagers—need to believe in the possibility of adolescent growth. (14-15)

Virginia's interaction with Annie is Mackler's contribution to the genre of young adult novels. When Virginia learns that Annie “won't let [Byron] have that kind of power over me,” she discovers that Byron has had a hold on her since childhood, and as an adult, she is in charge of herself (Mackler 241). Annie continues by saying, “I had no control over what Byron did that night. [...] But what happened the next morning, what will happen every morning for the rest of my life, that's up to me” (242). Annie is showing that she is creating her own version of reality where she is in charge of her feelings and actions. Mackler is doing justice to the young adult aspect of her novel, but she lapses insofar as the interaction and the emotions shared between Annie and Virginia are not likely to happen in the world readers know as “real.” However, Annie shows that reality is based on the perceiver, much like the reader must decide if *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* could be real. While Virginia assumes that Byron has wrecked both her and Annie's lives, Annie thinks differently, and she shows Virginia that there is another reality where they are in control of their actions and reactions.

While *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things* can be viewed as a realistic novel by readers, upon close inspection, the novel becomes a story *about* reality.

The novel itself is unrealistic because of its unlikely relationship to many readers, the two-dimensional nature of the men in the family, and the unreliable narrator. However, there are enough cues and indicators to make the world in the novel familiar to the world of the reader (like common magazines, familiar items, and generalized people). What Mackler shows through the alleged realism of the novel and through Virginia's assumptions about reality is that not everything we see or read is real, and the manifestations of reality are dependent upon the viewer and the stimuli that is presented. Virginia sees a world through other people who see her as being overweight, unpretty, and unimpressive. She does not know for a fact that this is how they see her, but she assumes that her perceptions of their realities are law, and her behavior is modified to meet the expectations she assumes their reality requires. For example, she feels that she must feel guilty about her appearance because her mother feels that she feels guilty about her appearance. Based on her father's comments, Virginia thinks that she will not be beautiful unless she is thin. The media that Virginia interacts with also portrays a certain type of reality that does not care for her and that requires that she feel that their reality is fact, and she will consume more magazines in the hopes that they will teach her how to look. In short, Mackler's version of "realism" only serves to show that there is no one factual reality, and it is the job of the individual to create a reality with the input from various other sources.

The Adolescent Journey

Adolescence is defined differently in Mackler's novel than it is in the Harper Hall Trilogy, and that is due to the forms of the different books. While McCaffrey's adolescent is on a linear quest that has a beginning, middle, and end, Mackler's adolescent is in the midst of a disorganized chaos of conflicting realities. While Menolly seems to be on a trajectory like a rocket or a comet through space, Virginia is more like a planet; information gravitates toward her without a filter, and she must decide what she will take or leave. Thus, McCaffrey's version of adolescence is of unstoppable fate. Menolly has no choice but to continue moving forward in the quest narrative. Mackler's version of adolescence is of scrupulous observations and creation of reality.

There are similarities, though. Both Virginia and Menolly must be active participants in their growth. While Menolly has to try to keep learning and moving forward, Virginia must also carefully consider the realities around her and actively decide what she will believe and what is false. She believes the wrong things at the beginning of the novel, but by the end, she recognizes that she must actively build her own form of reality as she ages into adulthood.

The format of realism contributes to Mackler's portrayal of reality for adolescents. For example, while Anaïs is a voice of reason, she is a radical voice. She is aggressive to the point where being like Anaïs is considered bad form. When Virginia talks back to her mother, Mrs. Shreves asks, "What's gotten into you? You're starting to sound like Anaïs," to which Virginia replies, "I'm sorry. I just don't think it's fair" (155). Mackler must make allowances that indulge the reader into thinking that Virginia is real. If Virginia were an aggressive feminist with concrete views and theories and

aggression like Anaïs, she would not resemble as many teenage girls. While teens can be rebellious, Virginia represents the fear and confusion of adolescence. Her character explains the emotion and uncertainty behind teenage rebellion. While Mackler may not be portraying the behavioral reality of teens, she seeks to explain the mental reality of adolescents.

Mackler seems to be choosing to be moderate in her portrayal of Virginia. There are no extremes for her. When Virginia starts her own webzine with her classmates, she is again showing the temerity and allowances adolescents must make. She is not seeking to change the system in which she exists. There are certain parts of her reality that are given: adults are in charge, the adults can be misleading, there is little the younger generation can do until they grow up. Therefore, Virginia seeks to work *within* the already structured system to recreate reality, or at least show others that there are alternate ways of viewing things. Virginia and her new friend, Alyssa, assert that the webzine for students is a place “where people can bitch, rant, and rave about whatever is on their minds” (272). The students write stories and essays about the founder of the school and his alcoholic past, Brewster’s tendency to contact the students of color to take promotional pictures although there are very few non-white students at the school, and how Virginia feels about her weight and how to look at the bright side of things that seem negative. Although the students do not have much agency because of their age and their place in the social order of the school, by writing about what goes on there, it becomes more bearable. Roberta Seelinger Trites explains, “By providing an emotional outlet, antiestablishment humor helps teenagers reconcile themselves to living with the

establishment” (35). If they cannot beat the establishment, it is a comfort to make fun of it. What is happening, though, is that the students are learning to cope with the status quo instead of trying to change it. The reality of their situation is that there will always be a system that is so ingrained in everyone that it must be followed (i.e., the children must obey the elders). If the students were to try to take down the school, the novel would immediately transform into fantasy, and the realistic element would be lost. What the students are doing, however, is restructuring the way they view reality by combining all of their observations into one place where the readers can consume these anecdotes and begin to see the reality for the structured system that it is.

Of course, because Mackler is an adult writing for adolescents, she has a few words of wisdom to impart to her readers. Since the entire novel is about various forms of reality, Mackler is explaining that girls are subject to influences from multiple voices, and it is the job of the prudent adolescent to listen to the voices, then decide where they come from, why they are so prominent, and whether or not they are useful. The fact that Mackler does not define one concrete form of reality in her novel further enforces the theme that there is not a right or wrong answer to adolescence; the young adult must build from the realities around her a reality that works for her. From the information Virginia gets from her sister, Annie Mills, Ms. Crowley, and Dr. Love, she builds her own conception of what is happening around her. She is in charge of her destiny, her growth. By the end of the novel, Virginia has asserted her right to form her own opinions and her version of “real” is fabricated to fit her needs.

Another piece of didacticism from Mackler comes in the form of humor throughout the book. The comedy in Virginia's paranoia and her special, made-up rules probably comes from an adult's hindsight. Mackler is no longer a teenager, and as we age, some of the things we did as teens seem absurd. Virginia's reactions are quite foolish and funny to the readers, but serious and possibly horrifying for her. When her thoughts are seen with the humor of an adult looking back on her own teenage years, she shows how foolish, in "reality," some of the teenage tendencies are. Throughout the novel, many things happen to Virginia that are upsetting. Mackler offers a reprieve in the intense emotions with Virginia's interactions (or fear of interaction) with Froggy, a boy from school, and her snarky and sarcastic descriptions of what she thinks she is supposed to do. This lesson puts a spin on the reality relayed by Mackler. It is important, she shows, that people laugh at what is taken so seriously by the reality of the media. For example, when Virginia invites Froggy to her apartment, she indicates that she lives in the Penthouse. Froggy is immediately interested, and Virginia thinks, "Thank you, *Penthouse!* The raunchy magazine that features naked vixens with basketball-sized boobs and skin oilier than a Pizza Hut pizza often gives people the wrong impression about my family's abode" (10). Virginia shows that we are not to take everything we see seriously. The fact that *Penthouse* is written as a caricature of what some think that men want offers both humor and criticism in light of the reality that Froggy recognizes. When he hears "Penthouse," he thinks of pornography. Thus, Mackler's lesson through humor in the novel is once again to pay attention to the information presented and the source from which it is presented. Froggy's mistaken reality for the Penthouse apartment shows

that things are not always as they seem. Virginia's description of what she thinks of *Penthouse* magazine is a humorous jab at what some claim to be realistic.

The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things, while not entirely realistic, is a good lesson for adolescents who may be floundering in the midst of so many realities being presented to them. Mackler is at the mercy of her readers' perceptions of reality and understanding of the world, but she uses that to her advantage. She recognizes the different perceptions and different realities, and she moves to explain that there is no concrete definition of who one should be or how one should look. Virginia does not recognize that the women in magazines are not real, but she assumes that is reality, and that is how she should look. Mackler shows through Virginia's mistakes in interpretation that all is not as it seems, and all levels and forms of "realism" are built solely on perception, not reality.

The Feminist Agenda

In keeping with the no-reality realism theme, there is no clear definition of "femininity" in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things*. However, Mackler uses this to her advantage, since the lesson to be taught and learned in the novel is that one must create her own definitions of femininity.

The first question in my criteria for whether or not this is a feminist novel is whether or not the novel empowers women. The journey for Virginia is one from oppression to empowerment, so the answer to this question is an emphatic "yes." In the beginning, Virginia wants to be what her father wants her to be. She explains that her

father is “constantly praising thin women’s bodies” (47). Even when he is not speaking as blatantly as he does when he tells Virginia that she would be prettier if she lost twenty or thirty pounds, through her observations of his observations of other women, she knows that he wants her to be thin. This causes Virginia to go on a crash diet that makes her weak and ill. By the end of the novel, though, she tells her father, “I’d rather you don’t talk about my body. It’s just not yours to discuss” (Mackler 281). She is showing her father that he is no longer in charge of how she feels about her body, whether it be good or bad. While Virginia does not want to be as heavy as she is, she decides that it is only her business to change herself or approve or disapprove of herself. She does not want praise or criticism. Instead of having her father celebrating her body, Virginia would prefer that her father leave her body alone either way.

Likewise, she is out of the grip of Byron’s opinion by the end of the novel, as well. Instead of making him proud of her or basking in his approval, Virginia does not care how he sees her. When she comes home from Seattle with an eyebrow ring, she explains, “In the old days, I would have paraded over and shown [Byron] my eyebrow ring. If he liked it, I would have been the happiest person on the planet. If he said it looked dumb, I would have taken it out instantly. But now I couldn’t care less what Byron thinks” (216). Virginia is empowered because she does not need the power of her father’s or brother’s approval. When she judges their views on reality, she decides that they are wrong. Therefore, she creates her own form of femininity for which the approval or disapproval of the males is inconsequential and unnecessary for her to feel good about herself.

The next question is whether or not the novel promotes equality. While the answer is yes, the result is different from the equality shown in the Harper Hall Trilogy. While McCaffrey's equality is matching the women's status with the men's, Mackler is suggesting that the women need only to stop listening to the men to do what they want to do. Women are not restricted from being successful in Mackler's reality. Instead, the thing holding the women back in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things* is the perception that women must do it all. Virginia's mother thinks she must be successful at her job, visually appealing to her husband, and the picturesque mother with a perfect family. Once Virginia re-evaluates that reality, she is able to remove herself from the assumption that women must do it all to be respected, and she instead decides to be successful on her own terms. For instance, rather than starting another crash diet to garner approval, she takes kickboxing lessons to learn something, make friends, and feel stronger (258). In a world where women are politically reaching equality, Virginia shows that there is still ground to be won over her own mind, and she can do what she wants and still be proud of herself. She has nothing to prove to anyone.

Finally, the novel portrays femininity in a positive light. Although there are still the stereotypical girls absorbed in vanity like there are in *Dragonsinger*, Virginia decides to flaunt her femininity and enjoy being a young woman by the end of the book. For example, Virginia assumes at the beginning that she is too fat to wear clothes that hug her figure. She relies on her mother to find clothes that hide everything she has. However, as Virginia begins to realize that she does not have to listen to everyone else's reality—she can both contribute to and formulate reality—Virginia and her mother butt heads.

The two are in a department store trying to find a dress for a Christmas party when Virginia tries to venture into her new ideas of self and femininity. Mrs. Shreves wants to find something “a little less attention-grabbing” and “a little more layered” in the department for fuller women called Salon Z. Virginia eventually loses her temper with her mother: “I’m fat, OK? F-A-T. But that doesn’t mean I have to hide beneath layers of fabric. That doesn’t mean I’m exactly like you used to be, ashamed of showing my body. That doesn’t mean I have to get my dress from stupid old Salo—” (226). Virginia is actively telling her mother that the reality Mrs. Shreves adheres to (being fat means you have to cover yourself) is not the reality she has made for herself. Thus, Virginia shows that she can decide on her own terms what is feminine and what is not.

What Mackler is teaching in her novel is that girls are free to choose what they consider femininity. While there are outside influences, it is ultimately up to the individual to decide how she should look and act as a woman. Virginia shows young female readers that while they may listen to and appreciate some of the input for the definitions of femininity, they have the power and agency to state their criteria.

Conclusion

Carolyn Mackler’s version of reality is similar to what her readers are familiar with, but it also serves as a commentary on sources of reality. For this reason, the various realities presented in the novel (and the novel itself) are open for interpretation and are clearly not set in stone. Virginia serves as an example to young female readers that they must critically analyze and synthesize the voices around them to create their

understanding of reality despite what they are told. For instance, girls must understand that the people they see on television or in magazines are not models for society or possibly even real. Girls must also break away from the influence of their parents or elders and try to stop seeing themselves through other people's observations. Finally, while it is necessary for girls to observe the world around them in true realist format, they must take action and decide what reality is truest for them.

For adolescents, Mackler shows that they must gain agency over themselves so that they feel confident enough to create reality. She shows that the stage of adolescence for a young adult is a time when they must sift through the many opinions and observations that are lobbed at them from all sides. Outside influences try to determine who adolescents will grow to be as adults, and it is the job of the active and prudent adolescent to be wary of the sources and, combined with his or her own observations, cobble together a form of reality that fits them best for the time being.

Finally, *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things* carries a feminist agenda without claiming a definition of femininity. Instead, Mackler encourages her readers to form their own definitions to empower themselves. Since all reality is based on perception, girls can take what they hear of femininity and format their own opinions. While Virginia recognizes that Anaïs is a feminist and she can "spout feminist theory," Virginia knows that Anaïs' form of femininity is not for her. Through Virginia, Mackler shows that femininity is in the eye of the beholder, and a woman can be a feminist without having to fit a certain mold or version of reality.

CONCLUSION

Depending on the form, these young adult novels give different interpretations of both adolescence and femininity. While both seek to empower adolescents, they do it in different ways. Anne McCaffrey uses the quest to show readers that the journey of adolescence is exactly that—a journey. It has a beginning and an end, and if the adolescent readers are persistent like Menolly, they will eventually emerge out of adolescence and into the adult world of relationships and social respect. However, if adolescence is anything like the quest narrative, those who refuse to leave their comfort zones may remain childish and naïve, even if they do reach physical adulthood. The quest is a strict format that makes many demands on the author and the hero within the quest. There must be isolation, a desire for change, a road of trials, and a return from said road. The quest is formulaic, which shows readers that there is a set pattern to the journey of life. While Menolly embarks on a grand adventure in her journey toward adulthood and a professional life, she goes through intended and necessary stages, which gives the state of adolescence an organized aspect.

Conversely, Carolyn Mackler shows in her portrayal of adolescence that confusion and dissonance are necessary for the condition. Through her “realism,” she shows that there is no true reality, only many forms of the same reality. While people and the media say different things, it is important for the adolescent to critically recognize and analyze the voices around him or her. Out of those voices and personal experiences, the adolescent can then recognize that perceptions change, and reality hinges on perception. They in turn construct an individual reality that caters to their needs. So,

unlike the linear trajectory of the quest, Mackler's realistic novel shows a much less organized journey of adolescence. In trying to become an adult, Virginia must try to develop her own definitions out of the mass of realities presented. Mackler shows the stage of adolescence as a chaotic scramble for reality based on other people's interpretations and finally the individual's interpretation. In the end, Virginia learns that everyone must create his or her version of reality.

Whether adolescence is like a quest or the act of creating reality, the experience is different for girls than it is for boys both biologically and psychologically. A part of growing up for girls is deciding how to fit into society as adults and women. Young adult novels can offer advice or examples for girls who seek to define themselves as females. This could be an assertion of feminism or simply verbal or visual declarations of femininity or pride in being female. In this respect, the Harper Hall Trilogy is both empowering and problematic. While Menolly is a woman who succeeds, she succeeds because she reaches the status of men. She does not succeed because she is a womanly woman; she is successful because she is more like the men. However, Menolly also shows that the roles set aside for certain genders are false and culturally scripted. They have no sway over the hero, whatever gender. Therefore, McCaffrey portrays the triviality of gender roles. This may be in part due to the form of her novels. The quest format, which conducive to males historically, can be applied to any gender of hero who is isolated and finds the emphasis on culturally-scripted norms obsolete or unnecessary.

For Carolyn Mackler, femininity is in the eye of the observer. Since there is no set reality, there is no set realism. Although she offers clues through Annie Mills and

Anaïs, Mackler never specifies what she means by femininity. She instead requires Virginia to build her own versions of femininity like she must build her own concept of reality. The result is that Virginia learns that what other people think about femininity may not always be right, and she must wade through the many perceptions and voices in order to find the version of femininity that works best for her. Because adolescence is to Mackler a stage of probing, inquiring, and critical thinking, the perceived definitions of femininity can be seen as perceived and as a result questioned and manipulated. Mackler puts the agency of growth not on a trajectory fueled by necessary conditions like McCaffrey's adolescence, but on the adolescent as an observer, creator, and participant.

Form is integral to the messages delivered in young adult literature by its adult authors. Whether a quest or "realism," the novels carry an agenda for the readers to consume and consider. Both Mackler and McCaffrey conceal their gems of adult wisdom within novels that either fit or manipulate the guidelines of their forms, and in that interaction, they carry hope and encouragement for a demographic that is scared, lonely, and confused.

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