

Books & Writers



The female as protagonist: *Three books that reflect a new genre*

By David R. Altman
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It's an extraordinary time for female novelists—and the men (and women) who read their work.

Three of the best novels I've read in the last year are *Gone Girl* (Gillian Flynn), *In Wilderness* (Diane Thomas) and, most recently, *The Girl on the Train* (Paula Hawkins).

And that's not even counting Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* which is at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list (followed, incidentally, by *The Girl on the Train*).

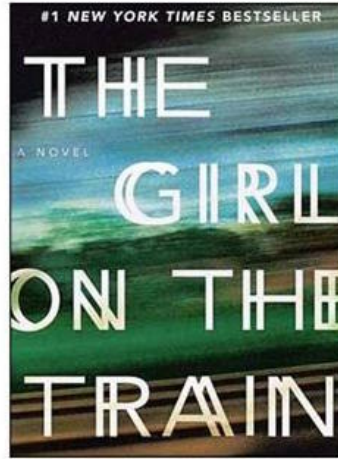
In fact, half of the Times' list is made of up of women authors.

If you want a suspenseful read, go get one of these books. The latest of the three, *The Girl on the Train*, may not quite measure up to the heart-stopping pace of *Gone Girl* and the extraordinary prose of *In Wilderness*, but is just as intense and you will find yourself wanting to read it straight through (at 326 pages which, according to my iPad, would take me about 5 hours and 50 minutes if I read non-stop, which I did not, although I wanted to).

This is not frivolous stuff. No *Fifty Shades of Grey* or the 'Twilight' series (both also best-sellers by female authors). *The Girl on the Train*, like the other two novels mentioned above, is simply great writing—without the lurid details of *Grey* or the juvenile appeal of *Twilight*.

It is nothing new, having great books by great female writers (leaving this discussion only for fiction, which I know unfairly leaves out brilliant non-fiction writers like Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Laura Hillenbrand, just to name two).

The top selling American female author is Danielle Steele,



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who has sold nearly 800 million copies and is the fourth best-selling author of all time (in case you were wondering, J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame comes in at about 350 million).

But it hasn't always been this way. As late as two years ago, refinery29.com reported that the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Review of Books* "...devoted a whopping 75% of their coverage to male authors."

The "gender imbalance", documented annually by an organization called VIDA, which monitors gender inequality in literature, was also evident in magazines and through the literary marketplace.

According to NPR, VIDA reported that "...*The Atlantic*, *The London Review of Books*, *The New Republic* and *The Nation* have all had an overall ratio of 75 men to 25 women, including both reviewers and those reviewed."

The good news is that things are changing. Currently, five out



paulahawkinsbooks.com / Photo Paula Hawkins is one of several female authors dominating best seller lists. By writing memorable, strong female protagonists, these exceptional authors make us more sensitive to the modern-day complexities of male-female relationships.

of the top ten NYT's bestsellers in fiction are written by female authors. Further, two of the last three Pulitzer Prizes for fiction have been won by female authors, and Jasper's long-time, part-time resident Diane Thomas' book *In Wilderness*, is a richly deserved nominee for this year's Pulitzer.

Gone Girl, *In Wilderness* and *The Girl on the Train*, have created (or at least reflected) a growing genre among female writers—the emergence of the 21st century female protagonist—a unique character that defies classification but reflects the complexity and strength of the modern woman.

The female characters in these books are flawed but attractive. They are highly independent or aspire to be. They are at once vulnerable and unwavering. They love and hate with equal intensity. They are both victims and shapers of a society run amok.

These characters are intelligent, savvy, sexy and unpre-

dictable; and, like all great fictional characters, they remind us of people that we know. Inevitably, they will capture most readers (male and female) on the very first page.

The fact is that these female characters reflect many of the haunting realities confronting women in today's society, which makes them as painful as they are entertaining.

And, their conflicts arise from the relationships they have with men, whose characters (generally speaking) are written with equal parts passion and contempt.

For those of us who like to hold onto the remote control, this emerging genre is not man-bashing in the traditional sense—as the men in these novels are as flawed as the women. Although, as you will find, at least three of the lead male characters are downright evil—written with fierce realism, deftly reflecting the underlying (and often invisible) anger in some of today's modern men without a hint of literary vengeance or prejudice.

By writing memorable, strong female protagonists, these exceptional authors make us more sensitive to the modern-day complexities of male-female relationships—and the inevitable consequences that those relationships often bring.

Be forewarned: if you want to escape from reality, these are three books you should not read. But if you want page-turners that will make you leave an extra light on at night, these are perfect.

The kids are heading back to school. The days will be getting shorter. End your summer and bring in the fall season with one of these books. You will not be sorry.

David R. Altman is the author of Death in the Foyer, a poetry chapbook. He was nominated for Georgia Author of the Year in 2014.