

The Girl Who Lived

FEMALE-DRIVEN FANTASY TAKES THE LEAD IN YA

By Elissa Petruzzii

SERIOUSLY. WHO WOULDN'T want to be a wizard?

Those who study the trends in publishing (such as your intrepid *RT* editors) have noticed an uptick in Young Adult fantasy as of late. No longer are the dark, futuristic dystopias ruling, though their numbers are still legion. Now fantasy is making a play for the teen fiction crown, with magical royalty and assassins at the helm.

And those sword-wielding royals? Those lethal assassins? They're girls — which wasn't always the case.

"When I was a kid, my dad and I shared a lot of books," longtime fantasy author Tamora Pierce tells us. "His taste ran to swashbucklers, Edgar Rice Burroughs and world explorers, which meant that with the exception of Burroughs, I was reading a lot of books with male heroes. ... By sixth grade I didn't understand where the capable females and female warriors of Burroughs' books had gone. ... Reading Tolkein's *The Two Towers* in seventh grade, I was excited beyond belief to find a girl warrior — except she gave it up at the end of the trilogy. I felt that if boys got adventures, why didn't girls?"

And so Pierce set on her path to write fantasy starring kick-butt girls. As she describes, her work features "girls and women who were equally as capable as the guys they ran with, and men who accepted that, or learned to (for the most part)."

In 1983, Pierce published *Alanna: The First Adventure*, starring a girl warrior hero, which came out just one year after Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword*, which also featured a female lead.

Fast-forward about 30 years, and here we are, in the midst of a female-helmed young adult fantasy boom.

"I've always been so into girl-dominated fantasy, Robin McKinley, Tamora Pierce, Garth Nix," fantasy author Sarah J. Maas tells us. "That's what I obsessively read as a kid, and that's what I wanted to write."

"When I was in college, I attended my first writers' conference and sat in on a panel about writing fantasy. I was, quite literally, the only woman in the audience," fantasy and dystopia author Marie Lu tells us. "So there is some truth to the stereotype. It didn't mean that there weren't amazing female fantasy authors back then, though. And times have changed since then, especially in the YA realm."

It's true. Lu's Legend trilogy as well as her new fantasy, *The Young Elites*, have garnered a large fanbase, while Maas and her massively popular *Throne of Glass* series regularly draw huge crowds at book signings.

"For a long time now, the general population has underestimated the power of the teenage girl," says Maas of her fans. "Female fandom is so vocal, and



IMAGE: FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS COURTESY OF SOAHNIE CHEN

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they've made YA this thing, and we can have all these different genres getting out there. It's the power of the woman!"

So who's reading these books? Is it only girls?

"I've heard from readers of all ages," says author Sara B. Larson of her *Defy* series. "But I'd definitely say that the majority of my readers are middle and high school students, and adults in their 20s to 40s."

Popular fantasy author Kristin Cashore tells us her readership for her *Graceling* series follows a similar pattern, saying, "It runs the gamut. It feels about half teenagers and half adults, and it always surprises me that there are more boys than I realize. I get letters and comments from men about my books all the time."

It's true. If you attend a signing — or *RT*'s Giant Book Fair — you'll find girls and boys, women and men, lining up to meet their favorite YA authors.

"I love that there are adults reading YA who are proud of it. The outside world has told us to be embarrassed about reading YA, which is bullcrap. Some of the most interesting writing is being done in YA," Maas says.

Indeed, part of the appeal of YA is that so many different subgenres can blossom, from vampires to dystopia to contemporary to fantasy. Many have attributed

