

# Heroism for girls

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Going on a quest? Making a journey of great difficulty with magical gizmos that are too powerful for normal people to handle? If so then you're a boy. Girls don't do their heroics like that. Heroines can be lucky, brave and act decisively under great stress, they can swash and buckle just like the men, they can find treasure; but they don't put on their walking boots or sail to dark continents to seek it. Girls have better things to do than chase trinkets – making the world a better place starts at home. If they fancy some dragon's gold they will probably send a man to go and get it for them.

	<b>Girl</b>	<b>Boy</b>
Where is it	Stays and deals with issues	Goes away on mission
What is it about	It's about her changing others	It's about him
Strength	Inner and practice and team effort	External gadget and special power
Relationships	Fixes relationships between others. Gives help.	Finds helpers to help him. (Common cause rather than emotional bond.)
'Magic'	Charm and beguilement (soft spot)	Supernatural power
Revelation	Those she helps (and audience) respect and cherish her	He is 'better inside'. Acquires noble virtue.
Fighting	Defensive. Copes, stands-up to whatever comes	Aggressive. Conquering obstacles
Beginning	She is 'an outsider' / loner / different	He 'gets a call'
End	She leaves (or dies)	He returns (but may not be contented)
The reaction	I wish I could <b>be</b> like that	I wish I could <b>do</b> that
Film?	Awful	Excellent
TV series?	Excellent	?
Example	Captain Mainwaring / Dad's Army	Dorothy / Wizard of Oz

# Boys have all the adventure

Before I tell you the secrets of being a heroine let us deal with the standard heroic story as told from ancient civilisations through to Star Wars. In literary theory this is called the *monomyth*. Firstly of course it is a man, or male in the case of Hobbits. He gets some call to set out on an adventure and leaves the comforting homely world where although things may not be sunny they operate according to normal rules. He may have a guide to show him how to enter the world of adventure where unusual things or magic bring dangers and temptation. The guide may give him something powerful like a spell, or gadget – It is a poor hero that doesn't have something only he can use in an emergency. All along this road of challenges he has some goal to keep his spirits up. If only he can find the missing Wotnot it will all be worth it. After pages and pages of adventures, you know how they go on, he reaches the spot at which whatever it was he was looking for should be. Typically it can't be seen and the hero has to change themselves in some way to fulfil the quest. This transformation, whether by mythical death and rebirth, 'growing up', or realising something they should have seen all along is the spiritual or moral payload of the story. Now the hero is wiser and probably has some regrets about his previous actions and attitudes and may swear to behave differently from now on. With any luck he will be given some private reward and perhaps an 'answer to all their problems' to take back with him. When he returns to the people he left behind at the start he may have difficulty adjusting as a 'new person'. Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* follows this pattern. Others get their hearts and brains but she can't get what she needs. Then she's explicitly told that she could have gone home any time she wanted: All she has to do is keep saying "There's no place like home". When she's back home she promises not to run away again.

This story formula is so common, it's a box-office banker in Hollywood, that we might fall into the trap of believing it is universal; but as I'm about to show you, when girls are heroic they do it completely differently and make a much longer-lasting impact. When a boy goes on an adventure, even if it is to save the world, the story is about him not the world. When a girl gets involved the story is about how the world is a better place as a result. When Dorothy returns home she says 'I will not run away again' but when Captain Mainwaring from *Dad's army* organises the Home Guard he isn't expecting a medal, he stands firm, grimly expecting the worst, trying to do the best with what he's got. As you'll have twigged by now you don't have to be a girl to do heroing the girl's way. Neither, as we saw with Dorothy, do girls have to stay in the kitchen if they want to follow the 'male hero' story pattern.

# Girls deal with problems that need solving

At it's very simplest, simplistic even, girls are heroic because they want to perform a service for others. A boy may journey many leagues to find the 'magical fuse of microwave' but a girl just puts a pan on the stove to feed the family instead. Girls deal with practical and immediate issues. That doesn't sound very heroic, but fear not, because a heroic girl makes her own magic, not the witchcraft sort, but something special about her that can go beyond respect into reverence.

Firstly a girl will practice patiently and continue to practice whereas a boy will 'get the

hang of it' then he knows it all and can play at something else. She doesn't need competition to keep her interest but he does. Look in a playground and the girls will be playing seemingly monotonous games together in one spot. A heroine will use quietly developed inner strength not a magic sword conveniently left in a stone. She may or may not practice for a purpose. It is possible that it is only in a moment of crisis that she realises she has the required skill. Now when a boy discovers an inner strength it affects him, he boasts of *using* or planning to use his new power to his friends and it is proof all along that he is special. A girl on the other hand may get great satisfaction from an achievement made possible by this strength, but note it is the successful *outcome* that is what matters to her. 'Hurrah! Because she has a good memory the baddies were discovered.'

Patience and deferring to authority are girlish tendencies that can be put to good use by a heroine. She can study hard in order to get praise for 'being a good girl'. Note that stereotypically she gets praise for doing the study rather than the outcome. Of course this is part of the female story of practising for a possibly unspecified role in the future. The same trait helps when she has to obey instructions without question. When the moment for action comes she will wait dutifully until 'she sees the whites of their eyes' as ordered. As her strength comes from within she will search her memory for the important thing that the men have forgotten in their excitement. For someone who can be disciplined without losing the power of intelligent thought it is a small step from being lead to being a leader.

## Helpers and admirers

Every hero needs helpers. It is one of their characteristics that they collect teachers or devoted companions. As a boy on a journey these can be picked up along the way, the more exotic the road is the more specialised the helpers become. Why do they help him? Various reasons but not normally because of his likeability. He doesn't put his arm around a new character and say "be my mate"; if he does he'll probably get a "'Ere! wot's your game!". A girl hero can get away with this. Also she is more likely to be making friends with less hardened adventurers who she will develop. An essential quality of a girl hero is charm. She must have lots and not be afraid to use it. She could start by charming say her parents and playmates then, as wild ducks will join the tame ones, more acquaintances are captured by that something special in her personality. So the girl hero collects helpers because of *who she is* not *what she's doing*.

There is a second trait that heroines must have: Assurance when it matters. They can be 'cautious, uncertain and respectfully keen to take advice' when planning the heist but on the day she's bulletproof. Everyone likes to be on the winning side, and most will 'pay extra' to be friends with the winner, so confidence is another good way to collect helpers.

The two Cs: An abundance of *charm* and *confidence* are the springs inside your female hero that boys don't have. (They have a need to be helped 'for the cause' and swagger.) In an "Oh my god they are attacking" situation the boy reaches for his trusty sword and says "This is it chaps – good luck" while the girl inspires her followers to stick by her with "I'm ready – stick by me." and the unspoken "don't let me down".

Super-confidence with a dusting of charm can be used as a weapon in itself. "I could have you killed – but I like you." or "I'm willing to learn – I'm sure we will have fun".

Here we see, as if we didn't know this already, that the girls are good at personal relationships and networking. Furthermore they can win lifelong gratitude by sorting out the relationships of third parties for them. The characters that she helps are immensely grateful for her 'magic touch' that ordinary people lack and which of course is credit in the bank of good-turns and more evidence of a winner.

## How it all ends

The ending of the story and the consequences are at the very least seen from a different perspective. When the boy returns he puts on his slippers, lights his pipe and settles back into obscurity until the next call. His daring deeds were done in far away places that people at home don't understand. The girl story ending is very different. What she achieved was 'here' and the effects should be visible. 'The evil baron was replaced by the noble prince so they live happily ever after.' Yes it is a fairy tale. At the end she becomes a legend. The moral of 'learn your lessons, be of service, help people improve their lives' is passed down from mother to daughter. The sons get a different message: 'Girls can make your life better in ways you couldn't do for yourself – so revere them.' The girl may drift away to the mythical world in complete contrast to the boy returning home. If your heroine is really good she will have echoes of spirituality. '...and that's why if you look up into the night sky and see Venus...' As a legend she may look after everyone in her own right or as a metaphor for women everywhere caring night and day for their families and friends.

We are living dangerously in the land of stereotypes so there are many tropes which writers need to be aware of. A heroine doesn't have to be kind to cuddly-wuddly animals, doesn't have to be pretty, doesn't need a horrible family background or situation to escape from. She doesn't need to like children, carry a kit including safety pins and petticoats to bandage the poor wounded men while cradling them to her bosom.

Anyone getting the best out of themselves and other people during a crisis in the here-and-now is doing it the Girl's way. A bit of leadership, charm and confidence can quickly become a legend we cherish. You can fill in your own examples from fiction and reality as they are everywhere. So gentlemen! – Let us tip our caps to the ladies with conviction and courage who care for us with charm.

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