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Princesses Against The Patriarchy:
A Collection of “Girl” Books From My Childhood

Eager to talk about one of my favorite books, I asked my English teacher on my first day of high school if he had read *Little Women*. His response shouldn't have been surprising, “No, that's more of a girl book.” He didn't mean anything by it, but the comment infuriated me. From that point on, I did not leave him alone. I bothered him incessantly until he finally read it. But the moment stuck with me. Why did he consider it a “girl” book? And why did he decide that it wasn't worth his time? And the answer came to me: it was because it was about girls. For some reason, although I read many books about boys, a book about a girl was only meant for girls.

So, this is a collection of “girl” books. Written for children, every one of these books has a female protagonist, and was written by a woman. This isn't a collection of feminist essays, or treatises of any sort. In fact, these are the books that helped me realize my own sense of justice. It is a collection of books containing the women and girls who, in their strength and their flaws, made me who I am today.

Like many young children, I loved fairy tales. So, once I had exhausted the classics, I began searching out new stories. One of those stories I found, on the very bottom shelf, in the third aisle of my elementary school library, was *Dealing With Dragons*. It was the first time I ever read about a princess who didn't need saving. Cimorene knew how to fence, speak Latin, and make Cherries Flambé. She was also surrounded by strong, complex female characters: Kazul, the king (yes, king) of dragons, Morwen, a cat loving witch, and Alionara, the curious princess. It became one of my favorite books. I grew hungry for more, and soon I had read the entire series and other books like *The Frog Princess*. I revelled in the fantastical stories, but I soon realized that I what I truly loved were the characters. They felt like real people. They felt like my friends.

That is especially true for *Little Women*. I cried, laughed, and loved with the March family. I hadn't realized when I read it for the first time, that it was also my grandmother's favorite book. It was the first book that she ever owned. I never got to meet her, but somehow I feel as if through *Little Women*, I can call her my friend. Throughout my life, I have found that many of these books connect me to other people in a deep and meaningful way. The most notable example of this is my elementary school librarian, Mrs. Biddle. Bonded by a love of *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables*, Mrs. Biddle and I would spend every extra minute talking about books. I would hang back after library class, stop by when I was in the hall, I would even sometimes spend a rainy recess in the library. When I graduated 8th grade, she gave me a box filled with books written by Louisa May Alcott. They had belonged to her daughter, and were published while Alcott was still alive. One of them even has her signature. I treasure them, because they were books written by one of the authors who taught me to be confident, and because they were given to me by a woman who fostered my love of reading.

I know that some of the books on this list do not feature true royalty. However, Sara Crewe of *A Little Princess* taught me that being a princess has nothing to do with wealth or status, instead it has everything to do with the way that you interact with those around you. In order to be a princess, you must have strength in even the most horrible of times. Each one of these girls exemplifies princesshood in their strength, kindness, and dedication to what's right. They taught me how to be the best version of myself, and I take pride in the fact that my older sister still affectionately calls me “Princess”. These girls can be role models for people of any gender. Their virtues are not inherently female. They are stories about bravery, and bravery can come in many different guises.

Alcott, Louisa May. *Eight Cousins*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1922.

One of the books given to me by my elementary school librarian, this book has a handwritten message inside the cover: "To the many boys and girls whose letters it has been impossible to answer, this book is dedicated as a peace offer by their friend-- L.M. Alcott". This story of a little girl who goes to live with her uncle and her 8 cousins is a marvelous perspective on the lives of children.

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. New York: Children's Classics, 1987.

This book became my favorite, because the March family feels so familiar. Despite being a little moralistic, *Little Women* is about real people. Every time I read it, I find a piece of myself in Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. I see my flaws reflected back at me, and at the same time, I discover some of my greatest strengths. This copy was bought in a second-hand store in NYC, and I hope that the addressee, "Holly" loved it as much as I did.

Andrews Edwards, Julie. *The Last of the Very Great Wangdoodles*. New York: HarpersCollins, 1989.

Julie Andrews's book is a beautiful tale filled with fantastical creatures, an ice cream sundae machine, and river that sings. It's all about the power of imagination, and a little girl and her brothers who have the ability to help a magical creature named the Wangdoodle.

Baker, E.D. *The Frog Princess*. New York: Scholastic, 2003.

A new take on a classic story, Emma is a princess who is training to be a witch under the tutelage of her aunt. She goes out to the swamp one day to collect ingredients and meets a talking frog. Predictably enough, she kisses him, and turns into a frog herself. This is the story of Emma going on a journey to turn herself back into a human.

Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *A Little Princess*. New York: Puffin, 2014.

Sara Crewe arrives at Miss Minchin's School for Girl as nearly a princess. She has beautiful clothes, fancy shoes, and expensive dolls. However, instead of being haughty and cruel, she is a kind girl who spends her time making up stories. When her father dies, she is forced to work as a scullery maid. She taught me that it being kind and brave have nothing to do with how much money you have.

Cleary, Beverly. *Beezus and Ramona*. New York: Yearling, 1979.

Beezus and Ramona are about the same age difference as my sister and I. It is still one of the most accurate portrayals of sisterhood that I've ever read. As a sister you fight, you boss each other around, you are jealous of one another, you ruin each other's things, but ultimately you are the other's most important person.

Gray, Margaret. *The Ugly Princess and the Wise Fool*. New York: Scholastic, 2003.

This book is about a kingdom where beauty is prized above all else. Princesses have hair that is miles long, and beauty contests are the national past time. All princesses are expected to be beautiful, but the third-born princess is always more beautiful than her sisters combined. Rose, however, is born ugly. The book illuminates how harmful ideals can be, and how easy it is to fall prey to them.

Ibbotson, Eva. *Which Witch?* New York: Penguin, 1999.

Eva Ibbotson is one of my favorite children's authors and this book was my introduction to her. It was the first time that I had begun to think about good and evil as something more than just black and white. The evil witches in this book were crude, and snarky, but never cruel.

Konigsburg, E.L. *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler.* New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 2002.

The most important lesson I learned from this book, which my 8-year-old self stole from my sister's bookshelf, was that if you are clever enough, you too can live in a museum. Claudia and Jamie run away and break into the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Claudia was bossy and organized, everything I wanted to be and was not as a child. Baths in the coin fountain, a hermetic old lady, and Michelangelo; this book caused me to dream about being a runaway, or at least about planning to be one.

Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted.* New York: Harper Trophy, 1998.

As a small child I had a hard time falling asleep, and this was the story I told myself to help me go to sleep. I admired Ella's stubbornness and her wit, even in the face of unbelievable odds (like a obedience curse).

MacDonald, Betty. *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's Magic.* New York: Harper Trophies, 1995.

Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is a pirate's widow who lives in a house that was built upside-down. These are the stories of her teaching children manners through all manner of magical means. My personal favorite is the story of Lester, the pig who teaches table manners.

McKinley, Robin. *Beauty.* New York: Eos, 2005.

Beauty is another retelling of a classic fairytale: Beauty and the Beast. It is close to the original in that Beauty has two sisters, but they are kind instead of cruel.

Montgomery, L.M. *Anne of Green Gables.* New York: Dover, 2000.

This is a story close to my heart. Matthew's death was the first time that I remember mourning. It felt like I had lost a family member. Anne and Marilla, however, are the heroes of the story. It is a beautiful book about friendship between all matter of people, but especially between women of all ages.

Pierce, Tamora. *Protector of the Small: First Test.* New York: Laurel-Leaf, 1999.

Keladry was the only girl in a school full of male squires. She spends the entire book proving, over and over again, that she is just as worthy as any of her classmates. And it's not as if she is somehow an exceptional female. The book is about her hard work and determination.

Wrede, Patricia. *Dealing With Dragons.* New York: HMH Books for Young Readers, 2015.

This was a book that I would borrow from the library at least once a month. Eventually, my mother got fed up and bought it for me. About a princess who runs away to avoid an unwanted marriage, *Dealing With Dragons* changed the way I saw the world. The knight-in-shining armour is only heroic if someone wants to be saved. The King of Dragons can be any gender. Why should there be two different names for the same job? Manners are important, but it is more important not to be foolish.