

## Charm the Boys, Win the Girls: Power Struggles in Mary Stolz's Cold War Adolescent Girl Romance Novels

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**Abstract:** This article examines Mary Stolz's Cold War adolescent girl romance novels—which I call “female junior novels”—to suggest that the dominant tropes that form the popular romance motifs within these texts (i. girls' conformity, ii. girls' use of “boy capital,” iii. girls' collective establishment of a female dominant society, and iv. the recognition of the prom queen as the object of her own desire) create and then mask complex female power struggles within a highly regulated adolescent social hierarchy.

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**Keywords:** female junior novel, patriarchy, Mary Stolz, romance, adolescent, teenage, girls, boys, capital, boy capital, commodity, Cold War, postwar, Pierre Bourdieu, Luce Irigaray, prom, ring, love, young adult literature, popular romance studies, female gaze, power struggle, power, fan mail

Here was what she'd been waiting for. Not something—someone. Here, as so often in the daydreams, Douglas Eamons was talking to her. Doug . . . in college now, emptying the vast high school when he left, leaving the crowded

corridors, the wide classrooms empty, taking the flicker of promise from lunch hours, when she might see him, stripping the crisp, vivid pageant of football to nothing but bands, color, battle, and hundreds of people. (Stolz *To Tell* 15)

So begins Mary Stolz's first teen girl romance novel, *To Tell Your Love* (1950), the story of seventeen-year-old Anne Armacost's summer of first love, wrapped in the arms (and popularity) of Doug Eamons. From the outset, Anne knows that her meeting with Doug is critical: "She was a girl well used to charming and captivating boys. But this time, she told herself, I must be very careful. This time it's very, very important" (16). In the world of post-war/Cold War adolescent girl romance novels—what I call "female junior novels"—Anne is right. Her meeting with Doug is important, for if Stolz follows the major tropes of the genre, Anne's future happiness—and social status—is entirely dependent on her ability to "captivate" Doug.

Female junior novels were a new genre of adolescent romance literature, published between 1942 and 1967, and aimed at the freshly-minted American teenage girl consumer. Written by authors such as Betty Cavanna, Anne Emery, Rosamond du Jardin, Amelia Elizabeth Walden, and Mary Stolz, these novels showcased the brave new world of malt shops and high school clubs, as well as eagerly narrating the first loves, dances, and class rings that formed the teen girl realm. While Maureen Daly's 1942 novel, *Seventeenth Summer*, provided the wellspring for the genre, hundreds of novels quickly followed over the next two decades, all eagerly imparting stories of female maturation through romance. Simple, pleasurable, and often formulaic, the female junior novels divided those working in the newly emerging field of literature for adolescents. Although they were initially welcomed by many practitioner-oriented critics (such as librarians and educators) as "wholesome" because of their capacity to show girls "how to approach the problems of dating with common sense" (Edwards 465), the texts were often simultaneously derided by then-contemporary academic critics. Richard Alm, a professor at the University of Hawaii, [1] was clear in his emphasis on the pejorative positioning of the female junior novels:

most novelists present a sugar-puff story of what adolescents should do and should believe rather than what adolescents may or will do and believe. [ . . . ] Their stories are superficial, often distorted, sometimes completely false representations of adolescence. Instead of art, they produce artifice. (315)

Of course, the division between the two types of critics was not entirely clear-cut, and even the practitioner-oriented critics had their reservations about these texts. Margaret Edwards, for example, head of young adult services at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, and arguably the most staunch supporter of the female junior novels, also admitted that "the warmest defender of these stories would not recommend them for the Great Books list nor ask to be marooned with them on a desert island, but they have their good points" (465).

While now-contemporary critics have a tendency to be just as condescending toward these texts as our academic forebears, I believe that to continue to neglect these novels is to do a disservice to the fields of both young adult literature and popular romance

studies. Indeed, the female junior novels may be “sugar puff” stories, but they also highlight competition, machinations, and general manipulations involved in the girl protagonists’ attempts to “land” the perfect boyfriend, thereby revealing the social structures that force the protagonists to think, feel, and behave in pre-established manners. This paper focuses on texts written by one prolific author in this genre, Mary Stolz, and suggests that the heterosexual romance plots within her novels mask complex female power struggles within an adolescent social hierarchy—struggles which further suggest the possibility of a surprising female-focused alternative to patriarchy.

This article is organized into four main parts, each of which corresponds with four overarching factors that contribute to the possibility of the female alternative to patriarchy: i. girls’ conformity, ii. use of “boy capital,” iii. establishment of a female dominant society, and iv. recognition of the prom queen as the object of her own desire. Thus, in the first part I focus on female conformity, and suggest that it is necessary for the protagonists’ romantic success and acts as a measuring rod against which female maturity can be measured. In the second section I draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of distinction as a lens through which to study the girls’ use of “boy capital” to raise their positions in the teen society. While the society in Stolz’s novels is patriarchal, it is paradoxically run—and regulated—by the popular *girls*. Luce Irigaray’s theory of the commodification of women is therefore my dominant tool in the third part, and I employ her ideas to suggest that Stolz’s novels incorporate a kind of all-female commerce, subordinate to and reliant on male characters, but functioning based on the protagonists’ desire to be recognized, accepted, and codified as one of the popular girls. Finally, in part four, I examine girls’ homosocial / homoerotic desire through Stolz’s use of a female gaze, in which the female protagonists watch the most popular girls, and in which the girls’ yearning for social dominance becomes visible. In their moment of prom crowning, the popular girls become not only the object of other girls’ desire, but the object of their own. They therefore somewhat remove themselves from male commodity exchange, and instead entrench their status as governing figures within the adolescent society. In doing so, they reveal that the romance plot at the heart of Stolz’s novels ultimately creates *and* masks complex female power struggles within a highly regulated adolescent social hierarchy.

## Female Conformity in Female Junior Novels

I take as the starting point for my argument a quotation from the preface to Pamela Regis’s *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, in which Regis states:

The [romance] genre is not silly and empty-headed, as mainstream literary culture would have it. Quite the contrary—the romance novel contains serious ideas. The genre is not about women’s bondage, as the literary critics would have it. The romance novel is, to the contrary, about women’s freedom. (Regis xiii)

The concept of women’s freedom—or, at least, a hint of the possibility of such freedom—is what underscores many of Mary Stolz’s female junior novels, although its

presence is not always obvious. Indeed, the majority of current criticism of the female junior novel genre positions its texts as reinforcing a kind of female bondage or lack of agency. As girls' literature critic Anne Scott MacLeod states regarding female junior novel protagonists:

More striking [ . . . ] is the pervasive leveling pressure in these novels. In dozens of ways, implicit and explicit, the literature counsels acquiescence, acceptance, and adjustment to undemanding prospects. Ambition is decidedly not "part of it"; in fact, fictional girls often reduce their already meager choices by adopting further, and self-constructed, boundaries. [ . . . ] Whatever else she may consider doing, a girl must conform to conventional ideals of feminine attractiveness and behavior, even if it means putting her own tastes and aspirations aside. (MacLeod 60-61)

If one focuses on the heterosexual romance plots of these novels, MacLeod's statement is absolutely correct: the female protagonists are repeatedly taught to conform, particularly when it comes to the behavior and trappings of a 1950s femininity aimed at luring future husbands. Moreover, for some protagonists that conformity is not only necessary for romantic success, it is desired and actively sought.

Before I detail this conformity in Stolz's texts, I should include a brief caveat: Stolz's novels are representative of the female junior novel genre because they incorporate many of the typical tropes and concerns of the genre, not least of which are the four that provide the foundation of my current analysis: conformity, "boy capital," the female dominant society, and the crowning rite of the popular girl/prom queen. While Stolz's novels share these characteristics with other texts in the genre, however, they are also very different in a multitude of ways, particularly when it comes to quality of writing and age of readership. Thus when I state that Stolz's texts are representative, I hope that the reader will accept that "representative" does not necessarily equate with a sense of "all female junior novels are completely like this." Indeed, Stolz was often singled out from the other female junior novelists by academic critics like Alm, who declared Stolz to be "surely the most versatile and most skilled of that group" (320), and one who "writes not for the masses who worship Sue Barton Barry" (320). Practitioner-based critics similarly separated Stolz from the other authors of the genre, although this separation was sometimes to Stolz's detriment. Margaret Ford Kiernan, for example, observed in her *Atlantic Monthly* review of Stolz's *In a Mirror* (1953) that

[*In a Mirror*] is as penetrative and analytical as anything [Mary Stolz] has ever done. But is it a teen-age book? I confess I bogged down for a minute while I went through it because, as a stream-of-consciousness journal of a present-day college girl, it would surely have Henry James looking to his laurels. [ . . . Well-balanced teenagers] could handle it and would thoroughly enjoy it, no doubt, but for the more immature I think it is too introspective and somehow disturbing. (547)

Still, although the level of writing sophistication within Stolz's texts may separate them from the other female junior novels, they still share the fundamental tropes of the genre, including an actively-sought conformity. Jean Campbell, in *The Sea Gulls Woke Me* (1951) watches all the other girls in her class "producing by sleight of hand the little colored combs that were as much a badge as the white, everfresh turned-up socks they wore" (2). Jean, whose hair, "braided and heavily hairpinned in the morning, required no further care till evening" (2) looks "with accustomed and unhopeful longing at the sleek shining caps of the girls around her" (2). Later, in a moment of adolescent rebellion, Jean visits a department store in New York City to have her hair cut. This act leaves her feeling "divinely content," (37), and she joyfully exits the hair salon "in an access of the poise that comes, at sixteen, from looking exactly like everybody else of sixteen" (37). Interestingly, this act of conformity is not celebrated by the adults in the text who, with the exception of Jean's father, all seem disappointed by the loss of Jean's hair. Mr. Armando, her hairdresser, mourns: "Mr. Armando walked around her, lifting the unbound locks, hefting them. His face was brooding. 'Glorious,' he murmured, almost reluctantly. He sighed" (36). Similarly, when Jean asks her Aunt Christine if she likes the haircut, Christine replies:

"Oh, very much," said Christine, who thought it was a great, if understandable, pity. "I suppose there aren't many girls of your age with long hair."

"I was the only one left in the United States." (55)

Jean's haircutting act may appear trivial, but it is one of many seemingly superficial acts within Stolz's texts that demonstrate the sheer joy that her female protagonists experience whenever they are able to behave or appear like "everyone else" (or, in other words, like the popular girls). As Amy Pattee notes in *Reading the Adolescent Romance: Sweet Valley High and the Popular Young Adult Romance Novel*, "in the adolescent novels of the mid-century, the 'question of maturity' was successfully answered by the hero or heroine who succeeded in adhering to and maintaining dominant scripts" (11). Jean's act of conformity not only establishes her desire to be part of the group, it also hails the beginning emergence of her maturity—a maturity that will be further established as she slowly develops her first love affair.

In many of the female junior novels, looking and acting like everyone else is, of course, the key to attracting a boyfriend. Once the girls achieve that, their conformity ensures that they will fulfill their gendered roles and pass through the prescribed checkpoints of their burgeoning heterosexual relationships: from the promise indicated by a class ring, to engagement, and finally to marriage (and, one would assume, to the eventual production of a family). Although the majority of female junior novels end with a token of the future relationship (through a pin, a class ring, or a kiss), rather than an actual engagement or marriage, the longevity of the couple is assumed. An exception to this trope, however, may be seen in Mary Stolz's secondary characters, such as Nora in *To Tell Your Love*, who "loved her baby and longed to be free of him" (174), who act as cautionary tales regarding the danger of too-early marriage and children.

In the majority of these texts female maturity is not just tied to conformity and the establishment of long-term heterosexual relationships, it is implicitly founded on such factors. Indeed, there is an obvious pattern in hailing male characters as "men" while

female characters remain “girls” until they become married “women.” Still, although the elements that determine the heterosexual romance plot within these novels—the focus on clothing, [2] dates, dances, and first kisses—suggest a pressure on female conformity, they also mask complex machinations that point not to female bondage, but rather to the potential for the kind of women’s freedom that Regis ponders. Indeed, as the next sections of this article will demonstrate, the very elements that may appear most conformist and superficial (dates, dresses) are the same elements that allow the protagonists to form their own semi-autonomous female society, hidden in the plain sight of heterosexual romance.

## “Boy Capital” and Gatekeeping

The potential for female autonomy emerges from the structure and functioning of the adolescent society in which the girl protagonists reside. On the surface, the female characters in Stolz’s novels dwell in a kind of hieroglyphic world, in which possession of the right dress, the correct “slang,” or the proper seat in the malt shop all determine one’s place within a firmly entrenched adolescent social hierarchy. While the ability to follow social codes regarding what to buy or wear implies a common democratized culture, the adolescent classes are predicated on more than simple economic ability. Rather, they function according to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of capital, which extends traditional notions of economic-based capital to include other forms (including social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital), all of which work to define a person’s position within a multidimensional social space. In other words, capital acts as a kind of resource that enables a person to gain or to maintain a position within a status-based social hierarchy. Although economic capital may seem to be the dominant form in a capitalist society, Bourdieu notes ways in which different categories of capital can be exchanged and transformed into each other. Such conversion, however, requires the complicity of all people. Part of this complicity stems from the habitus, which is a residue of one’s inherited class past (functioning below one’s consciousness) that shapes one’s present perception. The complicity is also based on the impact of the habitus on a person’s drive or desire to acquire symbolic capital. This symbolic capital, moreover, can manifest itself in any form that is recognized through socially-inculcated classificatory structures.

In Stolz’s female junior novels, that symbolic capital takes the form of what I call “boy capital:” a girl’s ability to date—that is, to *accumulate*—multiple dominant-class boys. The more higher-ranked boys who are willing to take a girl to the movies, or the malt shop, or—and this is the really important, Cinderella-creating event—the prom, the more dominant a girl becomes within the adolescent social hierarchy.

To understand the girls’ use of “boy capital” in these novels, one must first recognize the gendering of Stolz’s teen societies. Considering the time period in which they were written, it is likely no surprise that they appear to function within a patriarchal paradigm. As Linda K. Christian-Smith notes in her study of what she hails as Period I adolescent romance novels (1942-1959, the period that coincides with many of Stolz’s female junior novels):

romance is about learning how to relate to males and the importance of this. [...] What [the female protagonists] learn is that the ability to “get along” is primarily worked out within romance, a set of relations of power and control, that do not favor feminine power and initiative. The novels contain no mention of female and male parity. Rather, the romance situates girls within a set of relations whereby they are the ones that must compromise and change. (375)

Indeed, as Betty Wilder in Stolz's *And Love Replied* (1958) remarks concerning the gendered social division around her:

It was, as Carol frequently complained, a man's world. And in this man's world, Betty thought now, a girl has to take what she can get by wiles, subtlety, coercion, or blandishment. But she can never, not ever, say simply, honestly, and aloud, This is what I'd like. (51-52)

Like Betty, many of Stolz's female junior novel protagonists profess Bourdieu's “that's not for the likes of me” slogan, which Leslie McCall characterizes as “the dominated classes' practical consideration of their lack of opportunity to join in the cultural and economic life of the dominant classes” (849). McCall adds that these “social divisions appear obvious and self-regulated by individuals and social groups” (849), and thus most Stolz female characters rarely question this gendered social arrangement.

Still, while I agree with Christian-Smith that these adolescent societies are patriarchal, I would complicate her analysis by suggesting that they are—paradoxically—ruled by females, not males. That is, male and female characters rarely struggle for dominance against each other; they only battle against characters of their own gender. The lack of struggle between the genders is predicated on the *seemingly* automatic dominance of the males. Although boys are powerful in Stolz's teenage societies, their power is that of accessories to legitimation: they are not legitimizers themselves—and this is where the paradox emerges. The boys exist somewhat *above* the social hierarchy, in a kind of super-terrestrial twilight where their presence affects the lives of the girls, but where the girls have less effect on them. Consequently, while dating a boy can help a girl to gain the necessary symbolic capital to climb the hierarchy, it is the girls on the top rung of the ladder who ultimately determine each social climber's place, not the boys who help them. Or, as Betty Wilder eloquently phrases it, “boys might be kings, but it was the girls who ruled the court” (*And Love* 123).

This queendom becomes obvious in the way in which Pris and Madge, two girls who possess the most boy capital in Stolz's *Because of Madeline* (1957)—and who therefore hold the highest ranks in their adolescent society—refer to their boyfriends. Rather than using their given names, the girls refer to the boys by the names of the boys' prep schools: “Exeter was in town last week end. Woodbury Forest was coming all the way up from Virginia for the Junior Assembly. They weren't seeing Choate any more, he was just too darn fresh, and if he thought for a minute [...]” (*Because* 36). Although they decide to drop Choate for being “too darn fresh,” Pris's and Madge's language makes it clear that the boys' individualities matter far less than which prestigious preparatory school they attend. The

boys are simply forms of capital, to be collected and used at the Junior Assembly or some such social gathering, then disposed of when they become bothersome.<sup>[3]</sup>

While Pris and Madge know how to seek and wield their boy capital, it is Dody Jenks, in Stolz's *Pray Love, Remember* (1954), who becomes the most trenchant example of a girl whose ability to brandish boy capital in manipulating her adolescent society rivals that of the Marquise de Merteuil or, in a more contemporary analogy, *Gossip Girl*'s Blair Waldorf. Dody may come from a working-class background, but within her adolescent society she is still "the high school girl who would incontestably be elected Snow Queen that year" (39). Stolz makes it apparent that the reason for Dody's social success is her ability to manipulate boy capital:

But there were other girls, as pretty, a good many with more pleasing backgrounds . . . more clothes, better manners, homes to which they could freely and without embarrassment invite people. None of this had prevailed against Dody, who knew by instinct how to charm boys. And, she had told herself simply, charm *them* and the girls will have to like you, whether or not they do. (40)

Dody is masterful in charming men, and acknowledges it as an inherent talent:

how had she known that directness was the lure which would bring Ben to her side? [. . .] She simply knew, as she knew Roger liked vivacity, Mr. Newhall a sort of ingenious coquettishness, the young policeman at the corner a bright-eyed dependence. (56)

This seemingly inborn knowledge of how to attract men exists in almost all of Stolz's popular characters. Lotta Dunne in *Who Wants Music on Monday?* (1963) purposely looks at a boy with "an oblique and fetching glance—a practiced glance, one that had not yet failed her" (207); Honey Kirkwood in *Hospital Zone* (1956) knows how to "lift her head in the way she knew was winning" (174) and to "look into his eyes a fraction of a second longer than an introduction demanded" (174); and Betty Wilder knows how to enter a room with

the quick sweet smile, the airy walk, the heightened sensibility that automatically took possession of her in the new presence of any young man. [. . .] You held your head so, you moved and lifted and dropped your eyes thus, you put into your voice something it was innocent of in the sole presence of your family, say, or of Carol. If the boy was dull, or obviously chartered by someone else, if no slightest current moved between you and him, why, you tucked the whole pleasant pantomime away, not because it was artificial, but because it served no purpose. (*And Love* 18)

While Stolz's popular girls seem to have no difficulty in attracting their male counterparts, it is important to note that possession of boy capital does not automatically equate with entry into the ranks of the social elite. Although Dody Jenks is partly correct in



suggesting that the dominant girls are forced to accept an outsider if she dates a dominant boy, possession of too much boy capital risks the danger of a reputation of promiscuity. These are, after all, postwar *teen* romance novels. In *Rosemary* (1955), Rosemary Reed attempts to gain social mobility through a dominant class boy, Jay, but unknowingly pushes her possession of boy capital too far:

She was aware of talking a little too much, a little too loudly. Aware, too, that many of these boys were holding her closer than they should, but she laughed with them excitedly, and thought how Jay would certainly have to be proud of his date, his vivacious, popular, sought-after-date. [. . .] She danced endlessly, and though the girls at the table ignored her more pointedly than they had earlier, Rosemary assured herself she didn't care. (24)

Whereas Rosemary's date with Jay has the potential to pave the way into the dominant society, her attempts to appear popular by gaining more boy capital ultimately create a barrier to that movement.

While Rosemary's failure demonstrates the danger of too much boy capital, it also highlights the fact that boy capital is only helpful when it is recognized—even reluctantly—by dominant girls. The girls—not the boys—are the gatekeepers to teen popularity. An obvious example of this gatekeeping can be seen in Stolz's *The Sea Gulls Woke Me*, in which Jean Campbell, an unpopular girl, hides in the lavatory during the school dance, and overhears Sally Gowans and a few other popular girls mocking both her dress and her date, Rhet Coyne. When Jean steps out of the lavatory, the rest of the girls, "giggling a little through nervousness, or perhaps remorse, ran out, looking at one another as they fled" (26). Sally, however, stays, and attempts to apologize. In that moment, Jean realizes that Sally's sympathy for her could be her entrée into the popular crowd:

Jean thought later that she probably had her chance there to escape through the dark mirror into the Wonderland of acceptance. This girl was Sally Gowans, acknowledged leader of the school. [. . .] But Jean, at the moment she might have received help, was too numbed by the evening to realize it. (27)

The fact that Jean fails to accept Sally's help does not negate the fact that it is Sally's judgment of Jean, more than the influence of Jean's date, Rhet, and certainly more than Jean's own opinion of herself, that establishes Jean's place within the social hierarchy.

## **The Female Dominant Society**

In Stolz's texts, then, female control of the adolescent society suggests not only the partial subversion of traditional forms of (patriarchal) dominance, but the emergence of a semi-autonomous female society—what I call the "female dominant society"—which functions within patriarchy, yet still remains somewhat separate from it. In acknowledging

the contradictory nature of the heterosexual romance plot for female junior novel protagonists, Linda K. Christian-Smith notes that the process of romantic recognition

creates young women themselves as terms in a circuit of exchange where their value is acquired through affiliation with males. Romance is one of the sites for the learning of gendered relations of subordination and domination. The code of *romance* is ultimately about power: who has it and who may legitimately exercise it. (375-376)

Christian-Smith's suggestion that these girls act as "terms in a circuit of exchange" is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's theory of women as commodities, in which Irigaray suggests that the foundation of heterosexual society (as we know it) is based on the use, consumption, and circulation of women. Women function exclusively as "products," in that "men make commerce *of* them, but they do not enter into any exchanges *with* them" (172). Instead, women's otherness stimulates men's exchanges of other forms of "wealth" while simultaneously smoothing the relations between men. In terms of women's relations with other women, Irigaray states: "uprooted from their "nature," [women] can no longer relate to each other except in terms of what they represent in men's desire, and according to the "forms" that this imposes upon them" (188).

Still, Irigaray questions: "*But what if these 'commodities' refused to go to 'market'?* What if they maintained 'another' kind of commerce, among themselves?" (196). In Stolz's texts, this other kind of commerce is the "female dominant society." While it may be subordinate to and reliant on male characters, its power stems from female desire. That desire functions as related forms of longing: to be recognized, to be accepted, and ultimately to be codified as one of the popular girls. Thus Betty Wilder spends much of *And Love Replied* falling in love with Clifton Banks, but spends an equal amount of time pining to be accepted—perhaps even loved?—by the dominant girls in her new high school:

One morning , when a couple of girls whose names—Ginny and Rowena—she knew, and whose place—at the summit—she knew, passed her in the hall and waved pleasantly, not slowing their steps, and called, "Hi, Betty, how are you?" not waiting for her reply, she stood rooted, looking after them. A girl named Eleanor, whose command was queenly in these halls, gave her a queenly nod and sailed by among her cohorts. The cohorts glanced quickly to see who'd been favored, but pressed in so as not to get out of the royal train.

Take a chance on me, Betty cried in her mind. You'd like me if you knew me. . . . Oh, please! (*And Love* 120)

Rosemary Reed, similarly, dreams of membership in the female dominant society. In her mind, girls from the college "would stop by of an evening for a Coke and gossip" (*Rosemary* 8). Her craving to belong is almost entirely female-oriented:

She wanted to sit, on a winter's night, as girls must be doing this moment, pajamaed ridiculously like the girls in ads, crowded into one lovely bedroom, eating things out of bakery boxes and drinking coffee and talking, talking. [. . .] *Rosemary, want some more cake? Rosemary, could I borrow your yellow jacket? Rosemary . . . Rosemary . . . Rosemary . . .* (122)

This scene of the “pajamaed” girls-only sleepover is repeated in multiple Stolz novels, [4] and in each the emphasis is on a kind of female communication and understanding that seems to be absent from the protagonists' interactions with boys. In Stolz's *Good-by My Shadow* (1957), Barbara Perry experiences a daydream that is similar to Rosemary's, only Barbara's dream is fixated on a single popular girl:

She pictured herself and Margaret Obemeyer, spending the night together at one of their houses, doing their nails perhaps, and talking things over. They'd be such good friends that they could discuss anything . . . not just boys and sex, though those would certainly form a part of their evening's communication. [. . .] Yes, she could hear herself, going on and on, confident of understanding. (*Good-by* 74-75)

As Barbara's dream suggests, the girls' desire in each of these instances is not simply to be accepted by the female dominant society, but to be fully understood and valued.

## The Gaze and the Prom Queen

Of course, while Betty's and Rosemary's hopes focus more on the female dominant society as a group, Barbara's intense concentration on Margaret as an individual suggests a possible move from the homosocial to the homoerotic. Situations that can be read as indicative of both homoerotic and homosocial desire are actually quite common to girls' interactions within the female junior novel genre. [5] For the majority of Stolz's female protagonists, however, the underlying cause of either type of longing remains the desire for social status.

The merging of homosocial/homoerotic desire with a yearning for social dominance becomes visible through Stolz's use of a female gaze, in which the female protagonists watch the most popular girls in the female dominant society. By the end of *Good-by My Shadow*, Barbara has achieved enough social status that when Randy Lawson (or Boy Capital) takes her to a party at Margaret's house, Barbara is able to relax and enjoy watching Margaret:

Margaret was beside her, saying in her slightly husky voice, “How're you, Barby? I'm so glad you could come.”

Barbara looked at her, at the short springy hair, the direct bright eyes, the fine bones and animated posture. Margaret had always given her the impression that she could, if she wished, merely leave the floor and sail from

one point to another. She listened to the throaty, friendly voice, and the tension within her loosened. She could almost feel it flowing away through her fingertips, as she said, "I'm glad, too." Did she dare to call her Margy? "Margy." (*Good-by* 197)

While this passage has the potential to be read as Barbara's homoerotic desire for Margaret, it can also be read as Barbara's desire to *be* Margaret, in terms of wielding Margaret's power to be "everybody's dream girl" (116), or the most dominant of the female dominant society. Barbara's impression that Margaret can "leave the floor and sail from one point to another" (197) suggests a level of social ability that Barbara still lacks, but ultimately desires (although her date with Randy Lawson and inclusion in the party suggests that she, too, will soon gain social dominance).

The visual climax of the desiring female gaze is revealed in the culminating event of many of the female junior novels: the prom. For dominated girls within Stolz's novels, this is the instance when the struggle for dominance ceases momentarily, and the apotheoses of the female social elite—those beautiful and popular sovereigns, the prom queens—are watched and celebrated in all their glory. These are the girls who, according to Lotta Dunne's Aunt Muriel in Stolz's *Who Wants Music on Monday* (1963),

sail lightly along the surface of their youth, never suspecting the existence of undercurrents, riptides, rapids. The cheer leaders, the prom and hop belles, the flirts, who look forward to the next date, the next dress, anticipate college as a more glamorous extension of high school and marriage as a state of being adored by a perfect man. (54)

In that fateful moment of prom crowning, these girls, the most dominant of the female dominant society, become not only the object of other girls' desire, but the object of their own. In *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Catherine Driscoll examines the role of the bride in popular culture. She notes that the bride can be understood as both the object of patriarchal desire and as an instance of identified passivity, but she also suggests that "the desire to be the bride that looks at the bride is not a desiring gaze defined by this standard heteropatriarchal narrative, and perhaps contains no narrative of sexualized possession at all" (187). The same, I suspect, may be said of the prom queen within the female dominant society. She is no longer a commodity passed between men, although she may view her position as a sort of commodity in itself, since it entrenches her as a governing figure in the adolescent society. Still, even if she holds that view, she is the only one who enacts the possessing. Her prom king or date—for there has to be a male figure to provide her with the appropriate boy capital to enable her to gain her position—is simply an accessory; as Driscoll explains, the bride (prom queen) "is her own ideal and love object, and any groom (the one who loves me) is a means to that idealization" (187). Thus although Dody Jenks plans and implements a social coup to secure her date, Ben, in Stolz's *Pray Love, Remember*, Ben is completely forgotten in the instant of her social crowning. Instead, the moment becomes solely about the rightful homage that must be paid to Dody Jenks, Snow Queen, most dominant member of the female dominant society:

The music changed to Strauss, the big doors swung wide, and Dody, with the faintest of smiles, surveyed her domain. As at home, there was complete silence, except for the music, and then a long breath of capitulation [. . .] as they all stared. [. . .] There had been lovely queens in Plattstown High other years, but without question, Dody Jenks, in her frosty green sheath with the rhinestones sparkling like icicles against her hair, was a Snow Queen from a fairy tale. (121)

Irigaray's vision may not be completely fulfilled, but the female dominant society of Stolz's texts—and her prom queens, in particular—certainly express a possible alternative to a society in which women are exchangeable commodities in relations between men. They may still exist under the ultimate rule of patriarchy, but their paradoxical power within the teen society suggests a kind of hope for the protagonists, regardless of whether or not the reason behind that hope—the establishment of “another’ kind of commerce, among themselves” (Irigaray 196)—is truly possible.<sup>[6]</sup>

As this article has attempted to articulate, the elements that form the romance plot of Stolz's specifically 1950s style of female junior novel—the female conformity, “boy capital” and girls' attempts to gain social dominance by dating boys, pajama parties and the emergence of the female dominant society, and, of course, the recognition of the prom queen as the object of her own desire—may seem “sugar-puff” or “saccharine,” but they ultimately create *and* mask complex female power struggles within a highly regulated adolescent social hierarchy. Perhaps Betty Wilder's observation, which feels both suffocating and combative in its surface reading, may actually suggest a course of action, and a hope: “boys might be kings, but it was the girls who ruled the court” (*And Love* 123).

## Lingering Questions

The first question that inevitably arises following an analysis of Stolz's novels through the lens of either popular romance or young adult literature is this: to what extent did the teen girl readers recognize the female struggles hidden within these stories of first love? My answer is, unfortunately, necessarily inadequate: we cannot know. The teenage girls of the 1950s and 1960s have long since grown up, and very little record remains of their relationships with these novels.

There are a few studies available regarding the use of Stolz's texts in relation to educational and psychological theories of their day.<sup>[7]</sup> The most notable of these is Cynthia Frease's 1963 dissertation, in which she examines Stolz's texts in terms of bibliotherapy and R.J. Havighurst's developmental tasks. In 1950 David Russell and Caroline Shrodes created the dominant definition of bibliotherapy, or therapy through reading, as:

a process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature—interaction which may be utilized for personality assessment, adjustment, and growth . . . it conveys the idea that all teachers must be aware of the effects of reading upon children and must realize that, through

literature, most children can be helped to solve the developmental problems of adjustment which they face. (335)

Connected to educational bibliotherapy was psychologist Robert J. Havighurst's concept of a developmental task, which he defined as "a task which arises at or about a certain period in the life of an individual, successful achievement of which leads to his happiness and success with later tasks, while failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval by the society, and difficulty with later tasks" (6).<sup>[8]</sup> Frease's dissertation uses these connected concepts to focus on "the popularity of the Stolz books with adolescents," "the recognition by adolescents of the novels' literary merits," and "the help received from them by teen-agers striving to master the developmental tasks of adolescence" (206). Thus we know from Frease the assumed popularity of Stolz's novels,<sup>[9]</sup> whether or not the girls recognized the texts' literary merit (as defined by Frease),<sup>[10]</sup> and whether or not the girls thought that the novels helped them to mature successfully.<sup>[11]</sup> We still do not know, however, how the girls actually read these texts, or what they thought about them.

Fan letters to Stolz (from 1967 onwards), preserved in the De Grummond Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi, record some of the girls' thoughts. One letter-writer was Gail Morton, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who read *A Love or a Season* for her English class and informed Stolz that "the characters seemed so real and the way it was written made me feel as if I were a part of it" (Morton). Eleven-year-old Kim Richardson, from North Versailles, Pennsylvania, similarly noted that "I liked your book *Ready or Not* because I felt that I could just go around the corner and meet the characters" (Richardson). Her favorite part was when "Morgan was telling Tom that she loved him. And guess what I was doing! Crying. When things are really happy I get all filled up inside a [*sic*] cry." The tone and content of many of these letters are similar: the majority of the girls seem to feel that Stolz's characters are realistic, and that they can empathize with them. They (sometimes effusively) express great joy when the protagonist achieves her "happy ending" with her boyfriend. One may speculate, however, whether these girls' sensations of realism are predicated solely on Stolz's mimetic abilities, or whether they recognize—however hazily—Stolz's articulation of both acknowledged and unacknowledged codes and rules of feminine adolescence.

Some letters suggest that these girls perceived *something* existing behind the love plot. Carol Piascik, from Cleveland, wrote to Stolz regarding her experience of reading about Anne Armacost in Stolz's *To Tell Your Love*. Notably, that text is one of Stolz's female junior novels that does *not* include a happy ending, in that the boy Anne loves—Douglas Eamons—ends up with another girl, Dody:

Well, this is the way it happens. You don't believe it, but it does. All this time, underneath all the ache, I've been thinking there'd be a day that he'd come back, a day when he'd explain, and it would be all right again. He isn't going to explain. He's never going to tell me one word of a reason. And he doesn't have to . . . because I know. He's afraid of me. He's worked too hard, he and his father, for him to go to college, and that's all he wants right now. So Dody was smarter than I was. I loved him too much, and he didn't love me enough, and neither of us knew what to say. . . . (242)

As Piascik stated: “it was sad in a way how things worked out for her. It gives a person who’s reading the story a funny feeling.” This “funny feeling,” of course, may simply be a kind of sadness for Anne’s heartbreak. I wonder, though, if it may also be a response to the complex layers and struggles present in Stolz’s texts—a sense of “not rightness” that is greater than the loss of the happily ever after ending.

The second question that seems to arise when studying Stolz’s novels—and which I again cannot answer—is once more directly related to the issue of readership, and particularly to adolescent readership. Are these books “good” or “bad”? Implicit in this question are anxieties that lie at the heart of both the field of children’s and young adult literature, and the field of popular romance studies. Responding to the good/bad debate in children’s literature, Peter Hunt suggests that:

instead of saying ‘better/worse’, or ‘suitable/unsuitable’, criticism would be more profitably employed in saying ‘This text has certain potentials for interaction, certain possibilities of meaning.’ If nothing else, we would escape from the present confusion of ‘good’ with ‘good for.’ (83)

In the difference between “good” and “good for” lies the relationship between the major disciplines that participate in the fields of children’s and young adult literature: English, Education, and Library Science.<sup>[12]</sup> The power imbalance involved in creating texts for younger and seemingly less powerful (although such positioning is debatable) readers, coupled with the interdisciplinary nature of the fields, causes the questioner of whether Mary Stolz’s books are “good” or “bad” to contemplate numerous other questions and suppositions, most of which are unanswerable. Such questions might include: how do we determine what is “good”? Who determines “good”? Does “good” change over time? Is “good” affected by readership? How does “good” relate to any of the following: literary value, helpfulness in promoting literacy, helpfulness in creating literacy, helpfulness in navigating life events, etc.?

The seeming need to assess texts as “good” or “bad” also lies at the heart of stigmatized fields. The popular romance field, like the field of children’s literature, has traditionally addressed the question in an effort to bolster its validity as a scholarly field, as if empirical evidence that its texts are “good” (or, at least more than “not bad”) will promote its legitimacy to those prejudiced against it—both readers and scholars alike. In their introduction to *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, Eric Murphy Selinger and Sarah S.G. Frantz trace the “generations” of popular romance scholarship, starting with the foundational studies that argued against judgments of popular romance fiction as escapist, formulaic, or trivial. Instead, these early studies focused on the ideological complexity within the genre to suggest that “what seemed like formulas were, in fact, a ritual struggle with ‘very real problems and tensions in women’s lives’” (3), and that “beneath the trivial exterior lay ‘elements of protest and resistance,’ a ‘hidden plot’ of ‘buried anger or hostility’; far from an escape, these novels encoded ‘anxieties, desires and wishes which if openly expressed would challenge the psychological order of things’” (3-4).<sup>[13]</sup> Selinger and Frantz note the usefulness of this early attention to the subtexts of power, but further suggest that

The ideological focus of that first generation of scholars, for example, had its uses—but it also implicitly framed their work as an updated, feminist version of a very old, patently moralizing question: “Are these books good or bad for their readers?” [ . . . ] Only with popular romance fiction [ . . . ] do otherwise sophisticated academics continue to treat this question seriously, whether raising it in the context of political debates or fretting over the practical, empiricist exigencies of how “to measure and understand the actual consequences of romance reading.” (5)

Thus, I choose not to state whether Stolz’s female junior novels are “good or bad.” Rather, like Hunt, I suggest that these texts have certain fascinating possibilities of meaning. In fact, I like to hope that, with all their underlying tales of girls’ struggles and attempts to wield power, the female junior novel genre, with Stolz’s texts as representatives, fulfills the possibility inherent in Pamela Regis’s earlier statement: “the genre is not about women’s bondage, as the literary critics would have it. The [female junior novel] is, to the contrary, about women’s freedom” (xiii).

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[1] Alm was also a member of the Committee on Senior High School Book List of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), as well as an editor of the *English Journal*.

[2] For a closer examination of the use of clothing in the female junior novels, and how it relates to girls’ attempts to climb their social hierarchies, please see Amanda K. Allen, “The Cinderella-Makers: Postwar Adolescent Girl Fiction as Commodity Tales.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 33.3 (Sep. 2009): 282-299.

[3] Linda K. Christian-Smith notes that, in each period of her 1942-1982 study of teen romance novels, “sexuality constitutes a troublesome element of romance as far as girls were concerned. [ . . . ] Although girls understand that sexual favors are one element of exchange in romance, they are by no means happy about it [ . . . ] one is expected to pay for an evening’s entertainment with kisses” (373).

[4] Other texts that emphasize either the pajamaed sleepover scene or the desire for it include *The Organdy Cupcakes* (1953), *In a Mirror* (1953), and *Hospital Zone* (1956).

[5] In Janet Lambert’s *Candy Cane* (1943), for example, Candy’s recollection of her first meeting with Anne seems quite ecstatic:

Anne was golden-brown and black. Black hair like Barton’s, brown eyes that danced, and a smile—Candy felt faint from joy because, oh miracle, Anne’s smile was for her. Anne had come to see her. [ . . . ] Candy clasped her hands around her thin little knees and sat looking at Anne like a thirsty flower in a warm spring rain. (36-37)



[6] Indeed, although I view the presence of this semi-autonomous female society as positive, the protagonists' use of boy capital does cause me to wonder just how far these characters may actually invert Irigaray's theory of exchange, to the point at which the male characters could become the new objects of exchange intended to soothe relationships between women (although still, paradoxically, within a patriarchal society).

[7] Such studies include Cecile Magaliff, *The Junior Novel: Its Relationship to Adolescent Reading*, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat P., 1964); Mary Quarles Whitehurst, "An Evaluative Bibliography of Adolescent Fiction by Rosamond Dujardin, Jackson Scholz, Mary Stolz and John Roberts Tunis," (Diss. Washington, Catholic University of America, 1963); and, more generally, Dwight L. Burton, *Literature Study in the High Schools* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

[8] Havighurst included his first list of tasks in his 1941 publication, *Adjusting Reading Programs to Individuals*, but developed the concept more clearly in *Developmental Tasks and Education* (1948) and *Human Development and Education* (1953).

[9] Summarizing her findings, Frease notes that:

the Mary Stolz junior novels are well represented in the large secondary-school libraries in Colorado; that they are checked out frequently in a majority of the schools queried; that grades eight, nine, and ten are the ones in which Stolz novels seem to be most in demand; that the Stolz novels are noticeably less popular at the junior-high level than junior novels by other prominent authors but are in the category of one of the most popular at the senior-high level. (216)

[10] Frease states that the girls' judgments "correspond fairly closely to those of the professional critics and the writer's own, especially in the recognition of virtues" (223).

[11] Frease seems almost disappointed in these particular findings:

Students recognize that they have received help in mastering the developmental tasks of adolescence from reading the junior novels by Mary Stolz. The evidence is not so marked as the writer had anticipated, however, nor are the tasks which the writer's own analysis of the novels indicated the books would be most helpful with exactly the ones the students found more usefully presented. Perhaps the students are still too close to some of their reading experiences to be able to judge exactly what benefits they have received from them. (228)

[12] As Patricia Enciso, Karen Coats, Christine Jenkins, and Shelby Wolf describe in their analysis of the three major disciplines that study children's literature, as they relate to Christopher Paul Curtis's novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*:

In Library and Information Science (LIS) courses, Curtis's novel raises questions of its historical significance in relation with other Civil Rights era narratives. In education courses, students discuss how they will mediate children's responses and how they will develop critical, intertextual insights across this story and other novels, poems, and curricula. While English professors might address all of the questions considered by education and LIS scholars, they focus primarily on theoretical frames to interpret the story's narrative structure, character development, extended metaphors, and imagery. (219)

[13] As they state in their book, Selinger and Frantz are drawing their observations of the foundational studies from three watershed texts in particular: Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, and Kay Mussell's *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction* (3).

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