

[EXCERPT FROM MY FORTHCOMING BOOK, "KILLING MONSTERS: WHY CHILDREN NEED SUPERHEROES, FANTASY GAMES, AND MAKE-BELIEVE VIOLENCE," BASIC BOOKS, MARCH, 2002. IT'S AIMED AT THE POPULAR, MOSTLY "PARENT," MARKET, AND DEALS WITH THE VIDEO GAME AS ONE OF MANY ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA. GJ]

Chapter 9

Vampire Slayers

When we look at entertainment violence through the years it's easy to see only the most frightening changes: increasing explicitness, intensity, moral ambiguity. But some of the biggest changes are also the most encouraging. One was the shift from politically and ethnically specific violence—in which simply being an American Indian or a Soviet was enough to justify a character's role as cannon-fodder—to more fantastical and archetypal forms. A shift perhaps just as profound has occurred more recently, in the relationship of women to power and violence.

Traditionally, women in action stories have played either the victim to be rescued (thus an object of male power and a prize to be won), or the victim who isn't rescued (an object again, usually to make evil seem more horrific and its destruction more urgently needed). When women have taken power for themselves the effect has usually been destructive, and the women have served as *femme fatales*. There have been exceptions, from Wonder Woman to Princess Leia, but they appealed overwhelmingly to very little girls. Others, like Emma Peel of *The Avengers*, won cult followings mainly among late adolescents and adults. In generations past, as boys and girls passed through the ages of intense sexual differentiation, and especially as they entered adolescence, they generally showed a great loss of interest in, and even a real discomfort with, fantasies of powerful women.

During the 1980s that tendency reached an offensive apex in commercial entertainment. The action movies that defined the form—from

Commando to *Lethal Weapon* to *48 Hours* to *Raw Deal*—featured a gamut of female victims and hangers-on: whiny, limpid, petty, depressive, stupid, self-absorbed, infantile, cowardly, always sexy but never potent. Even the Indiana Jones series ditched the hero's strong female counterpoint after the first movie in favor of screeching airheads and treacherous icemaids, leaving adventure-craving preteen girls to identify with Indy himself. Meanwhile, teenagers of both sexes revealed a sudden appetite for slasher movies about male psychopaths terrorizing gorgeous teens—most often girls.

But those trends faded as the '80s became the '90s, not because of any adult outcry but because of the tastes of the next generation. Movies and video games featuring violence against women were steadily marginalized to a tiny audience of young men; every once in a while one will achieve some notoriety in the news, but none sell well. When horror movies returned it was with the likes of the *Scream* series that made fun of earlier slasher clichés and featured heroines who are more proactive and potent.

Meanwhile, the movie *Aliens* showed that millions of teenagers and young adults of both sexes could connect powerfully to the image of a beautiful heroine getting sweaty and bloody in brutal physical combat with a monster. Video game designers found that the voluptuous female fighters in *Mortal Kombat* and other games

were becoming favorites of adolescent male players—not only as *femme fatale* opponents but as surrogates for the players themselves. Then *Tomb Raider* became a huge hit on the strength of its underdressed, gun-packing female adventurer, Lara Croft, who, according to market studies, wielded an unprecedented "bimodal" appeal for both male and female gamers. The comic book industry was commercially revitalized partly by the fad for "bad girls"—angry, powerful heroines who wrapped their exaggeratedly female bodies in skimpy clothes and went head-to-head with the toughest males—who proved to be extremely popular with boys in their mid-teens but who also, at least when they were well-written as characters, drew a remarkable number of pubescent female readers to the superhero genre. Young people today want to see, as one avid female movie fan told me, "any chick in cool clothes who *kicks ass!*"

The change was signalled most clearly in 1992, when a low-budget action-comedy named *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* turned into a hit as big, surprising, and influential among teenagers as *Friday the 13th* had been a decade before. It was the story of a cute, popular, and fairly vapid high-school girl who finds herself charged with the mission of killing vampires who threaten to take over her suburban community. It contained gore, suspense, bad-taste gags, and cool teen references in the slasher-movie tradition, but wrapped them around a new kind of movie heroine: suddenly the sexy-but-naive girl who could have been one of the victims (or perhaps the terrified sole survivor) of a horror-movie monster was *herself* the ultimate dispenser of violence. She defeated her vampiric foes with the aid of a trait quite typical of young movie heroines: the vapid veneer that conceals an unexpected cleverness. But she combined that with something new: a complete shedding of the squeamishness and fear of violence that have always been part of the pop-culture image of the "good girl."

"She just plain drove the stakes right into their hearts," says Anne Sardik, an English professor who first saw *Buffy* as an undergraduate, "and then she'd check her nails. We howled and we clapped. No matter what she had to do, she somehow never lost her sexiness, her likability, or her ordinariness. For girls who had always seen physical power as either destroying women or masculinizing them, it was incredibly liberating."

Then, a few years later, the fantasy took on a new dimension: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was retooled as a television series. The humor and the violence were toned down in favor of plots emphasizing Buffy's cleverness at manipulating relationships and situations. The characters were made more complex and realistic, and Buffy's on-again, off-again romance with a vampire named Angel became a running subplot. The role of Buffy was given to Sarah Michelle Gellar, a soap-opera veteran and Maybelline spokesmodel who brought more glamour and poise to the character than Valley Girl cuteness. It immediately became a huge craze among preteen and teenage girls, with enough boys joining them to make it a ratings hit. By the late '90s the Buffy-style heroine—cool, cute, sexy, young, fearless, and willing to use violence—had become a TV staple.

Adult reactions to the new female action heroes have been mixed. Educators and cultural commentators have been saying for decades that girls need more media role models of power and heroism, and those models have finally arrived. But, as usual, youth culture refuses to follow the patterns that adults would like to lay down for it.

"I have a tremendous ambivalence about shows like *Buffy*," says developmental psychologist Carla Seal-Wanner, "and even more problems with things like *Tomb Raider*. I love the fact that girls have these symbols of power now. But I'll sit down with with Lindzay, my eleven-year-old, to watch *Buffy*, and I keep asking, 'Why is she wearing that *bustier*?' It's totally impractical for fighting vampires. Obviously it serves no purpose other than to make her sexier—by a standard, adolescent-male model of sexiness that means perky breasts and cleavage."

She and Lindzay were able to turn that into a running gag. Lindzay asked her once, when Buffy was doing some acrobatic stunt in a little halter top, "Wouldn't she just, you know, fly *out* of it?" "Which gave me," says Seal-

Wanner, "a chance to give her some behind-the-scenes information about the magic of *tape*." She is concerned, however, about girls who don't have anyone to help them process these images, particularly the girls who can never expect to attain the physical ideal held up by heroines like Buffy. She wonders what that tells them about the need to be sexy in order to be powerful: is it reinforcing the idea that girls can't be powerful, cool, admirable, unless they also look and dress like cover girls?

The linking of sexuality and power disturbs us: we don't want our young girls thinking that they have to make themselves into sexual objects in order to be powerful, nor girls thinking that they're less potent because they don't fit a physical ideal, nor boys objectifying girls sexually and dismissing their other strengths. The more I talk to the kids in my storytelling workshops, however, the clearer it becomes that that very link is precisely what makes fantasies like *Buffy* so compelling—and, often, so useful.

Buffy has become a familiar figure to me through the stories of middle-school girls. In the early grades, boys are somewhat more likely than girls to cast their make-believe in the form of *Pokémon*, *Harry Potter*, or some other mass-media property. By middle school, however, the roles are completely reversed: boys will go to great lengths to avoid seeming "geeky" or juvenile by playing with pop-culture icons, while many girls wear their fannish passions as a kind of identity. Even a boy whom I know to be a fanatic Batman follower will make up parodic superheroes of his own ("Bluntman," "Man-Man," "Duh-Man") rather than be caught fantasizing about childhood heroes. But every class will produce a handful of Charlie's Angels, Darias, or Harry Potters from the girls. Of all the mass-media heroes, Buffy has been the most common, and has also inspired some of the most interesting stories. She figured prominently, in fact, in one of the most revelatory workshops I've ever led.

It was an eighth grade class in San Francisco, and of the possible themes I'd presented for stories they'd chosen, as middle schoolers often do, "power."

The kids started by brainstorming types of power: political, physical, superhuman, economic, military. It was a fairly standard list. Then a girl named Eva raised her hand, waited until the class was quiet and she had my full attention, and said, "Sexual power." The phrase jolted the room. I've never seen thirty people trying harder *not* to react to something in my life. I asked her what she meant, and she started talking: about a girl being able to dominate a room with just an outfit or a look, about her ability to make boys act ridiculous, about retail clerks giving her special attention if she smiled and made eye contact; and about the undesirable side effects of the power too, like making other girls resent her, getting whistled at on the street, and drawing too much attention from older men.

She was remarkably poised as she talked. She'd obviously been mulling these things over for quite a while, and she was just as obviously speaking from her own experience. She was tall, pretty, genially flirtatious, dressed in the trendy mode of tight pants, bare midriff, and spaghetti straps. From talking to her mother and teacher over the ensuing days, I also gathered that she was a confident kid and a decent student, popular among her classmates, got along well with her parents, and avoided getting into trouble. Her explorations of sexual power were self-conscious and overt, but still with reasonably prudent boundaries.

With the teacher's approval I told her that sexual power was a fascinating theme and I'd love to see how she explored it. She grabbed a pencil and dove in, telling me how she was going to pull anecdotes from her own life and "make it funny and serious at the same time." Meanwhile, the kids around her were dealing with this bomb she'd thrown into the eighth-grade classroom. Her best friend, Kaitlin, decided to draw a poster called "Woman Power," about "the ups and downs of puberty." A boy named Evan drew a gag cartoon about a politician being destroyed by a sex scandal. Zach, a louder and more macho kid who spent a fair amount of trying lamely to get

Eva's attention, reeled off a silly comic strip about battling martial artists, then suddenly switched the focus to a voluptuous "samurai mega-babe" who burst into the action and slaughtered them both. When I asked why she was able to kill his heroes so easily he said, "Because it's realistic! Chicks always *do* win!"

A few seats away, very quietly and privately, a girl named Sophie worked on a comic strip about Buffy and her endless romance with Angel. She was very different from the trendy, flirty Eva and Kaitlin: a good student and earnest athlete, pleasant but shy, her changing body well-hidden under a Berkeley t-shirt and loose jeans. I read her rough draft, and thought it was a cute but very restrained comment on the way TV soap operas never resolve. But Sophie was frustrated. "I don't know how to end it!" she snapped. "It doesn't go anywhere!" I told her to put it aside, doodle on another piece of paper, and see what came up.

I went back to see what Eva had done. She'd done nothing. She grabbed her hair and said she couldn't figure out where to start. I spent ten minutes talking to her about the anecdotes she had in mind and how to focus her theme, and put her back to work. At the next seat, Kaitlin had filled her "Woman Power" page with a few gags about brassieres and make-up and then started floundering. I was trying to get her jump-started when I noticed that Eva was across the room, trying to get help from another student.

Over the next couple of days, Eva asked for help from the half the class, crumpled several sheets of paper, grabbed her hair a lot, and produced absolutely nothing. Meanwhile, her friend Kaitlin finished her poster up half-heartedly and turned it in early. Zach lavished great care on his mega-babe samurai. And Sophie, I discovered, had completely changed her story. It began the same, but now, halfway through, her Buffy had become frustrated with her endlessly unresolved relationship, announced that she herself was a vampire, flashed a pair of fangs, and in a lurid but hilarious final panel ripped Angel's throat out.

I'd begun to fear that Eva would end the week with a blank page, but I was wrong. She'd crumpled up her last blank page and ended the week with a bare desk. "I just couldn't figure out how to say it!" she said. When I asked if she might have been embarrassed, she blushed and said in the smallest voice I'd heard out of her all week, "I guess. Yeah."

Sophie seemed the most pleased with herself. She would look at the huge, bloody Buffy in the final panel, exploding from the end of a sequence of smaller and more constrained figures, and she would positively glow. "What's it mean to you?" I asked. "I don't know," she said. "But it would be hilarious if they did it on the show!"

The mixed results of that week of work gave me a glimpse into the function of stories and entertainment in these kids' lives. For all her courage in wading directly and publicly into the swirling issues of "sexual power," Eva wasn't ready yet to make anything coherent of her concerns. Kaitlin had tried a slightly less blunt and less personal approach to the same topic, but had also quickly struck the limits of what she was willing or able to express. Evan and Zach hadn't said a word about sexual power in class, and Zach, at least, had seemed overwhelmed by Eva's power; but they'd been able to play with the idea through media-based parodies. Sophie had done the most exciting work of all by funneling her titillation, anxiety, and frustration about the power of sex through a television fantasy. Entertainment gives young people a place to put their concerns and play with them until they feel ready to tackle them in life. It makes them feel more powerful in the face of their anxieties.

The issues surrounding body image and male attention can be powerful and troublesome for girls. It's important that the adult world help girls like Eva to develop personal potency beyond their sexuality, and girls like Sophie to understand that she can feel powerful without fitting some impossible physical ideal. But it's also important to understand that the sexiness of a character like Buffy isn't just a gratuitous media manipulation that kids would do

better without, but is, in fact, essential to her value as a power fantasy.

These kids know about sexual power. They experience its positive and negative effects intensely and constantly, as all adolescents always have. And, with exposure to AIDS education, increasingly extensive sex education, and seemingly endless, and unprecedentedly explicit, media discussions of sex, the generation now entering adolescence is accustomed to speaking about it more frankly than any generation before. With the increased attention paid recently to the crises of self-confidence that confront girls in early adolescence, it's also a generation more accustomed to thinking about their own psyches in relation to gender, power, and puberty. In many ways, these kids are better prepared for adolescence than kids before them, but in other ways they have even more worrisome information to make sense of. Like younger kids, they seek stories to give predictable, controllable, and reassuring forms to the powerful new emotions and concepts they suddenly find themselves having to deal with.

Mass entertainment is always a good source of those stories. And since parents and schools so often fail to discuss issues like the emotions and psychology of sex, power, and gender roles in a way that kids find relevant, entertainment that deals with those issues becomes that much more compelling.

The particular genius of Buffy in reassuring girls of their potential power is precisely that she is a vampire slayer, and that she is so sexy. Vampires have been overtly sexual symbols since they became popular in the Victorian era: Dracula was a charming man who took power over women by kissing their necks and awakening their repressed sexual passions; the "vamps" of early Hollywood were seductresses who essentially did the same to upstanding young men. The characters who defeated the vampires were always symbols of societal repression: professors, doctors, virginal fiancées. Decades later, with the sexual revolution, came a new spin on vampires, as seen in the novels of Anne Rice: the sympathetic vampire who can liberate as well as destroy by awakening sexual power and makes fools of the prudes who would destroy him. Even the new vampires, though, still wielded the power; sex was presented more positively, but still as a power that we could not master.

Buffy is a whole new model: as a vampire slayer she might have been another symbol of repression, but she's the sexiest woman on the show. She's also in love with a seductive male vampire, but she is pointedly not under his power. She's the perfect symbol of a girl taking power over sexuality. Not by bottling it up (which, as even the traditional vampire stories showed us, never works for long), but by facing it, loving it, and then outsmarting it.

It's critical, then, that girls find Buffy impossibly cool, and that they know boys drool over her. Buffy is an object, and her fans respond to her as such. But there is a power in being an object. An object elicits powerful feelings from others without having to expose any of her own vulnerability. To be able to be an object, or identify with an object, as long as one isn't trapped in objecthood, gives one a great symbolic power.

I asked that eighth grade class what TV shows they liked. Eva and Kaitlin didn't watch anything regularly, but did think Buffy was "cool." Zach leered and said, "I like *Buffy* ... 'cause I like Sarah Michelle Gellar!" The leer was a way of taking a little bit of power back from the sex object: she was there for him to ogle, and that made her fleetingly *his*. But in order to enjoy her in her bustier, he also had to enjoy her beating up bad guys; and as his comic strip showed, he understood and respected the power wielded by the "babe." If Buffy were a parent's dream, and developed her intellect and strength while dressing sensibly and looking more like an average high school girl, she wouldn't be nearly as valuable a fantasy.

"That was the problem with Princess Leia," says Anne Sardik. "I liked her in the first *Star Wars*, when I was little. But then came the realization that she had an annoying voice, no social skills, an ugly costume, and really

bad hair. She was a perfect demonstration that you couldn't be an action heroine without losing everything that made it cool to be a girl. By the second movie I was identifying with Luke Skywalker and Han Solo. One was cute and androgynous, one was vain and sexy in a teenage-girl sort of way, and both were way more potent than the Princess."

In encouraging our girls to be strong and competent while also urging them not to worry so much about being attractive and fashionable, we can unintentionally reinforce the old idea that power is incompatible with sexuality and femaleness. In the conformist world of early adolescence, maintaining a stable social persona as "one of the girls" or "one of the boys" can be an important part of building confidence.

This is the same dynamic that I've seen in younger girls' Britney Spears fixations. Spears' sexual style is so overwhelming that it's difficult for parents to see anything more in her than the self-objectifying sex symbol who seems to be saying that a girl's worth and power depends on attracting men. But, as little kids and teenagers both perceive, what makes her so potent to this generation is her portrayal of power. Emily, the second-grade tomboy "diva" we met earlier, found in Britney a symbolic image of a way to present power without having to step outside the exaggerated "girlhood" that was so important to her peer group and social image at the time. Adolescent girls seek a similar reassurance that they can be powerful without having to become boyish or asexual.

This is what I call the *optimism* of popular entertainment. It's the job of parents and teachers to make sure kids know the dangers brought by sexuality, but in our adult anxiety we can easily fail to acknowledge what the kids are discovering for themselves: that sexuality is joyful as well as scary, and the power that girls may suddenly find themselves wielding is exhilarating and fun and usually doesn't lead to bad outcomes.

The movie version of *Charlie's Angels* was almost universally blasted by adult critics, not only because it was a mess of a movie, but because it paraded its female leads as sex objects even as it showed them fighting evil. But teenage girls and young women fell in love with its cute, fun-loving, potent, violent, and frankly objectified heroines, and turned it into a box office hit. Shortly after, *Josie and the Pussycats* got more credit from the critics for its attempt to deliver a message about corporations manipulating the youth culture, but kids, as a movie mogul once said, stayed away in droves. TV shows like *Buffy* and movies like *Charlie's Angels* give girls a chance to celebrate and play with their new-found powers without having to act on them. Where the adult world will say, "Watch out," and present reality as a procession of dangers, hard choices, and self-sacrifices, entertainment says, "Be everything you want to be." If kids are allowed their fantasy lives, but shown how to modulate them into a productive real life, those fantasies can have a tremendous power to encourage and reassure them through some of life's most harrowing passages.

The arrival of sexuality is hard on boys, too, although our culture doesn't provide them with as many ways to view it or as many venues to talk about it. Girls are given images of the power of sexiness, but they're also given encouragement to remain innocent, they receive countless cautionary tales about the dangers of sex, and recently we've devoted great thought and resources to boosting their self-confidence. Boys enter puberty with less support, yearning to be as strong and confident as their adult male role models. If they're not—and hardly any of them are—they're likely to feel like geeks. If they try to compensate with excessive displays of fearlessness and power, they're liable to be labeled as troublemakers. I've heard from many young teenage boys who feel that adults fear, dislike, or ignore them, while lavishing all their attention on girls.

Boys begin to judge themselves by their relationships with girls in adolescence, and want desperately to be cool, in control, and admired. But girls grow faster, know more about sexuality, and talk about things that boys are

afraid to, leaving boys scared and confused, desirous and envious of the apparent power and wisdom of girls—and afraid to let it show. Some adopt strategies to take power back from girls: physical intimidation, or chasing much younger girls. More just armor themselves with a macho bravado. And a lot of them pull back into boyish geek-pursuits—video games, chess, comic books, sports fandom—where they can play at imaginary power among other nervous guys while putting off the coming struggles.

Puberty is a time when exaggerated images of maleness and femaleness become very powerful for both boys and girls. The overmuscled Hulk meant a lot to me when I was feeling like a nearly invisible wisp of a boy; at the same time, the Black Widow and other voluptuous women in the comics held my young libido transfixed. And, as many a culture critic has pointed out, when society at large is going through periods of anxiety about changing gender roles, the most common popular-culture images take on an adolescent bent: movies of the 1930s and '40s feature many images of powerful women and complex men, reflecting an increase in women's independence and economic power. But the 1950s brought a reaction in the form of impossibly voluptuous sexpots with tiny minds and square-jawed he-men with sweaty chests. In the wake of the '60s and '70s, the '80s brought Schwarzenegger and Stallone movies, along with thousands of underdressed, dewy-lipped women who were suddenly everywhere from MTV to *Sports Illustrated*. By the '90s that had contributed to the intentionally offensive extreme of *Duke Nukem*.

But as that exaggerated boyishness was still dominating teenage boys' entertainment, a new trend was rising. The pop-culture girls that boys began falling for were becoming tougher, more physically powerful, and (implicitly or explicitly) more violent than ever before. Confrontational girl rockers and rappers from Courtney Love to Lil' Kim not only won over angry girls but become poster-girls for boys as well. Jennifer Lopez became a sex symbol with a powerful body, a forceful style, and a series of hard-hitting roles in action movies. Even the dancers in music videos were noticeably more muscular and aggressive than a decade before. Gillian Anderson became a pin-up girl for a while even though she rarely appeared dressed in anything but boxy suits, thanks to an *X-Files* role that had her brandishing guns, wielding the authority of an FBI agent and a doctor, and plunging into gory autopsies of monsters and their mangled victims.

The most extreme representatives of the trend are the "bad girls." Zach's mega-samurai babe, like dozens of other killer-babes I've seen teenage boys draw, is a manifestation of an icon that thrills millions of teenage boys; but, like so many fantasy images that combine violence and sexuality, makes parents nervous. Like Buffy, these are sexy women who defeat mostly male opponents, but instead of Buffy's Maybelline-model cool they tend to have exaggerated breasts, absurdly skimpy clothing, huge guns or blood-dripping swords, lots of sweaty skin and nasty attitudes. And although market research shows that a fair number of girls love them in every medium, their principle fan-base is comprised of boys.

When I ask boys why they like these fantasy women they almost invariably either avoid answering me embarrassedly or respond with a variant of Zach's leer. "Lara Croft is hot!" "Elektra's wicked!" "Jessica Alba is fine!" And, indeed, any excuse to look at and fantasize about a voluptuous female body is welcome to most teenage boys. As the film critic Mick LaSalle said of *Charlie's Angels*, "Girls may respond to the irony and the power of the heroines presenting themselves knowingly as sex symbols, but male sexuality is much simpler. A guy in the theater will just be thankful of the filmmaker's generosity for letting him spend twenty seconds staring at Cameron Diaz's butt."

But these female bodies are no less "hot" when the women are damsels in distress or helpless victims. In fact, if objectification were the main point of the fantasy, they would serve a boy's needs much better if they were

passive and non-threatening. But the current generation of adolescent boys love active, powerful, threatening female figures—often as protagonists, and often, as in the case of video games in which the male player "becomes" *Tomb Raiders*' Lara Croft or one of the female warriors in *Mortal Kombat*, as a heroic surrogate for the boy himself. When Zach brings his mega-samurai babe into his comic strip, she immediately takes center-stage in his fantasies. These kids may approach their bad girls as objects at first, and they may tell themselves and each other that that's why they like them, but as the game or the movie or the TV show begins to unfold, they are clearly *identifying* with them.

Commentators on gender and popular culture have pointed out for decades the remarkable ability of girls to identify with male characters. Girls like my mother, who grew up loving *Flash Gordon* in the 1930s, didn't identify with the limpid Dale but the dashing Flash himself. Girls like Janice Cohen who fell in love with Indiana Jones consistently remember not just being infatuated with Harrison Ford but *being* Indy in their fantasy selves. Until recently it's been hard to find any sizable number of boys—at least boys who called themselves heterosexual—identifying with female characters. Elektra, Storm, Lara Croft, the Dark Angel, and all their sisters seem to be changing that.

Zach's remark that "Chicks really *do* always win" was a meaningful gag. From looking at the stories boys are selecting for their fantasy lives, I think they're both excited and scared by girls' increasing willingness to desire and express power, both sexual and otherwise. They envy girl-power, may resent it sometimes, but also want to partake in it and match it with their own. Since one of the functions of play is to help us take control over what frightens us, the teenage boys playing with sexy, destructive, exaggerated images of women are easing their fears of girls in much the way little boys playing with Darth Vader are easing their fears of death, destruction, and bad guys. At the same time, "becoming" mega-babes helps them contain some of their anxiety about girl-power by enabling them to say to themselves in imagination, "It's *my* power too."

By objectifying those same babes sexually (or pretending to) they take even more control of that anxiety-provoking power—and feel they're reinforcing their boyishness at the same time. Indirectly, these boys are helping themselves accommodate to shifting gender roles, to give themselves confidence that they can find even strong, challenging women attractive, and that they won't be overwhelmed by their own fears as they deal with real girls.

We meet the power of being an *object* again. These girls are sexual objects to the boys, but the boys gain some power by becoming those objects themselves. Popular culture doesn't allow men to be objects as readily: of action movie stars, only Schwarzenegger quite qualifies, and his old-school he-man longer speaks to many young men.

There's another power to these fantasies, however, that I glimpsed when I was writing comic books, including the early '90s incarnations of Wonder Woman and Power Girl. Although they were just as powerful and heroic as their male counterparts, they differed subtle but profound ways. The writers and artists who had developed their characters hadn't made them quite like male heroes. The heroines were less stoic, though no less tough, in the face of adversity, and were allowed a much broader spectrum of emotion. They could be loving, nurturing, and overtly protective of the weak in a way the grim Superman and Batman never were. They could be flirtatious, cute, embarrassed, silly, self-indulgent, and knowingly sexy. And if they flew into a savage rage against a villain it was liable to be a much more personal, and more human, reaction. By combining the "frailties" normally allowed to women in commercial entertainment with the power and anger allowed to men, they became much more complete characters.

Talking to fans, I began to realize that they would perceive female heroes along those lines even if they weren't written so. Writers, artists, and readers alike saw more vulnerability and more tenderness in a fantasy character simply because she was female. Even when I asked about the meanest, baddest girls, the likes of Marvel's Elektra, who could scarcely be called vulnerable or tender, I heard descriptions that suggested a greater emotional freedom than their male equivalents: they were "sensuous," "passionate," "artistic," "in love with what she's doing," "could love an opponent even when she has to kill him." The image of *woman* automatically created room for a teenager's imagination to project emotions onto her that he (or she) couldn't project onto the classic stiffnecked male adventurer.

As parents and teachers have worked harder to help little girls and boys recognize and express their feelings, particularly the softer and less aggressive feelings, and as emotionality becomes more central to mass entertainment, from children's television to *Jerry Springer*, kids are given a new challenge: weaving vulnerability and emotional messiness into fantasy selves that still feel powerful, invulnerable, and competent. The usual models of manhood—both in the media and the reality of most dads and other adult males—don't show very well how that can be done. Male heroes may be stoic or angry or funny, but our expectations of them usually don't allow them volatility, tenderness, or vanity. Girls have long been able to identify with male characters to experience courage, calm, and mastery in fantasy. Now boys are showing themselves able to identify with female characters to experience other parts of the human spectrum, without feeling that they're sacrificing their power or boyishness.

Those fantasies become particularly heated when sexuality enters the mix. Teenage boys will always be overwhelmed by their own sudden desires; the amount of sexual stimulation kids experience today through advertising and entertainment only makes those more overwhelming; add the dangers kids have grown up hearing about sex, add all the messages and realities around girls' physical and sexual power, add the ideals that boys think they are supposed to meet, and adolescence can be a time of intense anxiety for boys. Since one of the principle functions of imaginary violence, as we've seen, is to explode anxiety, no aspect of adolescence would call more urgently for violent fantasy than sexuality. That's also where male heroes are often most inadequate. A male hero might get the girl, might defeat a *femme fatale*, might establish dominance over sexual power in many ways, but he'll almost never be allowed to play with sexuality, or enjoy it, or make it a part of his personality. What Buffy does for girls, no Arnold Schwarzenegger character could possibly do for boys. But if a boy allows himself to identify secretly with her, Lara Croft can do it very well.

Angelina Jolie made some revealing comments about playing Lara in the *Tomb Raider* movie, after a career playing more vulnerable heroines in adult-oriented movies. Lara is the most successful of all the "bad girls," beloved by millions of young males for her huge breasts in a spandex top, full lips fixed in a cruel smirk, and twin, gigantic automatic weapons. After explaining how playing the troubled women in *Girl, Interrupted* and *Gia* helped her make sense of the pain and chaos in her own life, she said that playing a gun-toting bombshell meant that, "You don't have to feel trapped. I want to be free. I want to be loud. I want to learn things. What's holding me back? I'm the most alive and free I've ever been." She said she loved shooting Lara's huge guns, loved to "look down and see this big metal pile of shells and smoke. It makes you feel like a soldier. It feels like good." She expressed a hope that she could make a *Tomb Raider* sequel set in the moist tropics. "I desperately want to wrestle with an alligator," she said. Then added, "And we all would love to see her wetsuit."

As adults, we find the linking of sexuality and violence disturbing. Especially when those images are gory and intense. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dark Angel* are mild. Games like *Mortal Kombat*, *D.O.A.*, and *Tomb Raider* are full of scantily clad martial artists and tight-clothed soldiers of fortune with big guns. Watching a

teenage boy manipulating those sexualized figures as they hammer at bad guys and each other, grinning triumphantly as they make blood fly, can be troubling. But we need to differentiate our reactions from what they're experiencing.

I watched a fourteen-year-old boy playing *D.O.A.* in the form of a female warrior for a while. He was a poor city kid, but on the geeky side: skinny, glasses, friends mostly gamers. He was into fighting with body English and exclamations of "Yeah!" when his female combat-self landed a blow. Between levels I asked him, "Why'd you pick her?" "She's the best fighter," he said. But I knew enough about these games to know that every player has his own idea of the best fighter. "The best fighter for you," I said. "How come?" He thought a minute. "She's smooth," he said. "She doesn't do it with just strength, but she's fierce. She's *intense*." The games, of course, aren't sophisticated enough to give personalities to their combat images. But the kid was smooth, and fierce, and intense, when he was her.

Sexuality and violence are an explosive mix, and they can come together with serious, negative, real-world consequences. But through identifying with a fantasy figure who controls sexuality, destructive power, and heroism, kids can help themselves feel more in power over them all. Violent, powerful, exaggeratedly gendered heroes and heroines are fantasies that help kids *contain* the power of sexuality. Not only the power sexuality has over kids but the power that it gives them.

As parents, teachers, and as society it's important that we give kids constructive messages about body image, sexuality, gender roles, and the emotional turmoil of adolescence. It's also important that they have the stories they need to integrate those messages effectively with their own yearnings and fantasies. The stories adolescents choose also give us glimpses into the issues they're struggling with, and give us an arena to communicate with them—whether we're joking about Buffy's bustier or just asking a kid to tell us why he picked a female warrior. The current generation of adolescents is bearing the brunt of vast, frightening, and potentially liberating changes in our culture. Characters from Buffy to Lara Croft help them face those changes with greater power.

Keeping the lines of communication open with young people who are playing with fantasies that trouble us is a challenge. But none may be more challenging, or erect higher walls between children and parents now, than the video games known as "shooters."