# Female Students & Male Protagonists

## Alec McAulay

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## WHY DO FEMALE CREATIVE WRITING STUDENTS CHOOSE MALE PROTAGONISTS?

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For a number of years I have taught a Creative Writing class, with a focus on Screenwriting, to 3rd and 4th year undergraduate students in a Department of English Language and Culture at a private university in Tokyo. The students learn genre conventions, how to develop complex characters, and how to come up with story ideas and write them in a way that is engaging and entertaining. Often the class involves writing exercises designed to free their imagination. We often talk about 'what if' and 'what could be.' I impose very few limitations and would describe my critical feedback as 'gentle.' The students are novice writers, working in a second language, and from a society that is relatively guarded when it comes to self-disclosure. I do a lot of encouraging, and very little problematizing.

However, in the academic year from April 2019 to March 2020, I found myself taking more notice of the gender of the protagonists in my students' stories. Each year the class consists of 20 to 25 students, an overwhelming majority of whom are female. The class this year consisted of 23 students, 21 of whom were female. Of the 21 female students, 20 were Japanese and one was a French exchange student. We used the textbook *Save the Cat!* by Blake Snyder, a how-to text about genre feature screenwriting. The assignment brief required the students to write a two-page treatment for a genre film. Every year, a large majority of the students write stories featuring male protagonists. It is a tendency I have always been benignly aware of, but have never actively examined. This year, I decided to take a closer look.

In week 6 of the course, the students were required to submit a 100-word outline of their story. Of the 23 students, 17 were writing stories with male protagonists. This included the two male students – so among the 21 female students, 15 chose male protagonists.

The fact that screenwriting students show a tendency to favor male protagonists will not surprise many people. Cinema is notoriously male-dominated, both in terms of the personnel who make the films and the stories that are projected on screen. Behind the camera, a comprehensive study of film crews in the UK and USA found women made up only 26% of UK film crews (Follows et. al. 2016). With regard to the acting talent, Jamie Doward (2019) in The Guardian reports on an academic study that shows a persistent wage gap between male stars and women in Hollywood movies. Gender imbalance is found, too, in story: a study by Fleck & Hanssen (2016) of 50,000 films spanning the period 1920 to 2011 reported that of almost half-a-million roles in those films, two-thirds were male characters.

It should be noted that all of these reports refer mainly to the English-speaking world. For my Japanese students, Hollywood is arguably less of an influence in their cultural life than the inter-related fields of manga and anime – and anime, in particular Studio Ghibli, certainly offers plenty of female protagonist role models. It took Pixar until 2012 to come up with a female protagonist in Brave, partly one suspects as a result of unfavorable comparisons with Studio Ghibli, whose biggest hits (and most of their minor hits) have all featured female lead

characters, such as *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Spirited Away* (2001), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), and *The Secret World of Arriety* (2010). In addition, public broadcaster NHK's highly popular Asadora series is a morning serial drama that has consistently featured female protagonists since its inception in 1961.

The positivity is harder to find in society at large – Japan consistently ranks poorly in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report. In the 2020 edition, Japan ranks 115th of 153 countries. One does not have to look hard to discover why. In 2018, for example, there was a scandal at Tokyo Medical University when it was discovered the entrance exam scores of female applicants were deliberately lowered in order to keep the ratio of female students around 30 percent. According to a report in The Japan Times, the practice was "aimed at avoiding a shortage of doctors at affiliated hospitals. The medical college believed female doctors often resign or take long leave after getting married or giving birth, leading to a shortfall."

Against this backdrop, I decided to ask my students about their choice of gender for their protagonist. After receiving their outline in Week 6, I asked them to email me a brief explanation (no more than 1 or 2 sentences) of why they chose a male or female protagonist. All 23 students responded (see Appendix 1). As I mentioned above, fifteen female students (S1 to S15) chose male protagonists; six female students (S16 to S21) chose female protagonists; and two male students (S22 and S23) chose male protagonists.

The replies from the students were, on the whole, refreshingly frank and self-aware. Of the six female students who chose female protagonists, five of them gave reasons implying 'write what you know.' The two male students also stated this reason for choosing male protagonists.

Surveying the various comments and justifications offered by the 15 female students who chose male protagonists, two main strands seem to emerge. The first is the influence of normative gender representations in popular culture. For example, S1 thinks boys are better for adventure stories, and S3 says the same, noting that it is 'natural' to associate men with adventure. In her comment about 'spread,' I think she means to say that male-centered adventure stories also have wider audience appeal. S4 associates 'survival' stories with 'tough men.' S5 says soccer players imply men, an intriguing comment as the national women's soccer team, commonly known as 'nadeshiko Japan,' are relatively high profile due to their success, including winning the World Cup in 2011. For S6, a love story involves 'strong' men saving 'delicate women.' (This brings to mind a caveat on my earlier point about female protagonists in anime. *Your Name*, the massive hit anime from 2016, features dual protagonist male and female characters, but in the end it is the boy who saves the girl, and the story type is basically 'damsel-in-distress'). S13 admits that writing a 'prison' story meant, for her, a male protagonist, even though she is aware women's prisons exist. S14 makes an insightful comment when she says, "I feel many movies still a man changes his surroundings and a woman is always a part of the surroundings." The

textbook stresses that the protagonist must be active and drive the story, and for S14 this defaults to a male protagonist, because men are seen as change agents, whereas women are passive receptors of change.

The second trend that emerges from the students' comments in the influence of the classroom context. S12 mentions that she wanted to write a 'dude with a problem' story. The phrase 'dude with a problem' is one of 10 story types Snyder (2005, p. 25) proposes as templates for genre feature screenwriting. Until I read this comment, I never realised how overtly Snyder frames his story templates in male gender terms. I now find myself considering to what extent my choice of classroom materials influences the students to choose male rather than female characters. S14 mentions *Big* (1988), the key film screened in class and one dominated by male characters, as having an influence on her choice.

After reading these comments, I took a closer look at the gender representation in the materials I use in class. Snyder gives a handful of film examples for each of his ten story types. In total, he mentions 45 film titles directly. Of those 45 films, three have female protagonists (*Panic Room, The Wizard of Oz, Freaky Friday*), and two have dual male & female protagonists (*Love Potion #9, Titanic*). The other 40 films have exclusively male protagonists.

One of the first classroom exercises the students carry out is viewing trailers and discussing which film will be screened as the key film in class. Of the 36 genre films that were considered, 29 have male protagonists. I also have a list of ten short films that I screen in class. However, only three of these feature male protagonists (and not all had been seen by students at the time they emailed their answers).

This small survey of my students' motivations for choosing the gender of their protagonists has, I feel, various implications for my pedagogy. I expected to find that popular culture and societal norms would be one context for the male protagonist bias in the choices my students make. However, the possibility that there is a 'proximity effect' from the materials I use in class was a revelation. In my preparations for the spring 2020 term and re-launching the course, this is the area I plan to focus on to foster more informed choice among my students. As well as updating my materials to improve the balance in gender representation, there are two concerns I plan to make more salient in future. First, raising awareness: I will foreground the issue of gender bias in writing protagonists and have students discuss why they think their predecessors favored male protagonists. Second, encourage transgression and risk taking: I plan to have students engage in genre-bending exercises, using materials that focus on female characterization directly as a way of "triggering… imagination and breaking the mold" (Jacey 2010, p. 164). Taking these steps will hopefully enhance the creativity of my students in the coming term, and help them to make informed, ethical choices and write nuanced, complex, authentic characters.

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## Filmography

Big. (1988). Directed by Penny Marshall. 104 minutes. Gracie Films. DVD.

Brave. (2012). Directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. 93 minutes. Pixar. Film.

Freaky Friday. (1976). Directed by Gary Nelson. 95 minutes. Disney. DVD.

Howl's Moving Castle. (2004). Directed by Hayao Miyazaki. 119 minutes. Studio Ghibli. Film.

Love Potion #9. (1992). Directed by Dale Launer. 92 minutes. Penta Pictures. DVD.

My Neighbor Totoro. (1988). Directed by Hayao Miyazaki. 86 minutes. Studio Ghibli. Film.

Panic Room. (2002). Directed by David Fincher. 112 minutes. Columbia Pictures. DVD.

Spirited Away. (2001). Directed by Hayao Miyazaki. 125 minutes. Studio Ghibli. Film.

The Secret World of Arriety. (2010). Directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi. 94 minutes. Studio Ghibli. Film.

The Wizard of Oz. (1939). Directed by Victor Fleming. 102 minutes. MGM. DVD.

Titanic. (1997). Directed by James Cameron. 192 minutes. Twentieth Century Fox. Film.

Your Name. (2016). Directed by Makoto Shinkai. 106 minutes. Amuse. Film.

**Appendix 1: Student Responses**

(Errors is syntax and grammar have not been corrected in order to retain the authenticity of students' voices).

Female students choosing male protagonists:

S1: I chose a boy for a main character. My story is about adventure, so I think boy is better than girl for adventure.

S2: I put male as my story's main character because I got an idea from my favorite anime and I changed it originally to make it mine.

S3: I put a boy for a main character in my film. When I was wondering if the main character should be man or woman, I thought that man suited more as the main character of my film than woman. My film has elements of adventure a lot. I associate man with adventure because there are a lot of movies and manga putting man as a main character. For instance, ONE PIECE, Japanese anime or Pirates of the Caribbean and so on. I think many people think so, too. We generally have a image that man have a curiosity and energy than woman. These images seem to be related to traditional role of men and women. For these reasons, I put a boy as a main character. If we put man as a main character, our story seem to become natural and spread.

S4: The reason why I chose a man for my main character is that the theme of this movie is survival, so I thought a tough man would be better to develop the story smoothly. Also the reason why I (probably unconsciously) decided main character as a loveless man who is not getting along with his wife is that it is easier for me to imagine a loveless marriage than an ordinary family because I grew up motherless.

S5: I set a boy as a main character of my logline because the main character is a soccer player. In addition, the main character needs to be loved abnormally by his mother. I think that mothers generally love boys to distraction than girls, so the main character of my story needs a boy.

S6: I chose a man as a main character for two reasons. First, I was quite affected by "Detective Konan" because recently its film is very popular in Japan and the story is very interesting. Also, a story I made is included a love story and there are my imaginations that men are strong, don't lose against enemies, and save delicate women. That's why I decided that a man is a main character.

S7: I chose a man as a main character in my screenplay because in my mind a man tends to do something unpredictable. I think man is much suitable for comedy than woman.

S8: I chose a male character because I like boys' comics.

S9: The reason why I chose my main character as a man is because the film is based on a real story that happened in my life. I could have swapped the gender, but the story makes it more sympathetic by having a male main character.

S10: The reason I chose boy for my main character is I want to describe a friendship between boys and I often read novels and comics about boys.

S11: I chose boy for main character of my story. There are two reasons. Firstly, I got an idea of story from the current news, and the news focused on the boy. Secondly, the boy is about the same age as us, so we can identify with him easily.

S12: It can be both man and woman, but I chose a man. I really don't know why I chose it, but it was unconsciously. I can easily imagine that dull, ordinary boy loses his heart to the prettiest girl in the class and caught up in the incident. I totally imagine the "dude with a problem."

S13: Frankly speaking, I totally had no idea to choose heroines for my film. In my opinion, the word ''prison'' is usually associated with the men's prison, not women's although I actually know there are some films and dramas set in the women's prison. Then I considered deeply the reason why I chose this gender, and I noticed that maybe I wanted to try writing something I never experience in my life, ''men in prison''.

S14: I decided a high school boy as a main character. The reason I chose the gender of my main character is that I want the boy to be changed by a girl. I feel many movies still a man changes his surroundings and a woman is always a part of the surroundings. Big is mentioned as the example. Then I would like to make a story that a common teenager boy are influenced and changed by a girl of the same age from the future and he also thinks he changes the world.

S15: I mainly listen to male singers, follow male artists, film directors etc. And consequently, the protagonists of my different stories always end up to being a man, that I identity to but which is not me at the same time. What I mean is I try to put some distance between me and my main character but at the same time, I tend to give to him some of my masculine traits or what I find attractive in a man.

Female students choosing female protagonists:

S16: My story is the girl attempt to do dangerous things or gets involved in criminal to meet and approach the boy who is celebrity. In my surroundings, actually, there

are no criminal of course, some of them try to get close to the person they love. According to this experience, I decided to write the script like that. Boy as many as girl must dreaming of get in touch with celebrity, but in my own experience, it is much more easy to write about girl, so I chose the gender of my main character as a girl.

S17: Mainly there are two reasons I chose a female character as a protagonist. Firstly, it is easier to expect, sympathize and describe a female's feeling more than a male's feeling because I am female. Secondly, the film is about a sudden pregnancy, which generally has possibility of ruining more women's life than men's. Therefore, I thought female character have the potential to change the storyline dramatically in order to survive the situation. However, I will try not to overprotect females when reflecting my perspective on the writing.

S18: Why I choose a girl as a main character for my log line is the story setting came from my real experience of driving to Asakusa with my friends. All of them are girls so that I choose girl.

S19: The reason why I chose a female university student as a main character is because she is similar to me. I am also a female university student and belong to a brass band club. My story will be for especially Japanese university students. I want to make my story sort of fantasy but not totally unrealistic.

S20: The reason why I chose a girl as my main character is I can understand her emotions. I thought it is difficult to understand emotions of a man because I am a girl. But by making a girl my main character, I can be close to all emotions, such as happiness, sadness and love. I also like love stories played by a woman. These stories always make my heart pounding. So I chose a girl as my main character.

S21: I'll explain why I chose a girl as a main character. There are two reasons. First, I am a girl, so I really understand how girls feel about things. It is not difficult for me to express their feelings, but it's so difficult to do boys' feelings, because I don't understand how they feel exactly. Second, I think girls are more naive than boys, so it will be more interesting to choose a girl as a main character, because the story will get very complicated.

Male students choosing male protagonists

S22: I chose a man for my main character. This is because he is a basketball player and he will play in the NBA. If he was a woman, it would be a WNBA player. I don't know about the WNBA in detail. Also, there are a rival and teammates. Men sometimes can be more sensitive and feel the friendliness than women. These are why I chose a man for my protagonist.

S23: I chose male main character because it was easy for me to imagine his feelings. My main character is a high school student boy. Of course, I experienced that age as a male. I consider that I can imagine the feelings of male character who is the age I had experienced, easily. For this reason, I chose a male main character.

**Alec McAulay** is a writer whose work includes screenwriting, short fiction, journalism, and children's novels. He is Professor of English Education at Yokohama National University. His current academic research interest is transnational screenwriting in Japanese cinema. He has worked as script consultant for a number of Tokyo-based production companies, and for overseas productions looking to develop projects set in Japan.