

The Reception of Gender Portrayal of Characters in Young Adult Fiction

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Abstract

Gwen C. Katz stelt in de Twittergroep *OwnVoices* dat mannelijke auteurs niet kunnen schrijven over vrouwelijke karakters. In dit onderzoek wordt geanalyseerd of deze stelling in de ogen van recensenten terecht is of dat er sprake is van een ongegrond vooroordeel. Het onderzoek maakt voor de beoordeling van deze stelling gebruik van amateur recensenten en hun recensies van young adult boeken, gepubliceerd na 2010, op het internet platform *Goodreads*.

Voor het onderzoek zijn vijf boeken geselecteerd waarin een mannelijke auteur de vrouwelijke hoofdpersoon vorm geeft. Vervolgens is er gekeken naar het aantal positieve-, negatieve- en neutrale reacties van recensenten, gebaseerd op een vijftal aspecten waaraan de hoofdpersoon in een verhaal moet voldoen. Om uit te sluiten dat, volgens recensenten, auteurs niet in staat zijn binnen het binaire spectrum vanuit het perspectief van het tegenovergestelde geslacht te schrijven, zijn in het onderzoek ook vijf boeken meegenomen waarin de mannelijke hoofdpersoon wordt beschreven door een vrouwelijke auteur. Daarnaast is er, bij elke geselecteerde auteur, een boek meegenomen waarin deze auteur binnen het binaire spectrum een karakter beschrijft van hetzelfde geslacht. Gezien het controle effect van deze boeken, verviel voor deze groep de eerder gestelde publicatie eis.

Voor alle geselecteerde boeken zijn de top vijf recensies van *Goodreads*, in het totaal 100 recensies, verwerkt tot percentages positieve-, negatieve- en neutrale reacties, resulterend in 25 recensies per onderzoeksgroep. De verschillende onderzoeksgroepen zijn op basis van deze beoordelingspercentages met elkaar vergeleken. Daarnaast is de verwoording van de argumenten door de recensenten in de recensies vergeleken om vast te kunnen stellen of er verschillende argumenten naar voren werden gebracht voor de beoordeling van het boek.

Uiteindelijk zijn alle resultaten van dit onderzoek gecombineerd en is er, als conclusie, een onderbouwde mening geformuleerd over de stelling dat mannelijke auteurs niet kunnen schrijven over vrouwelijke karakters.

Keywords: gender, young adult, reviews, Goodreads, appropriation.

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Introduction

It was September 2016 when Lionel Shriver, author of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *the Mandibles*, took the stage at the Brisbane Writers Festival and gave a lengthy speech about fiction and identity politics in which she argues that “any story you can make yours is yours to tell, and trying to push the boundaries of the author’s personal experience is part of a fiction writer’s job” (Shriver). According to Shriver, that job, as she describes it, is jeopardized by a rise in super-sensitivity which puts prohibitions in the interest of social justice on fiction writers. These prohibitions come in the shape of handling any character that is not a carbon copy of the author them self with the utmost care and precision. Any scene that when torn out of its context can be viewed as disrespectful is a stain on the novel and the author’s reputation that no cloth woven out of fair explanations can clean off. In the same speech, Shriver proclaims that the author may be better off writing only memoirs, destroying the purpose of fiction writing all together, because it is apparently impossible to write anything authentic if the writer has not experienced whatever they write about themselves. It seems dramatic, but it was not too long ago when a male author reared his head in a Twitter debate under the hashtag “OwnVoices” with the following remark:

My book is a first person [Point of View] and the [Main Character] is a woman. I’m definitely not a woman. But it works because I was able to pull it off. I reject someone saying I couldn’t write a female MC because I’m a male because well, I just did. It’s called writing. (Robertson)

Author of *Among the Red Stars*, Gwen C. Katz decided to have a look at this man’s work and soon after his work became the laughing stock for many of her followers whom she showered in quotes of the very first chapter alone (Flood). The commenters on the Twitter thread came to a clear consensus on the matter: “[s]top writing about boobs when you’ve never experienced the frustration of wearing a bra” (Robertson).

Framework

The phenomenon that male authors supposedly cannot write authentic female characters is surprisingly not researched that often, contrary to cultural appropriation in literature. It is as if the literary field has already accepted that male authors cannot write authentic female characters as a commonly known fact. With regards to cultural appropriation in literature, Erich Hatala Matthes wrote an article titled “Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?” in which he stated:

Cultural appropriation can often seem morally problematic. [...] we often find misrepresentation, misuse, and theft of the stories, styles and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized.

(Matthes)

He uses the word “often”, which means this is not always the case. Yet, that is what many critics looking into the topic of men writing about women in literature seem to assume: always. Cheryl Lange is one of few who looked into how men write women in a disappointingly short research of five pages (Lange). Four out of these five pages of research look into the theories provided by several other critics, among which is Alan Williamson, who theorizes that male authors do not dare to write from the perspective of a female as they fear the possible backlash they may receive from readers and have a hard time imagining what it is like to be anything but their own gender (Williamson). According to Lange, all these critics base their research on the assumption that male authors indeed write less adequately when writing from the perspective of a female character. As Lange pointed out herself, these critics are also mostly female, Williamson being one of few male critics. Even Lange herself only wondered why men cannot write women, not once doubting if they truly cannot. These critics speculated that men are disadvantaged when writing women because

they have to create something outside themselves. In addition, male authors are said to be discouraged from attempting to write a female character in the first place because of the failures of male authors in the past and the backlash they received. Interestingly, from the four novels Lange analyses she concludes that the male authors write authentic female main characters, debunking her earlier assumption. Though it should be noted that none of the four novels she mentions are written after the year 1995, making them rather outdated for a research written in 2008. Lange justifies the lack of recent research material by stating men do not often write from the female perspective at all, which is of course problematic for her research. However this is not the only problem that arises when looking at her conclusion. She also fails to provide a clear method of deciding why these characters are authentic. Considering this, her conclusion may have to be taken with a grain of salt, leaving the literary world with an unsatisfying answer, if it can be considered an answer at all, to the question if men can write authentic women. This research will not look at the discussion in the same way. Instead, this research will analyse the reception of novels in which both male and female authors write from the opposite gender to see if there is any notable and significant difference to be found in the perceived quality of these novels, and in doing so, this research will hopefully contribute to the debate regarding appropriation of gender, as well as indirectly to the debate on appropriation of other characteristics such as sexuality, culture and religion, in fiction by revealing how far writers can step outside the boundaries of their own experiences if they want to tell new stories which are also deemed respectful and authentic by the readers.

This research attempts to circumvent the issues found in previous research attempts of this phenomenon. Before formulating the main research question of this thesis, several factors were held into account. The publication year 2010 was selected to assure a more recent corpus than was provided in Cheryl Lange's research and therefore the results found in this

research should be more relevant today. In addition, this research will only look into one genre, which is the young adult genre, since looking into a variation of novels of different genres would make the corpus too big. Every genre has its advantages and disadvantages, but it seems the most inconvenient to look at non-fiction, such as classic literary or historical fiction, since any poor portrayal of a character could then be rationalised by the time setting and people's behaviour in said time setting. As for fiction, the fantasy and sci-fi genres could be problematic to review with regards to this research if the novels were to introduce alien races and new cultures, since a reviewer cannot state something is appropriated incorrectly when the culture that was appropriated is made up. Therefore, those genres can only be used when the main or major characters in the book were according to reviewers not inherently affected by a made up race. The research then looked to further specify what fiction genre it wanted to look into. Children's books were highly unlikely to contain anything for reviewers to discuss that is relevant to the research question, which resulted in young adult fiction and adult fiction being the least controversial options. To decide upon which of the two categories under fiction would make for a better research option, it is important to look at what exactly distinguishes the two. In a blog on *Let The Words Flow*, Susan Dennard lists a number of things that distinguishes the two genres, but there is one point that seems relevant to make a decision which to research for this particular research question, namely the word count, which is less for young adult fiction (Dennard). A lower word count, and thus thinner books, tend to be more appealing for a quick read and therefore may gain a bigger audience and in turn more reviews. In an article by Daniel Boffey titled "The truth about boys and books: they read less – and skip pages" published in *The Guardian*, Boffey explains that boys do not read as much and like shorter novels. Therefore, the lower word count in young adult novels will attract a more diverse audience, resulting in higher odds for reviewers to be of either gender on the binary spectrum rather than mostly consisting of female readers. To add to that,

young adult literature is catered to, as the name implies, young adults. Considering the internet behaviour of people by age as provided by the Office for National Statistics in their research of “Internet users, UK: 2018”, it can be argued that the odds of finding someone writing a review online decreases with age (Office for National Statistics). In addition, since young adults are still forming and investigating their identity it is more likely for them to respond to gender appropriation in literature. Seeing as all of these arguments speak in favour of young adult fiction and there is no clear-cut answer to prove one genre is a better choice over the other, this research focuses on young adult fiction based on the previously mentioned theories.

To exclude the possibility that only male authors experience trouble writing a character from the opposing gender, the research will also look into whether the reverse of this phenomenon occurs, meaning whether or not it is perceived that women can write authentic men. To ascertain the authors of the selected novels are not just incapable of writing convincing characters at all, regardless of gender, a comparison shall be made with the reviews of novels in which the authors stick to describing a main character of their own gender. Since most novels in the young adult genre do not usually get reviewed professionally, which means these novels are often not reviewed by critics that work for newspapers, only the reception of amateur reviewers found on the platform Goodreads will be included in the corpus.

Before moving on to the research questions, some general disclaimers for this research will be made. This research will focus specifically on the concept of what shall henceforth be referred to as gender appropriation in fiction writing. Though the term is not a perfect name for this phenomenon, it is derived from the term cultural appropriation used by Lionel Shriver in the context of the recent debate and is therefore the current best option. Since this research discusses a gender sensitive subject, an attempt will be made to keep the

writing in this research as neutral as possible. To achieve this neutral writing, any one author in general will not be referred to as ‘he’, ‘she’, or ‘it’, but rather as the third person plural ‘they’, which has been opted as an acceptable gender neutral term by Johnson in his article titled “English has a traditional solution to gender-neutral pronouns” published in *The Economist* (Johnson). Specific authors will still be referred to by the gender pronoun that is associated with them. Lastly, this research will not look into work written by non-cisgender authors. Not every author openly shares whether they are transgender or non-binary and to speculate their biological gender for the sole purpose of this binary orientated research would be disrespectful. In addition, non-cisgender authors were assigned a biological gender at birth and have in the course of their life time experienced what it is like to live as their biological gender as well as what it is like to live as their true gender. This would make it difficult to prove if one of the main theories critics have provided so far as possible reason as to why men cannot write authentic women, seeing as, in example, a transgender male to female has experienced both sides of the binary spectrum, meaning they are theoretically not disadvantaged and this would temper with the validity of the results.

Research Questions

Keeping the framework into account, this research asks how amateur reviewers, specifically on the online platform Goodreads, of English young adult novels have responded to novels published after 2010 in which the author writes a main character of the opposite gender on the binary spectrum as opposed to when the author writes a main character of the same gender. If the reception is negatively affected when men write a female main character and vice versa, then a significant difference should be noted by reviewers for that novel compared to other works of these authors. If the theories provided by the critics in Lange’s research are correct regarding the author’s life experience influencing what they can write

authentically, then this should show up in the form of negative ratings and reviews which specifically mention the character portrayal as the reason for the negative reception, since the authenticity and quality of a character is mostly decided by the readers.

To answer the main research question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

1. How are the aspects of a character raised by reviewers when judging the accuracy of said character's portrayal?
2. How often are the character aspects specifically mentioned as a main argument to support a reviewer's judgment towards the novel?
3. Are the character aspects raised by reviewers unique or do they overlap with the characteristics mentioned in reviews to the other novels, suggesting a recurrent pattern in writing?

Methodology

The reviews of five novels published after 2010 were selected of which the author is male and their main character is female and five more where the author is female and their main character is male, resulting into reviews for ten novels published after 2010 in which the author writes a main character from the opposite gender on the binary spectrum. In the case of a negative reception, it is important to establish if the author does not have a general issue with writing authentic, convincing main characters and thus for each of these ten novels there will be a comparison novel, which does not necessarily have to be published after 2010, by the same author writing a main character from the same gender. This amounts to reviews for a total of twenty novel titles, which are listed in table 1 and 2 below.

| Male Author | Novel with MC from Opposite Gender | Novel with MC from Same Gender |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Gaarder, Jostein | The World According to Anna | The Solitaire Mystery: A Novel About Family and Destiny |
| Green, John | The Fault in Our Stars | Paper Towns |
| Riordan, Rick | The Mark of Athena | The Sword of Summer |
| Stroud, Jonathan | The Screaming Staircase | The Ring of Solomon |
| Weir, Andy | Artemis | The Martian |

Table 1. Alphabetical list of researched reviews of young adult novels by male authors.

| Female Author | Novel with MC from Opposite Gender | Novel with MC from Same Gender |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Long, Hayley | The Nearest Faraway Place | Sophie Someone |
| Maas, Sarah J. | Tower of Dawn | Throne of Glass |
| Nielsen, Jennifer A. | The False Prince | The Traitor's Game |
| Roth, Veronica | Four: A Divergent Story Collection | Divergent |
| Schwab, Victoria | This Savage Song | The Archived |

Table 2. Alphabetical list of researched reviews of young adult novels by female authors.

These novels were selected based on whether the novels and authors met the earlier mentioned criteria for this research and if the number of stars on a scale of one to five rated these novels at least average, meaning three stars or higher, on Goodreads. In addition, none of the novels were allowed to have an average star rating of five out of five, as this would suggest there is nothing to complain about the novel and therefore it would be highly likely for reviews to merely state that the novel was written perfectly. Luckily, a five out of five

Goodreads star rating is near impossible, if not simply impossible, to achieve. For the record, these star ratings were put into figures 1 and 2 below, so it can be shown that no exceptionally poorly rated novels were selected so an imbalance between negatively and positively reviewed novels in the different categories could be avoided. Figure 1 shows the highest and lowest Goodreads star ratings per category and figure 2 shows the average rating the novels received by category. Note that this data has been collected on the 17th of November 2018 and this data is subject to change at any time.

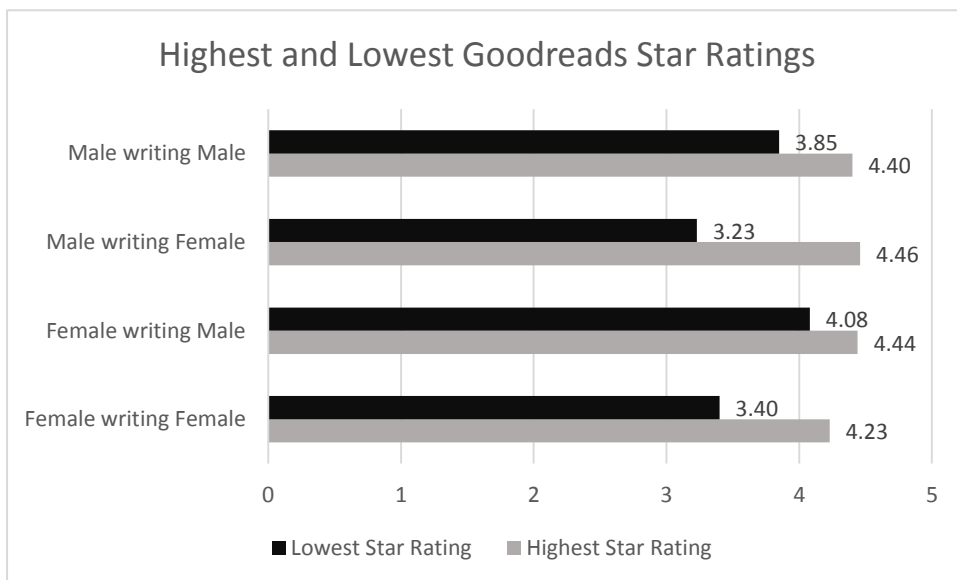


Figure 1. Average star ratings for the researched novels as of 17 November 2018 taken from Goodreads.com.

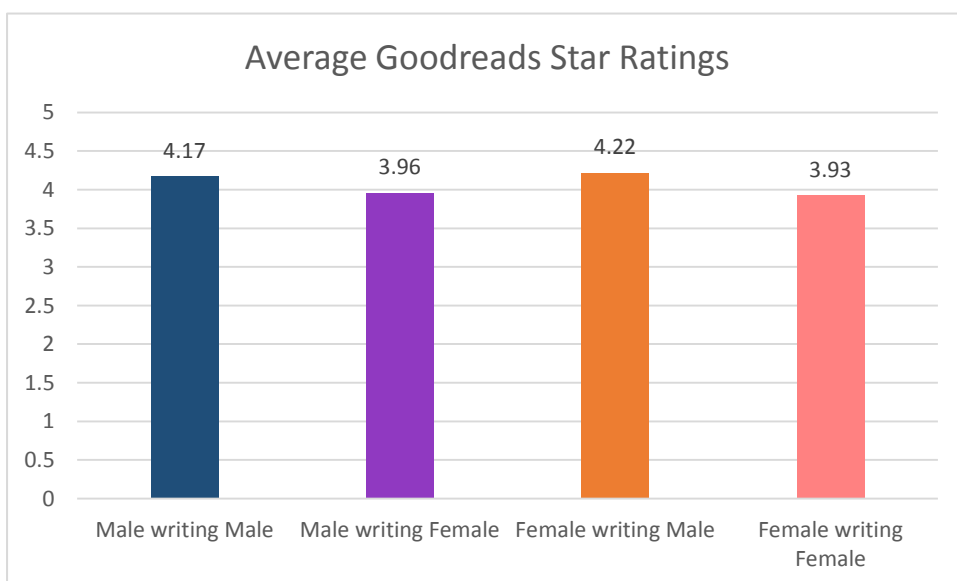


Figure 2. The highest and lowest star ratings found on the researched novels as of 17 November 2018 taken from Goodreads.com.

Going by these ratings, no clear advantage is given to any of the categories since the novels are generally rated above average, specifically at a four out of five star average. Simultaneously, the fact that none of the novels received a five star rating suggests that reviewers had something to complain about the novels, which means the reviews should provide relevant material for this research.

Now that is established on what grounds the novels were selected, it is decided how many reviews and on what ground these reviews are selected. For each of the twenty novels, at least five reviews will be collected from Goodreads. As with the star ratings, reviews on Goodreads are subject to editing and deletion just as the accounts of the reviewers that wrote these reviews. The names mentioned in this research and in the works cited were collected on 17 November 2018. Seeing as the research focuses primarily on how the main characters are perceived by the reviewers and how that perception affects the general reception of the novels, it does not matter whether the characters are critically analysed and so the amateur reviews as found on Goodreads are considered valid proof towards any claims that can be made as result of this research. However, the reviews do need to discuss something rather than simply stating that they liked the book and they need to be written in English. With that in mind, the top five reviews that met the criteria were selected for each of the novels. These reviews will be tallied so the number of negative, positive and neutral reviews can be compared amongst the different categories in what will be called the quantitative research, which will answer sub-questions one and two. The remarks found in the reviews are then compared and analysed in what will be called qualitative analysis. This will show if certain aspects cause a recurring problem for the authors for similar or varying reasons, answering the final sub-question.

Before the reviews could be tallied, it was important to decide what character aspects the research should look at. There are several aspect that determine a well-written character

and many blogs and books are written about how to write a strong character. To help answer the sub-questions, it is prudent to choose the most commonly reviewed from all these character aspects so the reviews can be used to see if the main characters from the selected novels score positively, negatively or neutral on those aspects according to the reviewers. Kristen Kieffer has listed thirty-three features that she deems essential for writing a properly layered character such as whether the character has a purpose, an identity, agency, and whether they are relatable and unique (Kieffer). From Kieffer's list, the following five aspects were most commonly mentioned in the reviews and were therefore selected for the research to look into: Status, relationships, personality, agency, and achievements. Status is used as an umbrella term to conclude whether or not the character has a believable history and present story. This includes whether they are living successful lives as, in example, a well-faring student or employee of the month, but does not include whether they are successful with regards to love and friendships, since that falls under the relationship aspect. The status of a character can however be influenced by the state of the world in a story. If the world building is unrealistic, the status aspect for the character is likely to suffer negative reviews. The achievement aspect focuses on whether the character has a clear goal for the story, if they achieve that goal, and how they achieve that goal. The achievement aspect often is paired with the status aspect of a character and will therefore be discussed in the same chapter. The relationship aspect looks into whether or not the character's relationship with their parents, friends, family or lover are adequately written. This could be influenced by a multitude of different factors since a relationship involves more than one character. If the side character of the novel is poorly written, this could very well influence the relationship aspect negatively. Agency discusses whether or not the character is active or passive inside the story and if their voice is unique and interesting. If a main character is not active in their own story, then that would undoubtedly show up in the reviews as negative judgement. The voice of a

character will often show through monologues and dialogues. Lastly, the personality aspect asks if the character is balanced in flaws, assets, and quirks. Too much of either will undoubtedly lead to negative reviews as it results in an unrealistic individual. This can be looked at in comparison to other characters in the same novel. Together, the aspects should touch on most of the problems reviewers may have with character portrayals.

The aspects will be divided into different chapters so that they all can be looked at and discussed in detail in light of the sub-questions. Some of the aspects will be grouped together due to how closely linked they are to each other. This results in the following three chapters:

1. Status and Achievements
2. Relationships
3. Personality and Agency

Each of these chapters will be divided into three, technically four if including the introduction, sub-chapters. These are in order: quantitative research, qualitative analysis and the conclusion for that particular chapter. Since two out of three chapters discuss more than one character aspect, these chapters will have two quantitative research and two qualitative analysis sub-chapters, but still only one conclusion chapter. The conclusion chapter will deal with the aspects in the same order they appeared in during the rest of the chapter.

Status and Achievements

As explained in the introduction, the status aspect of a character refers to whether the character's story, meaning their background, their current position such as their job in the narrative, and other factors that establish in what type of situation the character finds themselves in at the start of the novel, is convincing. The achievements aspect refers to whether the character has a clear goal during the novel's timeline, if they achieve that goal, and how they achieve that goal. One of the things this chapter looks at is how often the collected reviews mention either of these aspects to support their final judgement on the novel so the question of how often the character aspects are specifically mentioned as a main argument to support a reviewer's judgment towards a novel can be answered. This has been done by deciding whether the given arguments were presented either positive, negative or neutrally in the reviews. Any positive argument supports a positive judgement, any negative argument supports a negative judgement, and neutral arguments are either indecisive or do not state a clear opinion on the matter, meaning they do not support the final judgement. Some reviews did not mention a particular aspect at all. This lack of a mention is taken into the initial results as well. After this quantitative research is analysed and discussed, the chapter will look to analyse the relevant parts of each review to answer the question of how the aspects are raised and how often the mentioned arguments are unique to a given novel or not. Since the phrasing of reviewers tends to be unique, there is no accurate way to count these arguments and put them into a table or diagram. Therefore, the reviews will be analysed in the qualitative analysis sub-chapter and compared so the most accurate answer can be formulated for a conclusion. This chapter will first discuss the status aspect, as it is presumably less commented on and the status aspect provides a starting point for a character in a novel, making it fitting for it to be the starting point of this research as well. After discussing the quantitative research and the qualitative analysis

of the status aspect, the research will continue to discuss the quantitative and qualitative research of the achievement aspect.

Quantitative Research: Status

Before analysing the quantitative results in depth, a comparative overview of the reception of the status aspect between the different researched groups was made. This overview can be seen in figure 3 below. Overviews comparing all the research aspects per category can be found in the appendix under figures 48 to 51.

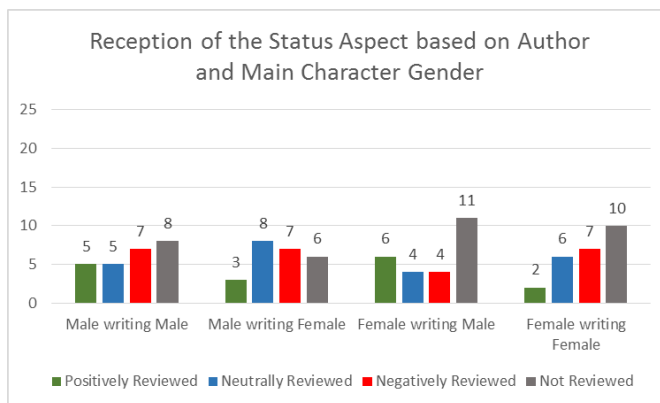


Figure 3. Comparison of the number of reviews on the status aspect of a character that were positively, neutrally, negatively and not reviewed per researched group.

Figure 3 shows that the status aspect is overall balanced in whether it is reviewed positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all, but female authors appear to receive less reviews that mention the status aspect than male authors do. In addition, the only category that receives below seven negative reviews on this aspect is when females write male characters, which is interesting considering the theories provided by the critics mentioned in Cheryl Lange's research suggest this category should suffer in the production of adequately written main characters (Lange). This same category also received the most positive reviews, so it appears reviewers on Goodreads do not agree with the critics on this aspect. However, these are only the exact numbers of reviews that were positive, negative or neutral with regards to the aspect

and it is important to convert these numbers to odds or percentages so more accurate conclusions can be drawn. These percentages are given below in figures 4 to 7:

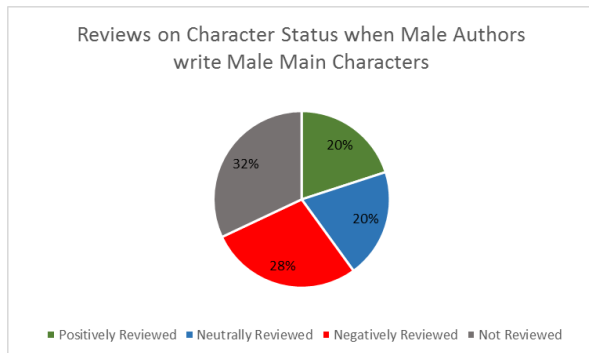


Figure 4. Percentage of times that the status character aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

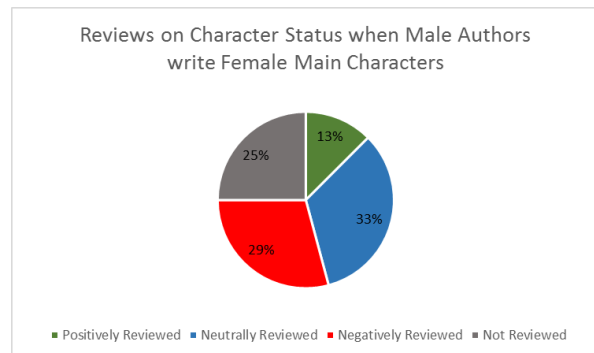


Figure 5. Percentage of times that the status character aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters.

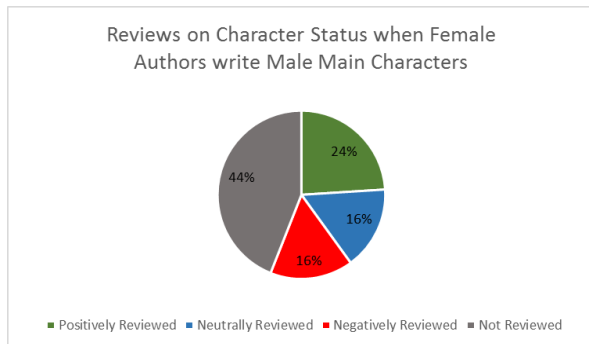


Figure 6. Percentage of times that the status character aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

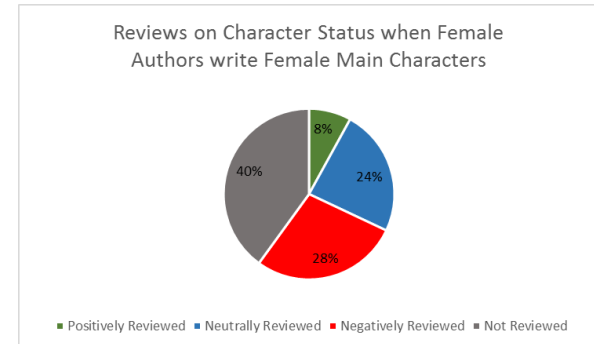


Figure 7. Percentage of times that the status character aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about female main characters.

These percentages show that in all cases, the status aspect is mentioned in over 50% of the reviews, however an interesting fact is that in the reviews for the novels written by female authors, regardless of what gender is assigned to the main character, the status aspect is not mentioned at least 40% of the times while for the novels written by the male authors this is 32% at most. A difference of at least 10% between categories can be considered significant, and this difference exists between female and male authors when they write from the perspective of a male character, as shown in figures 4 and 6, and when they write from the perspective of a female character, as shown in figures 5 and 7. When looking at the other digits in the figures,

it turns out that when male authors write a novel with a female main character 29% of the time the status aspect is mentioned to support a negative judgement of the novel while if a male author writes a male protagonist this is 28% of the novels. This difference is insignificant and can be neglected, but when female authors write from the perspective of a male character there is a difference in negative reviews of 12%, in favour of when female authors write a male character. Contrary to what Gwen C. Katz suggested in her Twitter thread, this would imply that according to reviewers female authors are actually the ones that cannot write an adequate male character while the writing of male authors does not suffer from the change in perspective. Similarly, female authors receive positive reviews on the status aspect of their female protagonists only 8% of the time while when they write a male protagonist they receive positive reviews 24% of the time, resulting in a significant difference of 16%. The change in gender perspective for the writing of male authors only results in a difference of 7%.

To further clarify the collected data, new diagrams were made per researched group only without the not-reviewed category. This resulted into figure 8 up to and including figure 11 below:

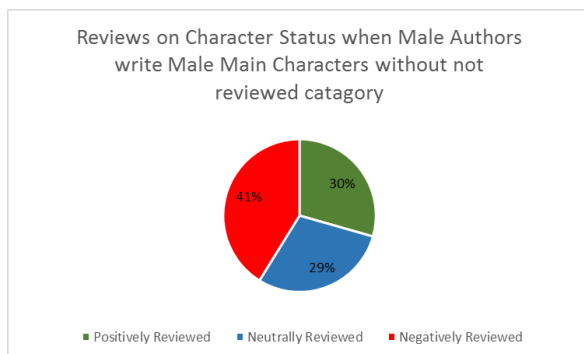


Figure 8. Percentage of times that the status character aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

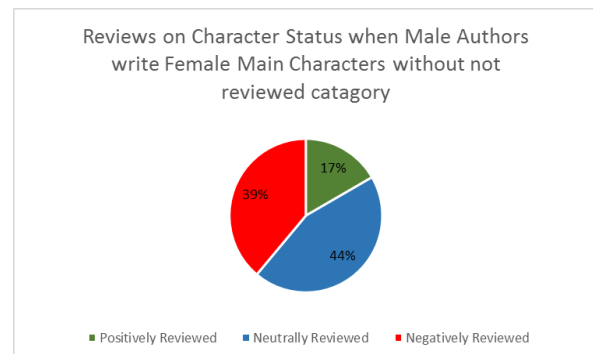


Figure 9. Percentage of times that the status character aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters.

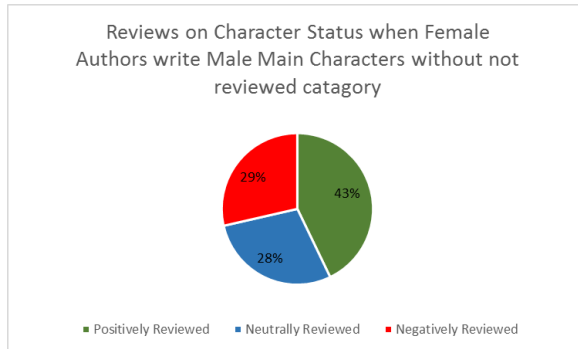


Figure 10. Percentage of times that the status character aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

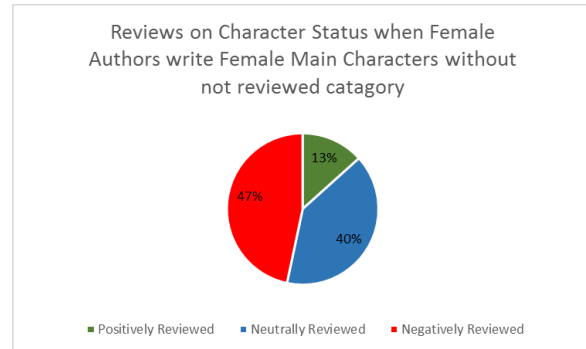


Figure 11. Percentage of times that the status character aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by female authors about female main characters.

Now that the not reviewed percentage has been removed, the data from the above figures reflect what the odds are for each category to receive positive, negative or neutral reviews on the status aspect. These figures show the differences in percentages are even greater than they appeared to be in the previous figures. In figures 8 and 9 it now shows that male authors actually do receive significantly less positive reviews when they write from the perspective of a female than when they write from the perspective of a male character, since the difference between these categories is 13%. The difference in positive reviews between when female authors write a female main character and when they write a male main character is now 30% and for negative reviews that difference is 18%. Another interesting detail is that when authors, regardless of gender, write female characters, there is an increase in neutral reviews for this aspect.

Qualitative Analysis: Status

From the quantitative research, it can be concluded that according to reviewers the female authors are generally better at writing male characters when looking at the status aspect while male authors are better at writing female characters. However, nothing conclusive can

be said until it is revealed how exactly these aspects are raised by reviews. As pointed out in the introduction, reviewers can be negative about the status aspect because a character's position is not relatable, but they can also take issue with the world building which in turn has a negative impact on the main character. That said, reviewers can also not have a general consensus on what is wrong with a novel and instead have a variation of reasons to support their judgement of the aspect.

When looking at the quotes, it becomes evident that most of the time a reviewer mentions status they simply do so to establish what the novel is about rather than giving their opinion on whether the status is convincing or plausible in the story, which falls in line with the high number of neutral reviews found in the quantitative research of the status aspect. One of the quotes that shows this is made by Amalia Gavea in her review to the story *The World According to Anna* by Jostein Gaarder: "Anna, a sixteen-year-old girl from Norway, is deeply concerned about climate change and its dreadful results" (Gavea). It can be argued that no complaint regarding the status of Anna in this case implies that the status is positively reviewed, but since this was not explicitly stated in the review, that conclusion can for the sake of accuracy not be drawn, resulting in a neutral review mention for the data. The reason why it cannot be stated that this review is positive for the sole reason that it is not negative is because there are also reviewers like Bionic Jean who comment in the following way on *The Solitaire Mystery: A Novel about Family and Destiny* also by Jostein Gaarder: "[T]he family history, although complicated, is compelling, and fully explained in the end" (Bionic Jean). This shows that reviewers are perfectly capable of expressing a positive opinion on the status of a character, meaning it is doubtful that Gavea had a positive opinion which she did not explicitly express. What Bionic Jean's comment also shows is that they believe a good status, so a good background story or character history in this case, is compelling and explained when complicated, in other words: plausible and comprehensible. Goodreads reviewer Sophie agrees

that a status needs to be compelling although she gives a negative review on *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green by saying that the plot is random and “doesn’t even make sense” (Sophie, *the Fault in Our Stars*). However, that is not all that Sophie complains about concerning the status, because she states that “it’s always the [same thing]” when it comes to John Green novels and that the perspective or position of the main character in the story is unbelievable (Sophie, *The Fault in Our Stars*). In other words, the character’s position is not plausible and the story not unique. Reviewer Ayesha elaborates on Sophie’s point about *The Fault in Our Stars* by pointing out a loophole in the story when she says “none of the teenage characters from this book show any interest in reading high literature and poetry [...] then what’s the reason behind their ability to spew pretentious monologues?” (Ayesha). So far that means the status of a character needs to be compelling, believable, unique, correct and comprehensible. When it comes to novels written by male authors, reviewers with a negative opinion often complain the position and story of the main character is not believable or unique, especially so when they write a female main character, but also when they write male main characters. To use the review by Emily on Andy Weir’s *Artemis* as an example, she writes that she “liked the overall idea” but “didn’t like the characters” because the main character did not come across as the twenty-six years old woman she was stated to be and she even goes as far as saying “I don’t understand why men authors struggle so hard to write female characters” (Emily, *Artemis*). It would be well to note that this is the one and only instance in all the one hundred reviews researched for this thesis that a reviewer states that male authors supposedly struggle writing female characters. Female authors, regardless from what gender perspective they write, on the other hand receive complains about their stories and world building being unbelievable which results into the status of the main character suffering because of it. Reviewer Tadiana comments in her review to *The False Prince* by Jennifer Nielsen that “[t]wo weeks (!!) is all that Conner takes to turn three rag-tag orphans into literate, knowledgeable, sword-wielding, horse-riding

princes? Not a chance. You'd need six months, maybe a year, at least” (Tadiana, *The False Prince*) and reviewer Nataliya comments in her review to *Divergent* that “this society is unbelievable. I’m not convinced that there was a way society could get to this point, because the details are so minimal and poorly thought out” (Nataliya, *Divergent*). Neither of them mention an issue with the character’s status, but explain that since the world building is implausible, the character automatically ends up in an implausible scenario. Similarly, when female authors receive a positive review remark regarding the status aspect in their novels, most of the time it is not because the reviewers have something positive to say about the position of the main character, but because the world building was unique and compelling. The same can be said for when male authors receive positive feedback. Again, the focus appears to be on the world building rather than on the status of the character. To stay with reviews on Andy Weir’s *Artemis*, reviewer Melissa writes that “Jazz doesn't live in the good part of town. Yes, the city on the moon is called Artemis and they have their rich side and poor side. It's just too awesome to read about” (Melissa, *Artemis*). The last part refers to the city on the moon called Artemis which is too awesome to read about, but the status of Jazz is neutrally stated in it this context. Jazz apparently is considered awesome by the reviewer because she lives in the city Artemis. An implication that is further supported by this quote about main character Jazz “[and she lives on the moon!]”, which was originally written in all caps (Melissa, *Artemis*). Either this means that male authors can only write a compelling status for characters if their world building is so brilliant that the character can basically not have a bad status in it, which is doubtful, or, the more likely option, reviewers avoid focusing on the status of a character written by a male author if it is good, almost as if reviewers do not like to admit that a male author did a good job, and it is simply expected of females to write compelling and plausible female main characters, as was suggested as a possible reason in the sub-chapter concerning the quantitative research as well, meaning they need no praise. This theory is even more

probable because any time a character does get praise for having a well-written, compelling and unique status, it is about a male main-character, such as with Bionic Jean's review, more often than it is about a female main character, which is information that is reflected in figures 4 and 5. Combining these findings to those found in the quantitative research suggests that male authors, according to reviewers, write a more compelling or relatable status for their female protagonists than female authors do. What is fascinating as well is that the exact opposite of this phenomenon occurs when authors write male protagonists. In other words, when it comes to the reviewer's opinion of to the status aspect, the theory that male authors cannot write adequate female characters is debunked.

Quantitative Research: Achievements

Now that the status aspect has been analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively, it is time to look into the closely related achievement aspect. Before looking at the percentages that reflect the odds for each category to receive a positive, negative or neutral review on the achievement aspect, the tallied results were put into figure 12 below:

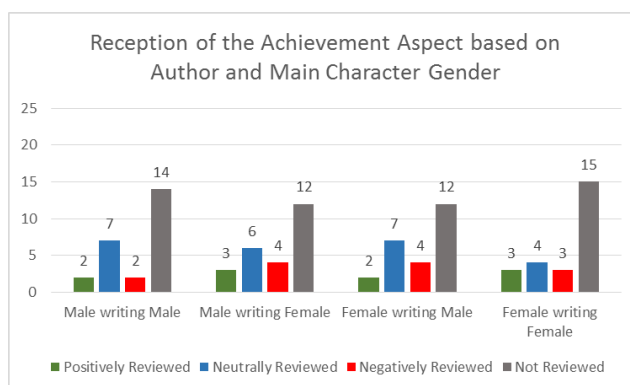


Figure 12. Comparison of the number of reviews on the achievement aspect of a character that were positively, neutrally, negatively and not reviewed per researched group.

The first detail that can be found in this figure is that the achievement aspect of a character is often simply not mentioned in reviews. The achievements aspects deals with the

goals of a character and how the character achieves their set goal throughout the story. In other words, this aspect entails a major part of the plot of the story, making the lack of reviews intriguing. Besides the lack of reviews, there is also a spike in neutral reviews compared to negative and positive reviews. Other than that, there are no apparent differences to point out in the tallied results.

With the different groups compared in the tallied results of figure 12, more detailed diagrams of each specific category were made and analysed. These more detailed diagrams are shown in figures 13 up to and including 16 below:

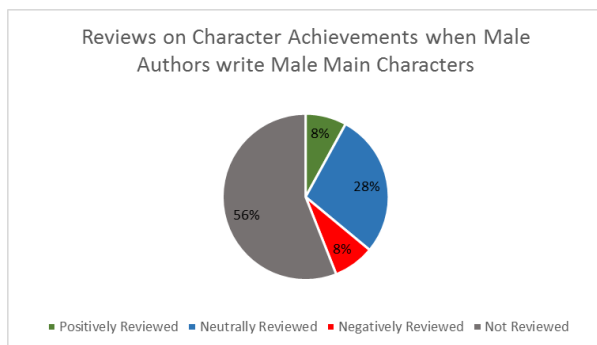


Figure 13. Percentage of times that the achievement aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

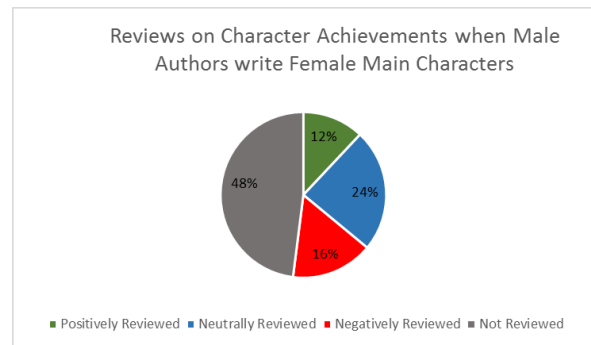


Figure 14. Percentage of times that the achievement aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters

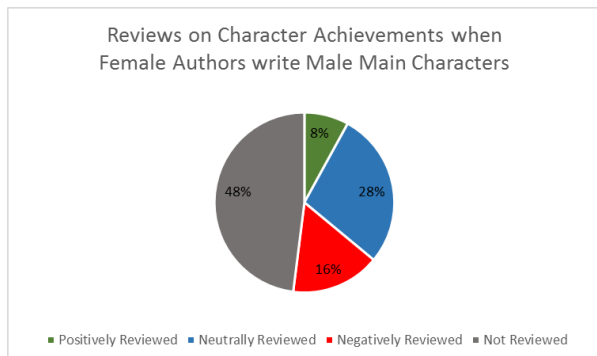


Figure 15. Percentage of times that the achievement aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

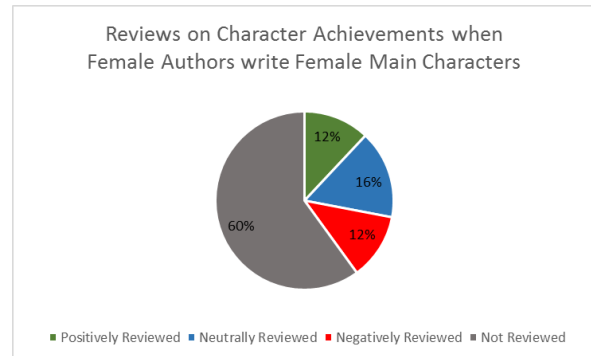


Figure 16. Percentage of times that the achievement aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about female main characters

In novels with a male main character, regardless of author gender, the percentage of neutral reviews is 28%, and in novels with a female main character written by a male and

female authors the numbers are 24% and 16% respectively. The number of times the reviewers did not review the achievement aspect is 48% for when authors of either gender write from the perspective of the opposing gender on the binary spectrum, 56% for when male authors write male main characters and 60% when female authors write a female protagonist. The only significant differences, so a difference of 10% or above, can be found in the neutral reviews to the novels written by female authors and the number of times these novels were not reviewed at all. This is a difference of 12% in both cases. Again, no major differences can be found for the percentages of the positive and negative reviews. In fact, the percentage of positive reviews is exactly the same for when male authors write from a female perspective as for when female authors write from a female perspective. The percentile difference of negative reviews given to novels written by male authors about male protagonists and when male authors write from a female perspective is close to being significant though as the difference is 8%.

As with the status aspect, the tallied results were also put into diagrams that did not include the not-reviewed category so the data would reflect the odds of a novel being reviewed in positively, negatively or neutrally assuming it would be reviewed in the first place. This data can be found in figures 17 to 20 below:

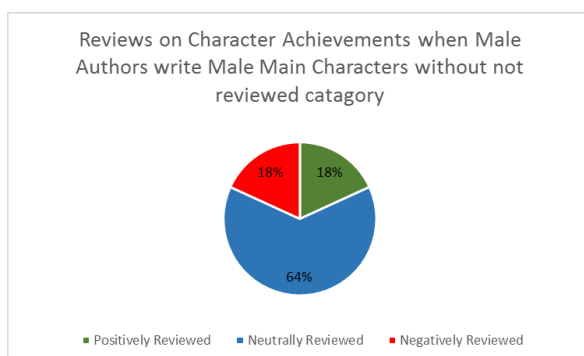


Figure 17. Percentage of times that the achievement aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

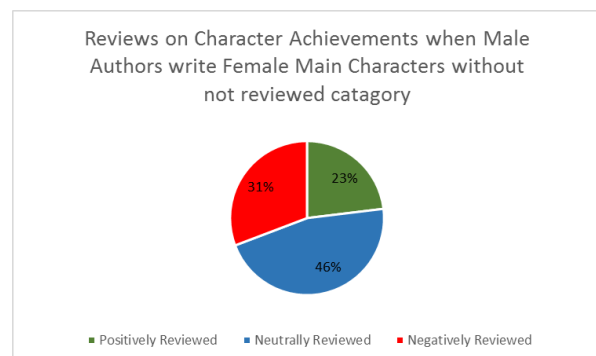


Figure 18. Percentage of times that the achievement aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters.

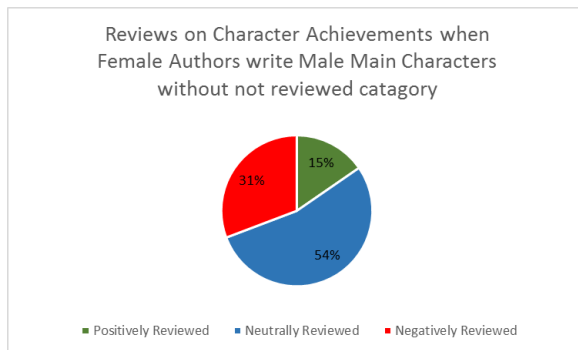


Figure 19. Percentage of times that the achievement aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

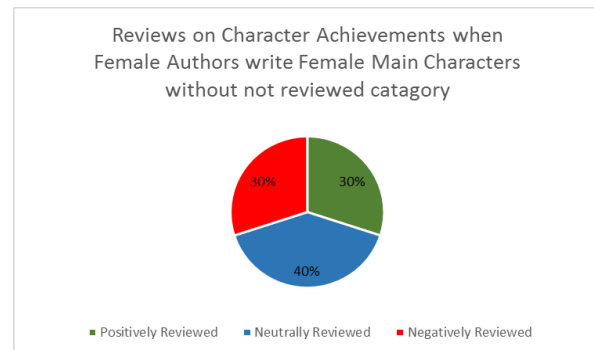


Figure 20. Percentage of times that the achievement aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by female authors about female characters.

Now that the not-reviewed category is removed from the percentile data, several significant differences can be found. As before, the neutral reviews still make up a big portion of all the figures and the differences when the authors change from which gender perspective they write are still significant. For the male authors the difference is 18% and for the female authors the difference is 14%. This is an interesting change from the earlier perceived differences since in figures 13 to 16 it was shown that the difference in neutral reviews was bigger for female authors than it was for male authors. The data in figures 17 to 20 is also more in line with phenomenon discussed by Cheryl Lange in her research, because these percentages suggest that reviewers believe the quality of the achievement aspect suffers when authors write from the perspective of a character on the opposite side of the binary spectrum. Figures 19 and 20 show that female authors get 15% more positive reviews when they write from a female perspective than when they write from a male perspective and the difference in negative reviews is only 1%. Figures 17 and 18 show that male authors receive 13% more negative reviews when they write a female protagonist than when they write a male protagonist and the difference in positive reviews is merely 5%. The difference between the authors based on their gender are not significant on the other hand, meaning no author receives more positive reviews than the other based on their own gender.

Qualitative Analysis: Achievements

The quantitative research suggests that reviewers believe authors are better off writing characters that share their gender, but before an accurate conclusion can be formulated, it is important to look at how the reviewers phrased their arguments. To start with the reviews for the male authors, Ayesha writes in her review to *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green that “I couldn’t feel Hazel and Augustus’ struggle against it. I couldn’t feel their pain” (Ayesha). Rather than with the status aspect, the goal and the way towards the goal being plausible or not is not the first point of critique. The importance of the achievement aspect is whether or not the journey is relatable on an emotional scale. Another argument that shows up in the reviews concerning the achievement aspect is that the goal and the journey through the novel were disappointing or not what the reader had expected. Reviewer Laurel points this out in her review to *The Fault in Our Stars* by saying “That’s what I wish this book was about: dealing with the cancer that wants to kill you. Instead, I get a book about a fictional miracle drug that keeps Hazel alive so she can have a boy love her” (Laurel). The argument of whether or not the struggles are plausible is raised for the first time by Nicole in her review to John Green’s *Paper Towns*:

I think this book suffers from it's own storyline. *spoilers* It veers from an amusing and interesting start to the baffling obsession of Quentin in his quest to find the will-not-be-named-again girl after they had one night of vengeful fun. I found myself wondering if this was seriously what this book was about. (Nicole, *Paper Towns*)

The last type of argument that shows up to support a positive review for the achievement aspect is whether or not the story keeps you reading, or, to describe it in one word, whether the character’s journey is thrilling or exciting. In Rick Riordan’s review to Jonathan Stroud’s *The Screaming Staircase*, he writes that “this story will keep you reading late into the

night, but you'll want to leave the lights on” (Riordan, *The Screaming Staircase*). Other than that, the mentions of the achievement aspect are neutral statements regarding what the goal is for the main character and how they are broadly expected to achieve that goal, which is reflected in the results of the quantitative research of the achievement aspect. Contrary to what is the case in a lot of the status aspect mentions however, the focus is more on the character’s actions and their journey than the general plotline, which is referred to in the novels by male authors only in the instances that are already quoted. The achievement aspect is mentioned in the same ways in reviews to novels by female authors as well. Brittney refers to Chaol’s journey in her review to Sarah J. Maas’s *Tower of Dawn* as his “emotional path to healing” and this struggles are struggles people deal with every day, making his journey a relatable one (Brittney). A new argument that is raised however is in Emily May’s review of *Tower of Dawn*: “You can sum [*Tower of Dawn*] up as an overlong healing process with a love story” (May). Two things can be concluded from this, also taking into consideration Laurel’s comment on *The Fault in Our Stars* again: according to reviewers, the journey described in a novel can get too lengthy and therefore, presumably, dull and thus not exciting, and love should not be the main character’s top priority. This last factor is something that will be elaborated upon in the chapter that discusses the relationship aspect, but it is now clear that a by reviewers deemed boring goal like romance negatively influences the reviews on a novel. Romance should be a side objective, so to speak. Aside from that, not much new can be found in the reviews to the novels written by the female authors. Apart from the quotes just mentioned, the female authors again receive reviews that are more focused on the plotline in general than on the journey of the characters. Taking into consideration the research done by Cheryl Lange in which she did not properly address how female authors wrote their characters or if female authors experienced trouble writing male characters, the theory that there is an unspoken consensus that female authors are expected by reviewers to write a proper story for their character is becoming more

and more viable. To add to that, so far male authors consistently receive more critique on their work than female authors, making it seem as if reviewers hold a negative bias towards the work of male authors as well as holding a positive bias towards the work of female authors. Again, the arguments raised for the achievements aspects are not unique. There is a consistent pattern in flaws and strengths that does not fluctuate based on what gender perspective the author writes from. Reviewers believe that the character's journey is in a certain manner relatable and emotional as well as plausible and exciting, or it is not. The only more or less unique reason was that the end goal of a character should not be romance, which was mentioned twice in all the reviews, once in a novel with a male perspective written by a female author, and once in a novel with a female perspective written by a male author.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the status and achievement character aspects. The quantitative research of the status aspect suggested that male authors do receive fewer positive reviews when they write from the perspective of a female character. The writing of female authors received far more negative reviews when they wrote from the perspective of a female than when they wrote from the perspective of a male, while at the same time receiving more positive reviews when they wrote a male main character than when they wrote a female main character. This is suggested that critics and researchers such as Alan Williamson and Cheryl Lange were correct to assume the quality of novels written by male authors suffers when they write from a female perspective, but the data also suggested that reviewers believe female authors suffer when writing from their own gender, which is odd considering they are writing from their own gender and should have the relevant experience in being a woman to help them write an adequate female character.

The qualitative analysis of the status aspect revealed that reviewers did not actually complain about the writing of a character, but that they were bothered by the plotline of a novel which influences the status of a character in the novel. If the world created inside a novel is unbelievable, the status of the character inside that world becomes unbelievable too. There were instances of the problem solely being with the status of the character and those reviews were exceptionally negative in comparison to the ones where the plot seemed to be the main concern of the reviewers. All in all, the issues taken with the writing of the status aspect were the same regardless of author and character gender.

The quantitative research of the achievement aspect showed the opposite from what the status aspect results showed. Male authors received significantly more negative reviews on their writing when they wrote from the perspective of a female while female authors received significantly more negative reviews when they wrote from the perspective of a male. This is more in line with the findings of Lange and Williamson. There was a high number of neutral reviews regardless of author and character gender as well.

The qualitative analysis of the achievement aspect revealed there was a slight difference between female and male authors when it came to why reviewers were negative towards the achievement aspect of characters regardless of their gender. Female authors received more critique on their general plotline, which resulted in reviewers believing the writing of the characters to suffer in turn, while male authors received more critique on the journey the characters took themselves.

Based on these findings, it cannot be concluded with certainty that, according to reviewers, the writing of male authors suffers when they write female characters.

Relationships

As explained with the help of Kristen Kieffer's list on character aspects in the introduction chapter of this thesis, the relationship aspect refers to the portrayal of the relationships the main character engages in. These relationships could vary from familial relationships to friendships to romances and so forth. Arguments or factors that are often associated with this aspect are whether or not the relationship between two characters is developed appropriately, realistically and naturally. Unlike the status and achievement aspects, the relationship aspect is not something that readers have to necessarily relate to specifically, since any relationship between two people is unique and, seeing as this research looks into the young adult genre, plenty of readers may not even have been in a romantic relationship before and thus have nothing to relate to, however readers do have to be convinced that the two characters make a logical match. In example, if two characters bang heads repeatedly throughout the story and at the very conclusion of the tale they are suddenly in love, that is generally not going to be received positively. To add to that, it is likely that readers, especially if they have not experienced a fully-fledged romance themselves yet, want to be capable of emotionally investing themselves in the romance between two characters. A rational approach to a relationship will then likely not be as appreciated as an emotional one. Lastly, the relationship aspect does not solely refer to the relationship between two lovers, but also between family members and friends. Readers are very likely to have family and friends, so these relationships do probably need to be relatable.

This chapter will look into how often the collected reviews mention the relationship aspect in support of a reviewer's final judgement of the novel, whether it be negative, neutral or positive. Just like in the previous chapter, this chapter will first look into the quantitative research. In those findings, any neutral arguments are arguments that do not support either a

positive or negative judgment of the novel, or they are arguments that suggest the reviewer was indecisive with regards to whether they experienced the aspect as positively or negative portrayed. Positive arguments and negative arguments support a clear positive and negative judgement of the novel respectively. Some reviews did not mention this particular aspect at all. This lack of a mention can provide the research with valuable as well and is therefore taken into the results. After the quantitative research is analysed and discussed, the chapter will look to analyse the relevant quotes in each review to answer the question of how the aspects are raised and how often the mentioned arguments are unique to a given novel or not. Since the phrasing of reviewers tends to be unique, there is no accurate way to count these arguments and put them into a table or diagram. Therefore, the reviews will be analysed and compared so the most accurate answer can be formulated for the conclusion of this chapter.

Quantitative Research

Before analysing the quantitative results in depth, a comparative overview of the reception of the relationship aspect between the different researched groups was made. This overview can be seen in figure 21. An overview that compares the reception of the relationship aspect to the other aspects can be found in the appendix under figures 48 to 51.

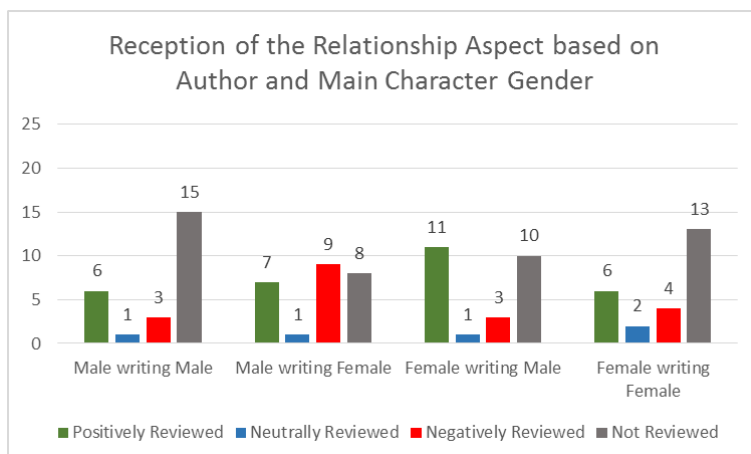


Figure 21. Comparison of the number of reviews that were positively, neutrally, negatively and not reviewed per researched group.

The first detail that can be noted about the reception of the relationship aspect is that whenever this aspect is reviewed, it is usually reviewed positively with the exception of the novels written by male authors from a female perspective. In this category, the negative reviews spike considerably in comparison to the other research groups. In the previous chapter, it was decided that a difference of at least 10% can be considered significant. Considering that twenty-five reviews were reviewed per group, a difference of at least five reviews is one fifth of the reviews which results in a significant increase of 20% for the negative reviews, which the figures presented later in this sub-chapter will show as well. Interestingly, much like with the status aspect described in the previous chapter, there is a significant increase of positive reviews in the group of novels written by female authors from a male perspective. In this situation, the difference is at least four reviews. By comparing the negative and positive reviews per research group, it appears from these numbers that females are seen as better at writing from the perspective of the male gender by reviewers while male authors should stick to writing from the perspective of their own gender. However, it is important to note that when the authors write from the perspective of their own gender, there is an increased number of reviews that do not review the relationship aspect. Comparing the number of times this aspect was not reviewed when males write from their own perspective to when they write from a female perspective results in a difference of seven. For the novels written by a female author, this difference is three reviews. Perhaps that difference is not as astonishing as it is with novels written by male authors, but a decrease of the times a review mentioned the relationship aspect of over 10% is still noteworthy.

With the different groups roughly compared to each other, detailed diagrams of each specific category are made and analysed. These details diagrams are shown in figures 22 up to and including 25 below.

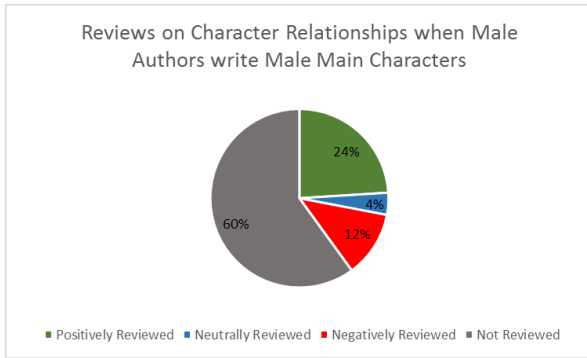


Figure 22. Percentage of times that the relationship character aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

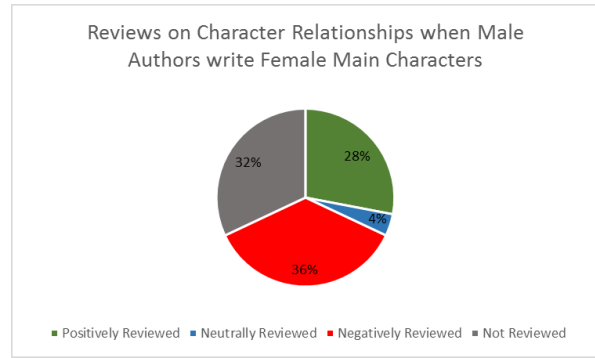


Figure 23. Percentage of times that the relationship character aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters.

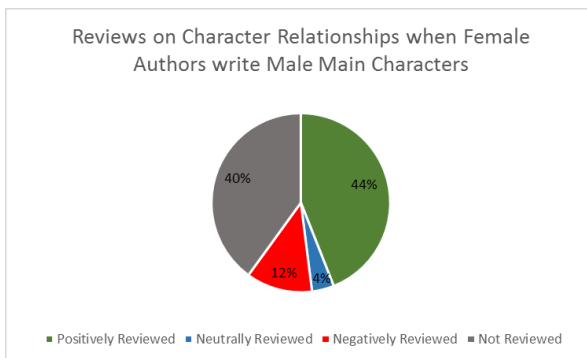


Figure 24. Percentage of times that the relationship character aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

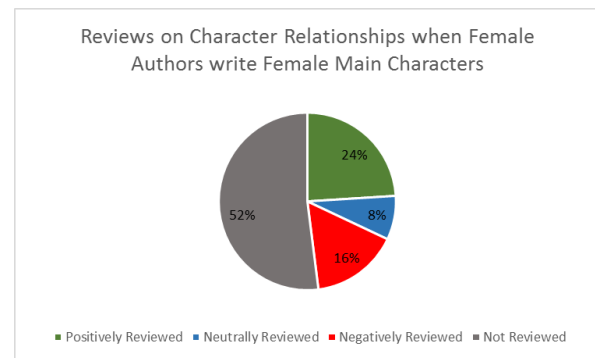


Figure 25. Percentage of times that the relationship character aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about female main characters.

Now that the quantities shown in figure 21 have been converted to percentile data, more detailed conclusions can be drawn per research group. As revealed when analysing the comparative diagram in figure 21, the average difference between the times the relationship aspect was not reviewed for novels written by female authors is three reviews, resulting in the 12% that can be taken from figures 24 and 25, and for novels written by male authors that difference was seven reviews, resulting in the 28% that can be taken from figures 22 and 23. Aside from the difference between male authors and female authors, there are remarkable annotations to be made based on the percentages per researched group. 60% of the reviews on novels written by male authors about male main characters do not discuss the relationship aspect and additional 4% are neutral regarding the topic. This is especially interesting when

relating these findings to the corresponding 32% and 4% in figure 23. These numbers imply that male authors are more inclined not to include a relationship for their male main characters. When male authors write a female main character, the reviewers do not mention the relationship aspect only 32% of the time, suggesting there is a relationship aspect to discuss more often. It can even be speculated that the addition of the relationship aspect is not pleasantly received by the reviewers since there is a significant increase of 24% in the negative mentions of the aspect. At first glance, the reverse seems to occur for the novels written by female authors. When female authors write a female main character, the reviews are more or less balanced in positive and negative reviews and the relationship aspect is mentioned 48% of the time, so in nearly half of the reviews. When female authors write a male main character, as seen in figure 24, the relationship aspect is mentioned in 60% of the reviews, 44% is positively reviewed and only 12% is negatively reviewed. This suggests not only that female authors write a notable, likely romantic, relationship for male characters more often than they do for female characters, but also that they allegedly write it in a more compelling or authentic manner than a male author would.

To further clarify the collected data and assure that any null-data in which there were no relationships in a novel to discuss is excluded, new diagrams were made per researched group only without the not-reviewed category. This resulted in figure 26 up to and including 29 below.

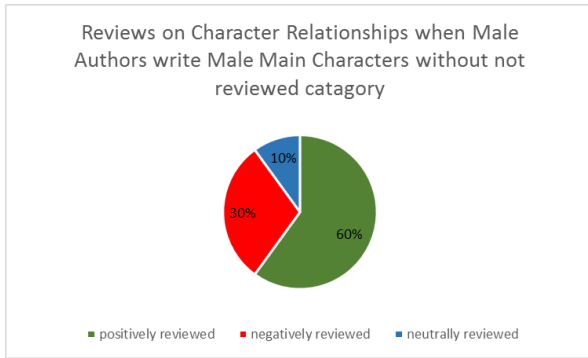


Figure 26. Percentage of times that the relationship character aspect was positively, negatively, or neutrally for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

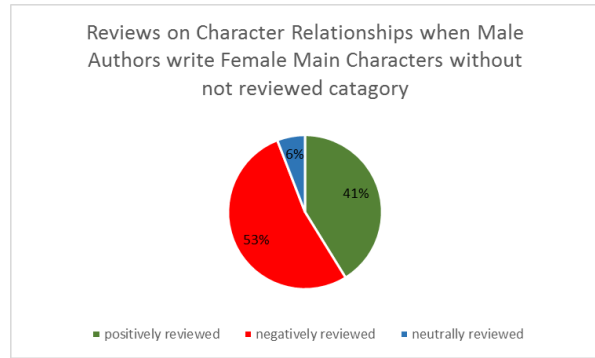


Figure 27. Percentage of times that the relationship character aspect was positively, negatively, or neutrally for novels written by male authors about female main characters.

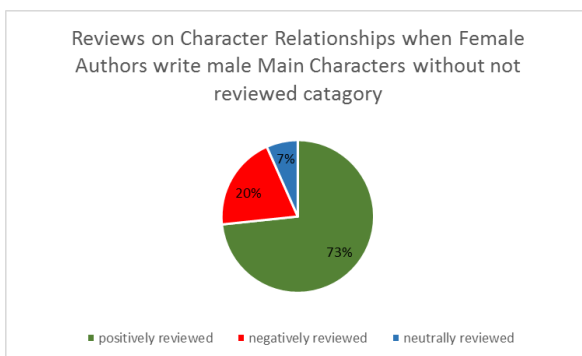


Figure 28. Percentage of times that the relationship character aspect was positively, negatively, or neutrally for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

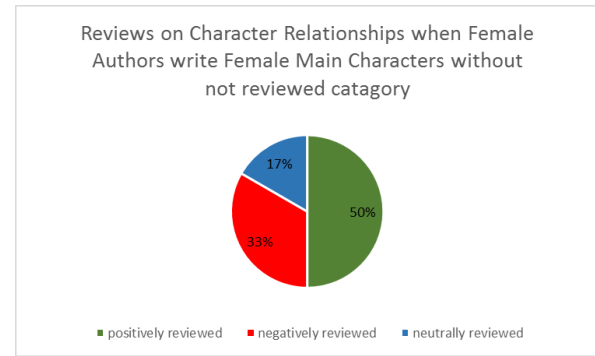


Figure 29. Percentage of times that the relationship character aspect was positively, negatively, or neutrally for novels written by female authors about female main characters.

This information puts the data from the previous figures into a different perspective. In example, figure 26 now shows that when male authors write the relationship aspect from the perspective of a male main character reviewers are significantly more positive than negative as 60% of the mentions are positive, just like when female authors write from the perspective of a male main character as shown in figure 28 as 73% of the mentions are positive. Simultaneously, figure 27 shows that when male authors write the relationship aspect from the perspective of a female main character, the reviews are still negative more often than positive but no longer as overwhelmingly. Meanwhile, in figure 29 it is revealed the female authors do not have that balanced a reception after all when they write the relationship aspect from the perspective of a female main character since it is distinctively

more positive than negative. If the entire thesis were based on solely these diagrams, it would now convincingly show that the reception of novels written by male authors suffers greatly when they write from a female perspective seeing as there is a decrease of positive reviews of 19%. However, going by these percentages, the reception of novels written by female authors suffer even more from the change of perspective from male to female than the novels written by male authors do. The percentage of positive reviews decreases by 23% for novels written by female authors when that perspective switch occurs. The increase in negative reviews when switching perspective from male to female for male authors as shown in figures 22 and 23 is 24% whereas in figures 26 and 27 it is 23%, but the increase in negative reviews for female authors as shown in figures 24 and 25 is 4% whereas in figures 28 and 29 the increase is 13%. Again, the reception of the novels written by female authors suffer more than those written by male authors. Adding this to the data we analysed before, this could mean several things. The first is that female authors are only commended or criticised when their work is far from the perceived average or standard. This is especially supported by the fact that when a female author goes beyond her experience to write from a male perspective, her writing receives a lot more positive feedback with regards to this aspect. The number of negative reviews for when male authors write from a female perspective could of course also mean that male authors, in the eyes of reviewers, are not as apt in writing from the opposing gender's perspective or, going on the note of reader bias that may exist for female authors, it could imply that readers expect the male author to do poorly, meaning they will review his novel more critically and that then results in a self-fulfilling prophecy with more negative reviews. The earlier proposed theory regarding the lack of reviews mentioning the relationship aspect is not debunked by the data presented in these diagrams and since that theory suggests the bias exists with authors rather than readers that means a combination of author and reader bias could explain some of these percentages. Lastly, continuing on the line

that most reviewers are focused on the romantic relationship aspect when they review a novel, there is a possibility, however improbable it may seem, that the relationships itself are portrayed in a more romantic manner when written by female authors, because females are generally more perceived as sensitive and males are generally perceived as rational and perhaps even detached. Readers, having stated in the previous chapter that they appreciate the emotional connection between themselves and the character, are more likely to want to experience a relationship rather than see the rational decisions made to get to a relationship and will likely lean more towards the romantic depictions. The only way to confirm these hypotheses is to combine this data with the analyses of the relevant quotes in the qualitative analysis for this aspect.

Qualitative Analysis

This sub-chapter will begin by inspecting the reviews mentioning the relationship aspect in novels written by male authors. In the quantitative research, it became clear that reviewers had more to remark on the relationship aspect when the novels were written from a female perspective and it was speculated that this was the case because reviewers are likely more inclined to respond to the depiction of a romantic relationship than a platonic relationship, and that male authors do not write a romantic relationship for their male main character as often as they write one for their female main characters. The numbers support this hypothesis and analysing the quotes from the reviews make it even more plausible. In the reviews to Jostein Gaarder's novel *The Solitaire Mystery: A Novel about Family and Destiny* it is either simply stated that the character Hans Thomas has an understanding relationship with his father who worries about his son, or no mention of any relationship is made, even though there is plenty of character interaction to judge the relationship by. Mentioning the relationship aspect while neglecting to give an opinion could also be perceived as positive

feedback, since nothing negative needed to be mentioned and therefore the relationship was portrayed adequately enough. On the other hand it could also indicate that nothing good could be said about the relationship and that it was simply there so no distinctive assumptions can be made about the neutral mentions other than that no romantic relationship was present because as soon as there is, the reviewers make sure to comment on it such as with John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Paper Towns*. In both cases the relationship aspect fluked for the same reasons of which one actually overlaps with the personality aspect discussed in the next chapter. This overlapping reason is that when the main character's personality or that of the side character is flat or unbelievable, the relationship's authenticity suffers greatly under it. To quote Sophia's review on John Green's *Paper Towns* "How many books can [John Green] write about an unbelievable teenager [secretly] loving another unbelievable teenager?" (Sophie, *The Fault in Our Stars*). The same problem occurs in Jostein Gaarder's *The World According to Anna* of which Ben Babcock states that most of the characters Anna interacts with are "one- or two-dimensional stock characters" existing only "to help hold up a mirror to Anna's thoughts" (Babcock). From this it becomes clear that a compelling and convincing depiction of a main character alone will not carry a novel to greatness in the eyes of the reviewers. All characters need to be at least three-dimensional and they need to have something to add to the main character's story. This is something that, according to the reviewers, only one male author amongst the selected managed to achieve in his description of a romantic relationship. This author was Rick Riordan when he wrote the relationship between Annabeth and Percy in his novel *The Mark of Athena*. The relationship between these two characters is praised by several reviewers for showing relationship growth, and maturity by both characters that each have a journey and personality of their own. This seems a good point to bring up another flaw in *The Fault in Our Stars* which was already mentioned in the previous chapter when discussing the achievement aspect. The point made in back then

was that engaging in a romantic relationship needs to be a side objective for the main character and not the character's prioritised goal. In other words, these reviewers are not interested in a story solely based on a romance, especially not when it then then also turns out to be poorly written in their opinion. A third negative point that was raised by reviewers is that romance should not fall from the sky. Sticking to *The Fault in Our Stars*, reviewer Ayesha gives a short summary of why love at first sight is not beautiful but rather unrealistic when she writes the following:

[The Romance] fell from the sky. Seriously, I don't get what's so "beautiful" about the relationship between them. They both fall in love within seconds just after laying eyes on each other ~love at first sight~. The romance is undeveloped and it comes from nowhere. I was baffled when Hazel accepted to go to Augustus's house just minutes after meeting him. WHAT THE HELL? How stupid can you be? You fall for a guy's words whom you met just few minutes ago and agree to go to his house! What if he were a murderer or rapist? (Ayesha, *The Fault in Our Stars*)

Perhaps it is unlikely that every teen boy in the world turns out to be a murderer or a rapist, but the possibility is there and it is something that parents always warn their children for and is therefore always on a teen's mind. Ayesha is right to point out that, considering that Hazel is said by the author to be intelligent, it is unrealistic for Hazel to just follow the strange boy home. A point made by the reviewers which coincides with this one is that relationships often felt forced. As if the characters were just put together for the sake of needing a relationship, which the quote about Hazel's relationship attests to. So as it turns out, reviewers indeed believe male authors are not especially good at writing romantic relationships from either a male or female perspective. To add to that, male authors do receive compliments when there is a lack of a romantic relationship such as in Rick Riordan's *The Sword of Summer* of which reviewer Melanie states she is happy that Riordan keeps it

realistic since not every main character needs to be romantically involved with or interested in someone (Melanie, *The Sword of Summer*). Interestingly, male authors are also praised when they describe a friendship in their novel because, according to the reviewers, they do a splendid job on writing exciting and entertaining friendships between characters of both genders. The numbers and quotes agree that novels by male authors are more often negatively perceived if they include a romantic relationship and there are indeed more mentions of romantic relationships when the novel has a female main character. However, to be as certain as possible when it comes to drawing conclusions based on this information, the relevant quotes from the reviews to the novels written by female authors need to be analysed as well.

According to the quantitative research, reviewers believe female authors excel when writing the relationship aspect from a male perspective and, several reviews in, it becomes evident that most novels include a romantic relationship. The reason they are positively reviewed is because the female authors apparently do the exact opposite of what male authors do. Nearly every positive mention of the relationship aspect in novels written by female authors is praise for how realistic and unpredictable yet natural the romantic relationships were portrayed. In fact, some reviews, like the review by Melanie on Sarah J. Maas's *Tower of Dawn*, mention all these points at once. Melanie writes "I love that this book realistically depicts that your first love won't always be your last love, and how normal and okay that truly is" and then adds in a later paragraph that she believed the book was going to force the romance between the main character and the main character's presumably first love, but was delighted to see that turned out not be the case (Melanie, *Tower of Dawn*). The three negative reviews with regards to this aspect have three different reasons. The first reason is given by Emily May in her review of Sarah J. Maas's *Tower of Dawn*, where she, contrary to reviewer Melanie, stated that the romance was actually predictable because "we know this is a Maas book, so he can only be shirtless so long before she starts falling for him" (May, *Tower of*

Dawn). Ignoring that May's opinion appears to be based on experience with the author rather than an objective review of this particular novel, this means the surprise factor is a must for romance in novels, but it can also not be too much of a surprise because it cannot fall out of the sky like with *The Fault in our Stars*. Miranda Reads avoids her knowledge about the author influencing her judgement as she reviews Veronica Roth's *Four: A Divergent Story Collection*, but she has to conclude that the stories have nothing new to add and that it was therefore not necessary to write the novel all together (Reads, *Four: A Divergent Story Collection*). So the relationship needs to be inventive and add to the growth of the characters inside the storyline. Virginia Ronan reviews the same novel in a more positive light but does note that the main character's relationship with a character other than the romantic interest is inconsistent (Ronan, *Four: A Divergent Story Collection*). Though inconsistency is not mentioned as a problem in any of the other reviews and appears to be an issue that only occurs in prequels or sequels of novels, inconsistency can exist within a stand-alone novel and will therefore be included in the factors used to judge the relationship aspect. Nothing new is added to the factors when discussing the reviews of the relationship aspect of novels written by female authors from a female perspective. Predominantly, a lack of a relationship is praised more often than a romance is praised and in the case of Sarah J. Maas's *Throne of Glass* it is actually implied by reviewer Navessa that the addition of the romance ruined the main character when she wrote that "Maybe I could buy this chick as a badass had she not been [...] in love with exclamation marks!" (Navessa, *Throne of Glass*). This is a recurring theme and is intriguing because it was a predominantly mentioned as the main factor to judge the relationship aspect for when male authors write from a female perspective. This suggests that readers prefer female characters to not be in a relationship because there is an implication behind it that bothers the readers. This implication is, as reviewer Laurel sarcastically comments, "the only way anything gets better in life [is] boyz." (Laurel, *The Fault in our*

Stars). If a female character has a problematic, sad or boring life, add a boy and the problem mysteriously disappears. The implication does not appear to exist when a novel is written from a male perspective because the male characters do not actually end up in a romantic relationship as often in novels, no matter what gender the author is.

To go back to the quantitative research and how often the reviewers neglected to mention the relationship aspect, it is now revealed by this information that this is not done, as previously suggested, because reviewers focus on romance and the novels have no romance to discuss, seeing as only two out of the ten novels written by female authors do not include a romance which the reviewers are keen to point out and praise. The female authors also receive so much compliments on the relationships they write from a male perspective that it becomes unlikely for readers to expect a female author to simply write that aspect accurately and therefore not refer to it when it turns out to be well written as anticipated. That leaves two possible explanations: one being that reviewers were either indecisive what their opinion on the matter exactly entailed and therefore left it out of their review, and the other being that reviewers are not interested enough in the side objective of the story, because no reviewer complained that romance was the ultimate goal of the story in the novels written by female authors, to include a judgment of it in their reviews. It can be argued that the second explanation is more plausible, but the reality is that nothing conclusive can be said about this and so this information can only debunk the earlier mentioned theory that the reviewers that do not review the relationship aspect do so because there is no relationship to review, even though it does appear to be a viable theory for the novels written by male authors.

Conclusion

The quantitative research shows that male authors receive considerably more negative reviews when reviewers mention the relationship aspect when they write from a female perspective than they do when they write from a male perspective. Female authors suffer an even worse decline in positive reviews when they write from a female perspective instead of a male perspective, but despite the decline still end up with a high number of positive reviews while male authors writing from a female perspective do not. Female authors received an overwhelming number of positive reviews when writing from a male perspective, even more so than male authors did when they write from a male perspective. Female authors were also more inclined to include a romance in their novels, regardless of the gender of their main character, than male authors were.

In the quote analysis many factors were mentioned that weigh in on the judgement of the reviewer for the relationship aspect. Though the factors are many, they mostly overlap and one factor is controversial. The controversial factor is that relationships need to be predictable enough to not come out of the blue, but not so predictable that it makes for a boring read. There has to be some sort of surprise involved when two characters form a relationship together, but it does not become clear to what extent the relationships need to be foreseeable. Another important factor is that the characters in the relationship both need to have depth to them. Even if the main character is wonderfully described and has been positively reviewed on other aspects, the relationship aspect will be reviewed negatively if the side character falls flat. In addition, the relationship aspect needs to spark growth in the characters and their relationship, maturing the characters through the establishment of their bond together. Then it was important that the relationship occurred naturally and was not forced, meaning that two characters that were perceived as incompatible should not end up together because that would not be realistic, which is another factor that goes hand in hand

with most of the already mentioned factors. Interestingly, the lack of a romance when it came to the relationship aspect and the inclusion of a compelling friendship sparked more positive reviews than if there were a romance and less focus on friendships. Lastly, the relationship aspect needs to not overshadow the storyline and thus the achievement aspect of a character, which is perhaps ironic because the relationship aspect does overshadow the achievement aspect when it comes to reviews. These factors were more often positively reviewed when it came to romance in novels written by female authors when writing from a male perspective, but were often negatively reviewed when male authors wrote from a female perspective. The romances were generally not reviewed as positively when female authors wrote from a female perspective or when male authors wrote from a male perspective, but male authors did get a lot of praise for the way they wrote friendships from a male perspective and authors from both genders received praise for when they did not include a romance at all when readers expected there to be one.

Overall, the findings in this chapter show that, according to reviewers, the romances and therefore often the entire relationship aspect written from a female perspective are generally not as well received, especially when written by a male author, and it suggests that female authors generally write a more adequate relationship aspect than male authors do.

Personality and Agency

Now that the achievement, status and relationship aspects have been thoroughly discussed, this chapter will focus on the personality and agency aspects of characters. As taken from Kristen Kieffer's work mentioned in the introduction of this research, the personality aspect looks into whether a character is balanced with regards to their flaws, assets and quirks (Kieffer). A character with too many assets, too little flaws or no flaws at all is likely to be considered unrealistic or not relatable for the readers and reviewers. The personality aspect does not refer to whether a character's personality inside the novel has the personality of a decent human being. To exemplify, if a character is an anti-hero or inherently evil despite being the protagonist of the story and the character is unlikeable for that reason that does not mean the personality aspect was not properly written in the eyes of the reviewers. Likewise, a heroic character is not automatically properly written. In fact, it very likely that a heroic character has so many boons that the hero is not balanced in flaws and assets. Reviewers simply stating that a character is likeable or relatable without even the slightest mention of why they believe it is will therefore be considered as reviews that did not mention the personality aspect. The agency aspect discusses the activity or passivity of a character and their voice. This refers to the role they have inside the novel. Are they involved in their own story or are they on the side lines watching the other characters steal the show? Is their voice unique; in other words, can the reader identify the character by their dialogue? A main character is expected in all cases to be active in the story. That is not to say that a character cannot be shy and reserved. It means the character needs to guide the reader through their story. The readers see the world through the main character's eyes. The main character is telling them the story and sharing their thoughts and opinions with the reader. They experience a scene and make a decision, even if they do not talk. If they do not talk, they actively decide not to. For that reason, a passive character or voice is almost synonymous to a

poorly written agency aspect. Reviewers will likely mention the agency aspect by discussing the dialogue between characters and then they will compare these to other dialogues.

Uniqueness will probably be a key-term in deciding whether or not the agency aspect is positively or negatively reviewed.

As with the other chapters, this chapter is divided in a quantitative research, in which the research looks into the number of times the aspects were mentioned and whether they were positively, neutrally or negatively reviewed, and a qualitative analyses, in which quotes will be taken from the reviews to support the findings of the quantitative research and then conclude how reviewers review the discussed character aspect. This research chapter will present the sub-chapters discussing the agency aspect first, as it is expected to require less analysing and explaining. The personality aspect will be discussed in the two sub-chapters that follow. To make it easier to find the specific sections discussing a certain aspect, the subtitles will mention the aspect that section focuses on, resulting in two quantitative research sections and two qualitative analysis sections. At the end of the chapter the findings will be summarised in a conclusion, which will discuss both aspects in brief, separated paragraphs but do not have subtitles based on what aspect is being discussed.

Quantitative Research: Agency

Before calculating the percentage of the time the agency aspect was mentioned to support the reviewer's judgement of a novel, the number of times the agency aspect was mentioned in all reviews was tallied. These results were compared amongst the different categories. This information can be found in figure 30 below.

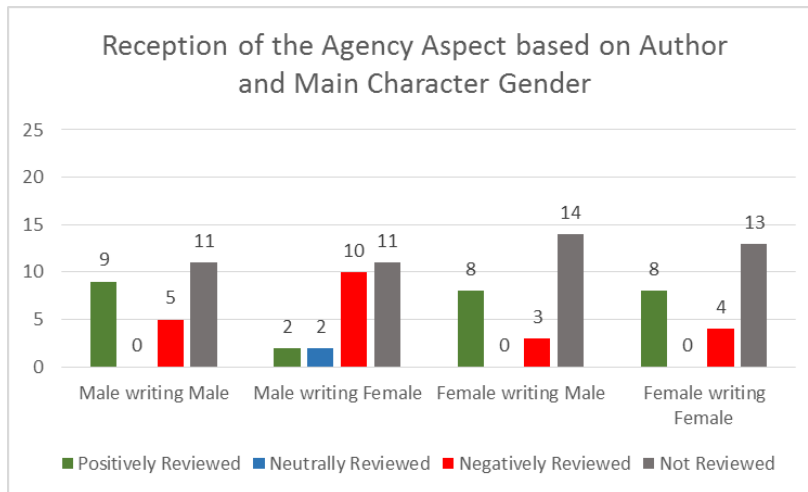


Figure 30. Comparison of the number of reviews that were positively, neutrally, negatively and not reviewed per researched group with regards to the agency aspect.

When looking at these numbers, the only category in which the agency aspect is reviewed negatively more often than positively is when male authors write female main characters. This would imply that according to reviewers, the activeness or dialogue of the character suffers when a male authors writes a female main character, which is in line with the ideas mentioned in the Twitter chat summarised by Alison Flood especially since the other categories do not suffer as dramatic an increase in negative reviews (Flood). In this case, it cannot even be said that it is simply more difficult to write a female character no matter what gender the author is, because when female authors write female characters there is only one additional negative review compared to when they write male characters and the positive reviews are equal. The male authors are judged to be at a similar level as the female authors when they write from the perspective of a male character, showing just how stark the difference is when they write from a female perspective. However, as with the achievement aspect, the agency aspect was more often not mentioned by reviewers to form their judgement of a novel. Considering what the agency aspect looks at, it could be that reviewers do not look at dialogue as critically as they look at other aspects or are not bothered enough

to formulate an opinion on it. It could be that all these instances of negative reviews are therefore the reviewer’s complaints regarding the activeness of this character, but this will be further discussed in the qualitative analysis of the agency aspect.

The tallied numbers as shown in figure 30 were then converted to percentages per category, so the odds of the agency aspect to be reviewed in a particular manner would be reflected accordingly. This can be found in figure 31 to 34 below.

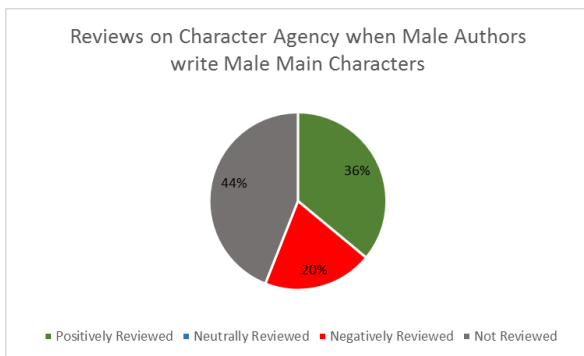


Figure 31. Percentage of the time that the agency aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

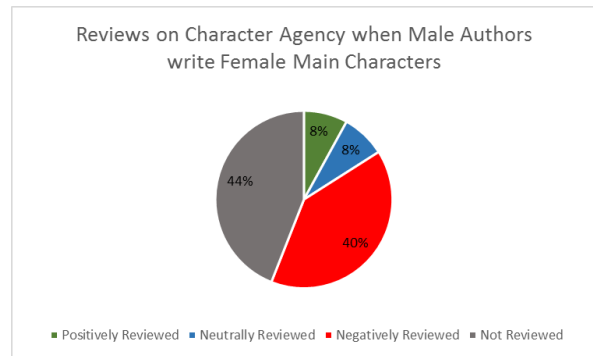


Figure 32. Percentage of the time that the agency aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters.

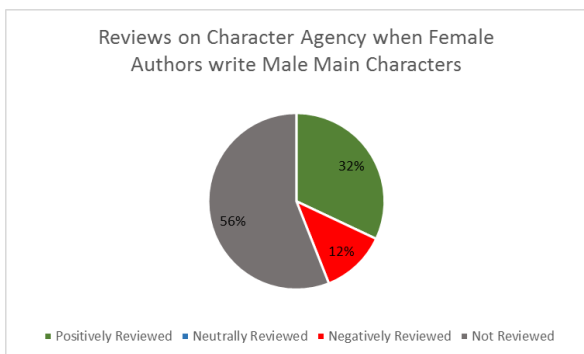


Figure 33. Percentage of the time that the agency aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

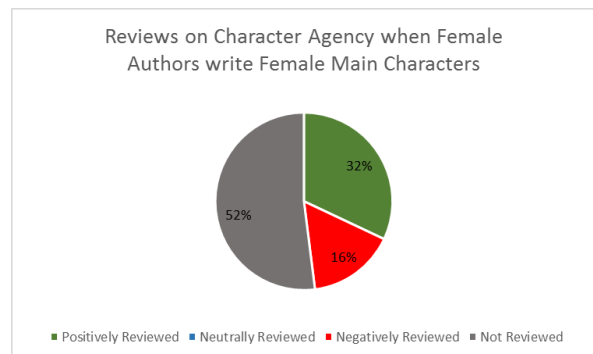


Figure 34. Percentage of the time that the agency aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about female main characters.

The percentages shown in the above figures reveal there is about as much a chance for a reviewer to not review the agency aspect in a novel written by a male author about a female main character as there is a chance for the aspect to be reviewed negatively in this situation.

These numbers are nearing 50 percent, which would mean that reviewers either do not

comment on the agency aspect or review it negatively when it comes to those novels. The agency aspect in novels written by female authors are also more likely not to be reviewed, which is in line with the results for the other aspects as found in the previous chapters. A possible explanation for this scenario is that reviewers believe the female authors wrote the agency aspect as was to be expected of them beforehand and therefore no feedback was required. The previous chapters discussing other character aspects mentioned in reviews also brought forth this theory, but it is sadly difficult to prove unless reviewers come out and say that they hold such a bias. It is however already stated by many women in the Twitter debate summarised by Alison Flood that they believe male authors cannot write female characters (Flood). Therefore it would be easier to speculate that reviewers are more critical towards the writing of male authors resulting in their novels being more accurately reviewed using a multitude of aspects including the agency aspect. Both theories would explain the slight difference of approximately 10% in the odds of novels being reviewed or not depending on author gender, but there considering the Twitter debate, there is a bit more evidence to support the second theory.

To get a clearer indication of the odds for a reviewer to negatively, neutrally or positively review the agency aspect of a character in a novel, the not-reviewed category was removed from the data resulting in figures 35 to 38 below:

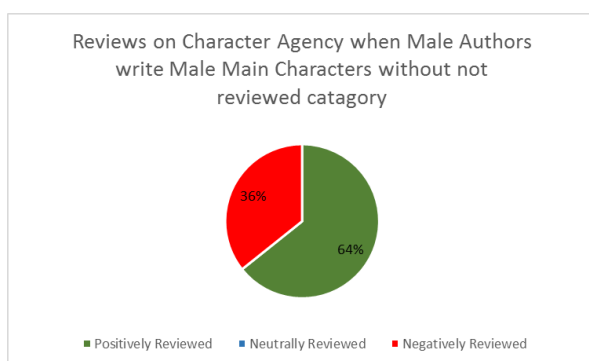


Figure 35. Percentage of the time that the agency aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

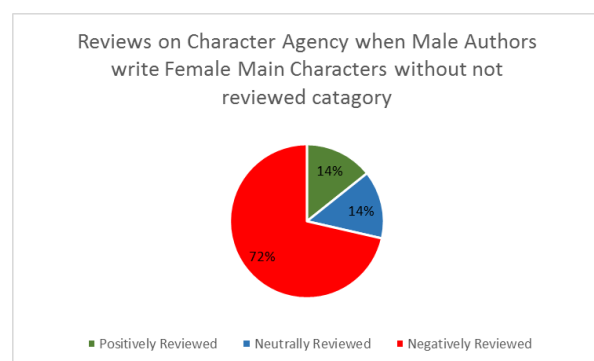


Figure 36. Percentage of the time that the agency aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters.

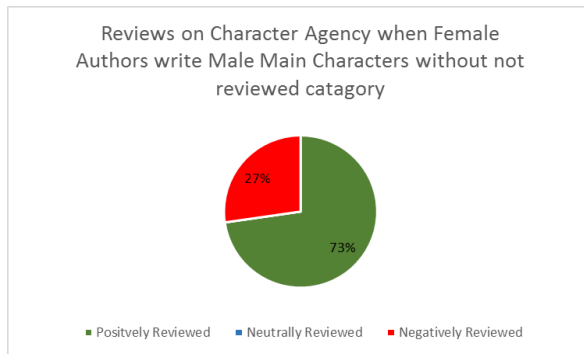


Figure 37. Percentage of the time that the agency aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

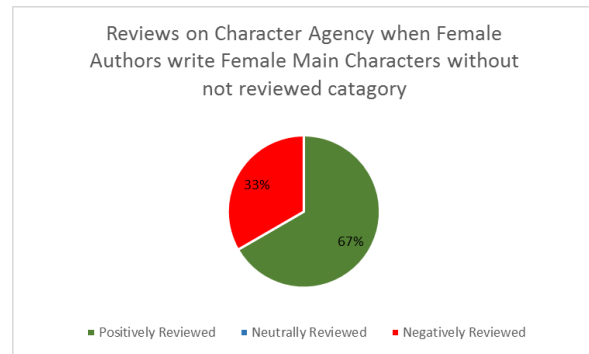


Figure 38. Percentage of the time that the agency aspect was positively, negatively or neutrally reviewed for novels written by female authors about female main characters.

The first portion of data that stands out is the negligent or even non-existent percentage of neutral reviews for the novels. The only category which has neutral reviews is the category in which male authors write a female main character, as shown in figure 36. In this case the percentage of neutral reviews is equal to the 14% of positive reviews, which are both underwhelming in comparison to the percentage of negative reviews standing at 72%. In the other categories, reviewers are far more likely to positively review the agency aspect than negatively. The three categories together average out on a 68% chance for a positive review on the agency aspect. Since the gap between the percentages is so wide, it is unlikely that these numbers are merely the result of reviewer bias towards the male authors, unless reviewers are on a vendetta to prove male authors cannot write female main characters, which is improbable too. There is no reason to assume reviewers are more likely to review novels with female main characters negatively either since the female authors have received 67% of positive reviews on their novels written from a female perspective, which is only a 6% difference with the number of positive reviews female authors received on novels written from a male perspective.

Qualitative Analysis: Agency

Now that the quantitative data has been analysed, this sub-chapter looks at how reviewers mention the agency aspect in their reviews. This will show what reviewers believe determines the quality of the agency aspect in a review and it will show what the data found in the quantitative research was based on, which in turn will help figure out if there is, according to reviewers, truly a difference in the writing of authors depending on what gender they are and what gender perspective they write from.

The first point that is mentioned by a reviewer about the agency aspect is made by Amalia Gavea in her review to Jostein Gaarder's *The World According to Anna* in which she writes that the dialogue of the story was the only downside of the tale for her and that it cost the novel an entire star on her star rating (Gavea, *The World According to Anna*). This is one of the instances that shows the importance of well-written dialogue to readers. In this particular case it even makes up a fifth of their star rating on the novel. In her review, Gavea also describes why the dialogue was lacking in her opinion. Rather than blaming it on the author, she blames it on the translator, as the novel was initially written in the Norwegian language, and she believes the translated dialogue does not capture the uniqueness of the original language. This could mean that the novel is actually worth five stars in Gavea's opinion if she had read it in its original language, but sadly she does not provide any evidence in her reviews that she has. Either way, if more novels written by a male author from a female perspective have negative reviews with regards to the agency aspect because of these reasons, that could redeem them from the data found in the quantitative research.

However, dialogue is not the only point of critique that reviewers mentioned for the agency aspect. Reviewer Claire actually complains about the activeness of main character Anna in Jostein Gaarder's novel (Claire, *The World According to Anna*). Claire explains that

Anna is too busy reading lists of dull facts to be a character of her own and then adds that the narrative and dialogue are nonsensical and excruciating. A list of generic facts being read out does not help develop a character other than that they have an interest in mundane facts, and it means the character is not doing anything to progress the plot. In other words, according to Claire, Anna is a passive character and in the introduction of this chapter it was already stated that a passive character would likely result into negative reviews for the agency aspect. Other than that, Claire adds that dialogue needs to make sense, a point Sophia elaborates on in her review of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* when she says that the dialogue was pretentious and unbelievable (Sophia, *The Fault in Our Stars*). Uniqueness, or rather the lack of it, is as predicted a returning factor when negatively judging the agency aspect in novels written by male authors about female main characters. However, these novels do receive a significant amount of praise on humorous and atmospheric writing. Bella Farren explains in her review of *The Screaming Staircase* by Jonathan Stroud that the usage of English slang in dialogue supports the world building of the story as it helped create the atmosphere and set the time as well as adding to the characters' personality and, again, distinctiveness (Farren, *The Screaming Staircase*). She adds that the joyful and comedic banter made sure the story remained entertaining where it could be terrifying at other points. In other words, a balance between seriousness and comic relief is appreciated for dialogue.

So far, it is shown that reviewers believe male authors mostly lack uniqueness in the writing of the agency aspect of their female characters, but the quantitative research implies that there is a significant difference in the number of negative reviews for the agency aspect when male authors write a character of their own gender. Looking into the reviews to the novels male authors wrote from the perspective of a male main character, it turns out that the reasons leading up to a negative or positive review differ from when male authors write from a female perspective. Sophia responds to the agency aspect in Green's *Paper Towns* by

stating that the metaphors in character monologues were so ridiculous they seemed to her to be bad jokes rather than poetic (Sophia, *Paper Towns*). Karen reviews the same novel and actually compliments John Green on writing characters that are smart while not pretentious, contrary to what Sophia said in her review to John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (Karen, *Paper Towns*). It is almost as if the compliments and complains are reversed now that the character genders are swapped around on the binary scale, but in her review to Rick Riordan's *The Sword of Summer*, Emily May shows that reviewers are still unrelenting when it comes to lack of variety in writing as she writes: "It's incredibly hard to distinguish Magnus's voice from that of Percy Jackson" (May, *The Sword of Summer*). She also claims that the humour provided in the dialogue by the main character is not enough to compensate for the seriousness of the novel, showing once more the interesting reversal in positive and negative remarks made towards the novels written by male authors. Does this mean reviewers think male character should be more comical or that female characters make for excellent jesters? Those are conclusions that are hard to draw without reading the novels themselves and perhaps tallying the amount of jokes and slander produced by a certain character for comparison, but what these findings do show is that reviewers look for the same three main points when judging the agency aspect as written by male authors: balanced usage of comic relief, natural and therefore authentic dialogue, and, most importantly, uniqueness.

Now the research looks into the question if the reviewers review the agency aspect as written by female authors using the same or different arguments as when reviewing the work of male authors. When female authors write male characters, it appears there are far more remarks towards the activeness and voice of the character than there are about dialogue and often the agency aspect is interwoven in sentences where the personality aspect is discussed as well. In example, reviewer Marie Andrews comments on the agency aspect in *The Nearest Faraway Place* by Hayley Long by saying that it she could actually see the way the main

character reacted to certain events in the book and that thanks to the active voice of the character, the story immediately drew her in, allowing an instant connection with the character (Andrews, *The Nearest Faraway Place*). In that same paragraph, she mentions how the varying personalities of the characters actually further bolstered the writing of the agency aspect as “their different personalities offer an interesting perspective throughout [...] events in the book” (Andrews, *The Nearest Faraway Place*). The strength and compelling voices as written by female authors for male characters consistently returns as the only argument mentioned to support a positive review of the agency aspect in their novels. A reviewer going by the name of Small Review wrote an uncharacteristically long review to *The False Prince* by Jennifer A. Nielsen in which they wrote:

I knew this was going to be a Special Shelf book as soon as I "heard" Sage's voice narrating. Really, the story could have been downright awful (it isn't) and I still would have Special Shelved *The False Prince* on the strength of his voice alone. (Small Review, *The False Prince*)

In Roshni Ajmal's review to *Four: A Divergent Story Collection* by Veronica Roth, he writes that the main character's voice sounded original as compared to when he was not the main character in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (Ajmal, *Four: A Divergent Story Collection*). So the voices are complimented but there is never a mention of dialogue when it comes to positive reviews for the agency aspect to novels written by female authors from the perspective of a male main character. Yet, that 27% of negative reviews as found in figure 37 of the quantitative research for the agency aspect does not come out of nowhere and it is in these negative reviews that there is precisely one implicit mention of dialogue when reviewer Tadiana writes that she could not stand “Sage's constant mouthing off” in *The False Prince* by Jennifer A. Nielsen (Tadiana, *The False Prince*). This is an interesting contrast with the reviews given to novels written by male authors where nearly every review concerning the

aspect was about the cons and pros of the dialogue. Since there is undoubtedly dialogue for the reviewers to comment on in the novels written by female authors about male characters, it can only be assumed that reviewers believe there is no commenting necessary for the dialogue. That in turn could mean they find that the dialogue was neither good nor bad, or that it was simply as they had expected.

The last category discusses the reviews of the agency aspect for novels written by female authors about female main characters. Not much new is noted for this category as it is pretty much the same as for when female authors write about male main characters, though slightly more reviewers dislike the writing of the female main characters. The only new argument that is brought up is by Wendy Darling to Victoria Schwab's *The Archived* in which she comments that she appreciates the contemplative tone and slightly slower paced writing of the narrating voice (Darling, *The Archived*). This results in the conclusion that there are common points for reviewers to judge the agency aspect regardless of the gender of the author that wrote the aspect which are uniqueness, credibility and relatability, but the focus on what part of the agency aspect is reviewed shifts based on what gender the author of the novel has.

Quantitative Research: Personality

As with the agency aspect discussed in the previous sub-chapters, data concerning the number of times the personality character aspect was mentioned to support the reviewer's judgement of a novel was gathered. These results were compared amongst the different categories and can be found in figure 39 below.

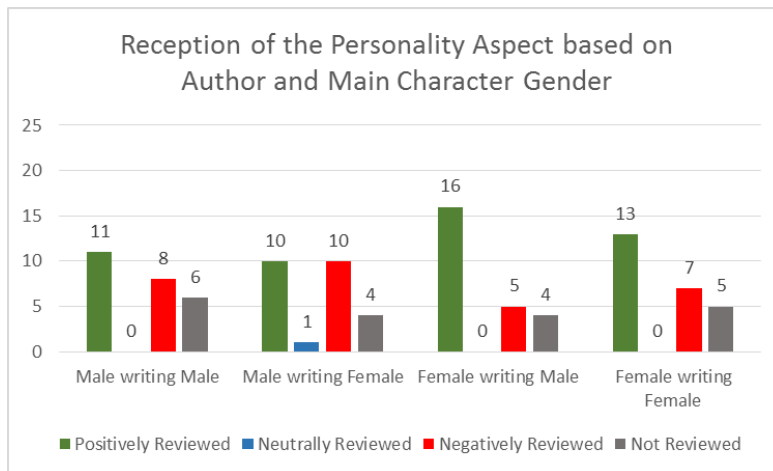


Figure 39. Comparison of the number of reviews that were positively, neutrally, negatively and not reviewed per researched group with regards to the personality aspect.

The numbers in figure 39 show that reviewers were especially positive when reviewing the personality aspect in novels written by female authors from the perspective of a male character. Overall, reviewers positively reviewed the personality aspect in all the research novels, but were slightly more negative when it came to male authors writing from a female perspective. Another detail that comes to light is that the personality character aspect was nearly always mentioned in the reviews, which was not true for the other character aspects discussed up till now. There is a very slight increase in the not-reviewed numbers when an author writes from their own gender, but nothing significant enough to deem it anything other than sheer circumstance. There is a significant increase of positive reviews when looking at the category of female authors writing from a male perspective. This could mean reviewers were happily surprised by the proper writing of the personality aspect or it could again be explained by reviewer bias that favours female authors. The male authors are again judged more harshly, receiving double the negative reviews when they write from the perspective of a female protagonist in comparison to female authors writing from a male character's point of view.

Having compared the numerals of the collected reviews, this data was converted to percentages to draw more conclusive evidence from the reviews. These percentages can be found in figures 40 to 43 below.

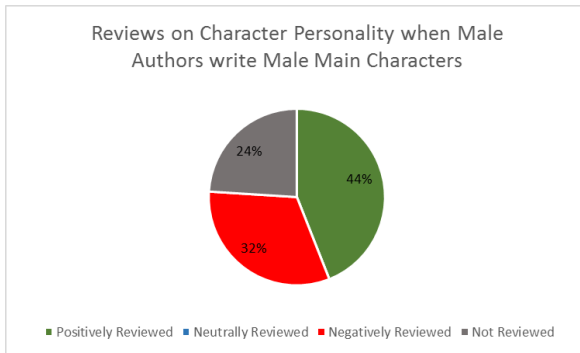


Figure 40. Percentage of the time that the personality aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

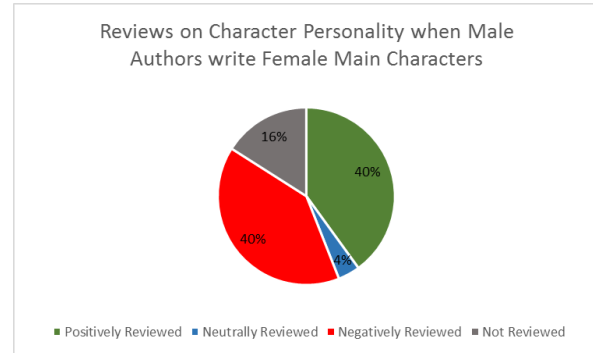


Figure 41. Percentage of the time that the personality aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters.

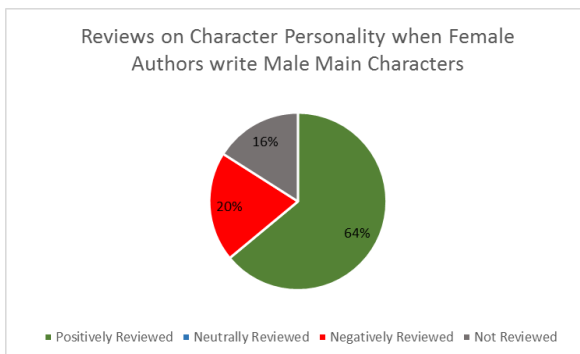


Figure 42. Percentage of the time that the personality aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

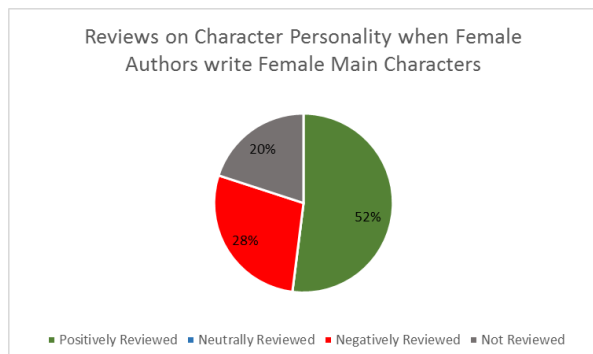


Figure 43. Percentage of the time that the personality aspect was positively, negatively, neutrally or not at all reviewed for novels written by female authors about female main characters.

In these figures, it is shown that the not-reviewed portion of the reviews is indeed a lot smaller than with the other discussed aspects. However, at an average of 19% it is still nearly one out of five reviews that does not mention the personality aspect. Though this is of no concern for the research and its credibility as it merely means that reviewers have a variety of reasons to support their opinion of a novel, which is why different aspects were looked into in the first place. What can be concluded from this data on the other hand is that reviewers hold the personality aspect in high regard when formulating their opinion of a

novel and are keen to discuss it. Another point these percentages bring to light is that the percentages for positive mentions of the personality aspect for novels written by male authors in figure 40 and 41 are closer together than would be expected when looking solely at the data in figure 39. This implies that male authors do not actually write the personality aspect better when they write a character of the male gender than when they would write one of the female gender, but rather that according to reviewers they simply do not write the personality aspect as well as the female authors do. In this case, it would mean that male authors should brush up on their writing of the personality aspect, but it cannot be said that male authors are incapable of writing the personality aspect of female characters. Reviewers do seem to believe female authors write the personality aspect of their characters, regardless of gender, nicely.

Lastly, the data from figure 39 was put into diagrams reflecting the percentage of the times a reviewer negatively, neutrally or positively reviewed the personality aspect of a character in a novel, omitting the not-reviewed category. This resulted in figures 44 to 47 as shown below.

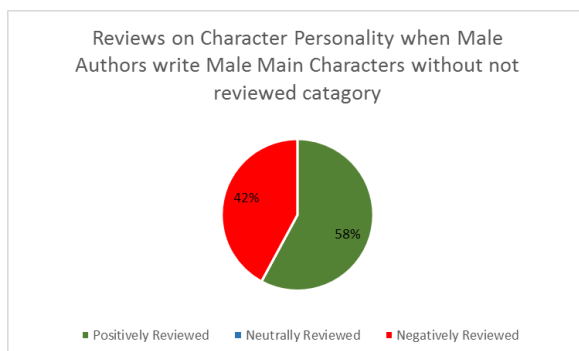


Figure 44. Percentage of the time that the personality aspect was positively, negatively, or neutrally reviewed for novels written by male authors about male main characters.

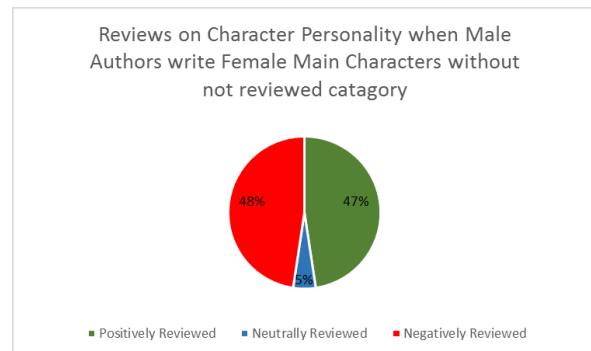


Figure 45. Percentage of the time that the personality aspect was positively, negatively, or neutrally reviewed for novels written by male authors about female main characters

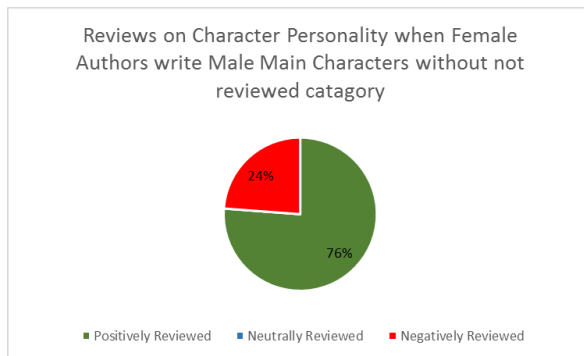


Figure 46. Percentage of the time that the personality aspect was positively, negatively, or neutrally reviewed for novels written by female authors about male main characters.

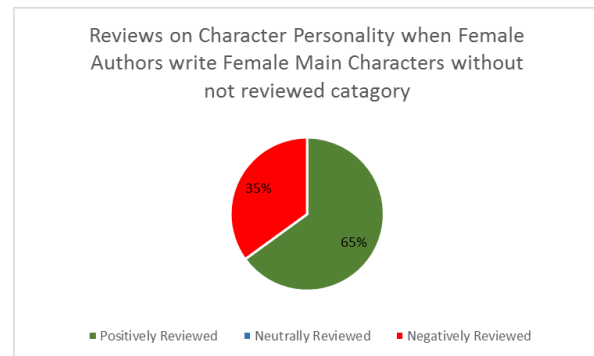


Figure 47. Percentage of the time that the personality aspect was positively, negatively, or neutrally reviewed for novels written by female authors about female main characters.

Although the difference with figure 41 is basically nihil, in figure 45 it is now shown that if a reviewer reviews the personality aspect in a novel written by a male author from a female perspective, then the odds are slightly higher for the review to be negative than positive. As with the agency aspect, the category in which male authors write from a female perspective is the only category with neutral reviews. The increase in percentage of negative reviews between female authors writing male main characters and when they write female main characters is now a little more significant. In figures 42 and 43 the difference was 8% while in figures 46 and 47 the difference is 11%. At the same time, the difference in negative reviews of male authors writing male characters and of them writing female characters went down from 8% in figures 40 and 41 to 6% in figures 44 and 45. These percentages imply that, in the eyes of the reviewers, novels written with a female lead suffer in quality regardless of author gender. This, too, is a phenomenon that has occurred with the other research character aspects. It could mean that female characters are more difficult to portray in a satisfying manner for readers and it could mean that readers are more critical towards novels with a female lead. According to an article in *The Guardian* by Daniel Boffey, most readers of any genre, including young adult, are female, as stated in the introduction of this thesis as well (Boffey). Following the theory that female readers are more confident in their capabilities to

judge a female character, it is accurate to state that female readers are therefore less confident to judge a male character and thus reviewers may withhold from giving accurate judgment when a male character has the lead in a novel. The reason female authors receive more positive reviews in this scenario could then be prescribed to the female readers rewarding them for writing a character the readers can relate to despite the mismatch of gender between reader and character. This could imply that female authors actually write male characters that are less authentic to reality since they are more in touch with the relatable feminine traits of the readers.

Qualitative Analysis: Personality

Having thoroughly discussed the agency aspect and analysed the quantitative data of the personality aspect, it is time to look at how reviewers mention the personality aspect in their reviews. This aspect was mentioned in most reviews, which could all share the same arguments but there is a higher chance than with other aspects that there will be a multitude of reasons that reviewers may bring up to support their judgement. Collecting these reasons by analysing their reviews will help explain the data found in the quantitative research and in turn it will help answer whether or not the novels of male authors are received worse than female authors when they write from the perspective of the opposite gender on the binary spectrum.

Firstly, this section will discuss the category in which male authors write from the perspective of a female character. A term that is brought up several times to describe the character's personality is "cardboard" and reviewer Claire even went as far as to call them "cardboard cut-out mouthpieces" in her review of *The World According to Anna* by Jostein Gaarder (Claire, *The World According to Anna*). The term varies slightly from "cardboard" to

“one-dimensional” or “two-dimensional”, but the argument remains the same, namely that the characters in the novel could be replaced with cardboard and their personality would remain the same. Despite there being no mention in these reviews of assets or flaws, the usage of the cardboard term implicitly states that the characters have neither assets nor flaws. After several reviews that complain about the lack of any personality, reviewers reply to John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* in which two more arguments are brought up. The first is the abundance of assets in the main character, whom reviewer Ayesha refers to as a “pretentious Mary Sue” (Ayesha, *The Fault in Our Stars*). “Mary Sue” is an internet term and is generally defined by the online *Urban Dictionary* as an original character that is in many ways considered perfect and flawless, making the character obnoxious (Urban Dictionary). The *Urban Dictionary* also mentions that the term Mary Sue is specifically used for female characters and that its counterpart is referred to as either a Gary Sue or a Marty Sue. Interestingly though, Ayesha mentions that the main character in *The Fault in Our Stars* is rather dumb or stupid, but a character being dumb would usually be considered a flaw, which is a remark that is seemingly at odds with the term Mary Sue. The problem in this is that the character is likely deemed stupid by the readers while inside the novel she is considered intelligent, making for an unrealistic narrative, which is a point that has been brought up to describe this particular novel. The other argument that is raised in the same review is once again the uniqueness of the personalities. Ayesha claims that the main character and her love interest are essentially the same character though one is female and the other male (Ayesha, *The Fault in Our Stars*). Reviewer Laurel adds that the personality of the characters in *The Fault in Our Stars* is unbelievable because there is no background, part of the status aspect discussed in chapter two of this research, to explain why the characters are so sophisticated and well-read (Laurel, *The Fault in Our Stars*). This shows how closely linked some of the character aspects are. It is very likely that if reviewers find fault in the writing of one aspect,

the way the other aspects are written is frowned upon as well. Whenever reviewers are positive about the personality aspect, it is mentioned how the characters are flawed more often than what assets they enjoy. For example, the review by Brigid on Rick Riordan's *The Mark of Athena* mentions that lead character Annabeth is mean and proud, which gets her into trouble, and through character development she becomes a little more humble which makes her a relatable character in the end (Brigid, *The Mark of Athena*). Perhaps this warrants concern for the young adults of this generation as it implies that flawed characters are relatable, meaning the readers themselves acknowledge they are flawed, but the important part for this research is that this means reviewers appreciate a character with slightly more flaws over a character with slightly more assets. In other words, balance is not necessarily the term to describe a properly written personality aspect, but rather a character needs to be closer to flawed than to perfection as this allows for development towards balance. However, reviewer Hannah Greendale does warn in her review to Jonathan Stroud's *A Screaming Staircase* that a character should not be so flawed that a side character overshadows the main character as happens with Anthony Lockwood overshadowing main character Lucy (Greendale, *A Screaming Staircase*). In short, this results in the following arguments that reviewers present to support a judgement of the personality aspect in novels written by male authors about male main characters: a character needs more flaws than assets to allow for character development to make their personality balanced; the personality needs to be believable, unique and relatable; and a personality cannot be without either flaw or asset.

In the category in which male authors write about male main characters, much of the same arguments can be found as when male authors write about female main characters. The difference is that now readers are just a tad more positive than negative and the terms cardboard and Mary Sue do not show up in these reviews. Male characters written by male authors are according to the reviewers never over-accomplished and flawless, and neither are

they one-dimensional. The complaints are either that they are not unique or unbelievable. The distribution of these arguments is rather even across the different novels, so it appears that the only reason that the quantitative research shows that male authors receive more negative reviews on the writing of the personality aspect of female main characters is because two more people decided to actually complain about the writing than when male authors write male main characters.

That said, why do female authors receive so much more positive reviews on their novels? Two words: character development. Nearly all the praise that female authors get regardless of whether they write from a male or female perspective is because the characters start with a scale that is slightly tipped towards more flawed and end up balanced. What is especially important in the character development is that it is shown and felt how the characters struggle to get towards that balance and how relatable that struggle is. To take a lengthy example that summarises most of these comments, reviewer Marilyz replies to *The Traitor's Game* by Jennifer A. Nielsen with the following quote:

Kestra starts off as naive and spoiled, but her exterior shell crumbles as the book progresses to reveal a hurting, genuinely compassionate person who wears a mask of toughness to hide her desire to feel like she belongs. Truly a masterful character arc, in my opinion. It makes her a sympathetic character who is relatable but also incredibly deep. (Marilyz, *The Traitor's Game*)

Though this argument appears most often out of all arguments, the uniqueness of characters is mentioned as an argument as well, usually as an argument to support a positive judgement of the personality aspect. What is important to note though is that whenever a novel written by a female author features a character that is, to use the term reviewers are keen to use for novels written by male authors, a Sue or otherwise unbelievable, reviewers

are relentless in sharing their negative judgement, even more so than when a male author writes an in their opinion poor personality aspect. A prime example of this is given by a reviewer called Kitten Blue to Sarah J Maas's *Throne of Glass* (Blue, *Throne of Glass*). In her review, Blue makes several comments about the personality aspect and rather than dully stating that the character has too many assets as happened with the reviews so far, she goes ahead and quotes 39 lines of the novel and complains about every specific line to support her judgement of the aspect. Blue even has a complaint about the name of the main character saying:

What in Erilea kind of a name is Celaena? Is it really any wonder that Nehemia eventually renames her?! Other people get normal enough names, such as Dorian and Grave and Sam and Elena and Xavier and Cain and Philippa and Verin and Ned; simple names, really. I guess the special snowflake needs a special name to go with her very special personality impairment. (Blue, *Throne of Glass*)

Going by this type of quotes, it would be safe to presume that reviewers are not biased in favour of the female authors, as was speculated in previous chapters. Reviewers give a relatively harsher judgement when female authors go amiss after all than when male authors go wrong. It does seem to be the case the female readers are more confident expressing their opinions about female personalities, resulting in the slightly increase of reviews in general as shown in the quantitative research sub-chapter for the personality aspect as well as the relatively harsher critique when writing negative reviews.

Conclusion

The quantitative research on the agency aspect shows that male authors receive a high number of negative reviews when they write a novel from the perspective of a female lead

character. The percentages also showed that novels by male authors about male characters are received about as positively as novels by female authors regardless of gender, meaning the quality of the agency aspect is indeed lower in the eyes of reviewers when male authors write about female characters.

The qualitative analysis of the agency aspect showed that the same arguments were raised when judging novels by male authors, namely; balanced usage of comic relief, natural and therefore authentic dialogue, and uniqueness. These arguments were centred on the dialogue and monologues written by the male authors. The female authors however were judged mostly on the voice and activeness of their characters, on which reviewers were mostly positive regardless of the gender of the main character. The arguments used to support these reviews were mainly based on the activeness, uniqueness, credibility, and relatability of the character's voice. The lack of remarks by reviewers about dialogue in writing by female authors implied that the dialogue was at least up to their standard.

According to the quantitative research, the personality aspect was the most reviewed aspect out of all character aspects. The data taken from this research showed that reviewers judge the writing of the personality aspect by male authors positively about as often as they review it negatively, though the reviewers appeared to be slightly more positive when male authors stuck to writing from the perspective of their own gender. In comparison, reviewers were exceptionally positive when it came to the portrayal of the personality aspect by female authors. This suggested that reviewers believe female authors generally write a more compelling character based on the personality aspect than male authors do.

Finally, the qualitative analysis of the personality aspect revealed that all reviewers share the same arguments to judge this aspect regardless of author or main character gender. These arguments were: a character needs more flaws than assets to allow for character

development to make their personality balanced; the personality needs to be believable, unique and relatable; and a personality cannot be without either flaw or asset. Reviewers were especially relentless whenever a female author went amiss in writing the personality aspect, but the female authors received more praise than the male authors. The focus of these positive reviews was in character development, in which a character started out more flawed than balanced and then ended up being balanced at the end of the novel.

Overall, these findings lead to the conclusion that, according to reviewers, male authors are indeed worse at writing the agency aspect, particularly dialogue, when they write from a female perspective than when they write from a male perspective or than female authors in general. When it comes to the personality aspect, reviewers judge that male authors are not necessarily bad at writing the aspect but that female authors simple excel in comparison.

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this research was to contribute to the debate about so-called gender appropriation in fiction. Gwen C. Katz started a Twitter thread in which challenged women to write themselves the way a male author would (Flood). This thread portrayed one side in the gender appropriation in fiction debate. This side argues that male authors are incapable of writing female characters and that they should stick to writing male characters while the other side, which appeared to be a minority, presumed that this was incorrect. No conclusive evidence has ever been collected to support either side even though there are many reasons to determine whether or not this phenomenon can be perceived as the truth or is, in fact, a misconception. Alan Williamson was one of the critics that discussed several theories that could explain why male authors cannot write authentic female character, but he did not question whether or not this truly was the case (Williamson). Cheryl Lange noted this in her research as well and she decided to research the phenomenon herself by analysing four novels and to determine if there was a noteworthy difference in the writing of female authors and male authors (Lange).

This research did not look into novels but instead focused on the reception of novels in which both male and female authors wrote from the opposite gender to see if there is any notable and significant difference to be found in the perceived quality of those novels. The corpus consisted of reviews of English young adult novels published after 2010 and the research question therefore was how Goodreads reviewers of English young adult novels published after 2010 respond to novels in which the author writes from the perspective of the opposite gender on the binary spectrum as opposed to when the authors writes from the perspective of their own gender. To determine if the fault with the selected novels was truly in how the characters were written, the five most commonly pointed out character aspects

were selected from a list provided by Kristen Kieffer (Kieffer). The reviews could then be analysed with respect to these aspects. These character aspects were the status, achievement, relationship, agency and personality aspects. One hundred reviews were collected from Goodreads in total and analysed to determine the odds of a negative, positive or neutral review on a novel per character aspect. Those findings were gathered in what was referred to as quantitative research. Then the reviews were further analysed to see how these reviews were presented so it could be revealed whether or not authors are judged on the basis of the same criteria and if the novels were truly judged on the characters and not on some other part of the novel. That part of the research was referred to as qualitative analysis.

The status aspect received a significant number of neutral reviews in the quantitative research and the numbers made it seem as if reviewers believed that it authors regardless of gender were simply not as good as writing the status aspect for their female leads. The achievement aspect discussed in the same chapter actually showed the opposite to be the case where authors regardless of gender were perceived by reviewers to write a better achievement aspect for their female main characters. In addition, female authors would receive more positive reviews on their female main characters and more negative reviews to their male main characters with regards to the achievement aspect than male authors did. The situation was again reversed when it came to the status aspect, meaning female authors received more positive reviews for their male main characters and more negative reviews for their female main characters than male authors did. The qualitative analysis revealed that that biggest issue found by reviewers to these aspects were for a great portion due to the poor world building and plot development in the novels. The quantitative analysis of the relationship aspect spoke in favour of the idea that reviewers believe female authors write a better relationship aspect for their characters than male authors do, though authors of both genders performed worse when they wrote from a female lead. The qualitative analysis for this aspect

revealed that reviewers had more praise for when male authors wrote a friendship rather than a romance in their novel, and in general the lack of a romantic relationship for the main character in novels resulted in more positive reviews. The criteria were focused on the characters and the same criteria were used in all reviews, meaning that according to reviewers the female authors write a better relationship aspect for their main characters than male authors do. In the final chapter, the agency and personality aspect were researched. In the quantitative research of the agency aspect, the odds showed that male authors received a significant amount of negative reviews when they wrote from the perspective of a female main character. All other categories received by far more positive reviews than negative, meaning only that particular category was reviewed negatively. The qualitative analysis showed that the problem reviewers had with the writing of male authors was mostly in their dialogue which was considered indistinctive and unrealistic. Female authors did not receive many comments on the way they wrote dialogue, but instead received a lot of praise from reviewers on the voice of their characters. Lastly, the quantitative research of the personality aspect showed once again that female authors receive more positive reviews than the male authors do. There is however, no significant increase in negative reviews for when male authors write female characters instead of male characters. Qualitative analysis showed that the exact same arguments were used by reviewers to judge this aspect and thus it could only be concluded that reviewers believe female authors write the personality aspect more adequately.

From all those findings it can be concluded that there is no reason to believe that, according to reviewers, male authors write worse when they write a novel from the perspective of a female main character. However, there is a good indication that female authors write better received novels in the young adult genre than male authors do. There was only aspect out of the five research character aspects that could be used to support the theory

that male authors cannot write female characters, while the others simply showed that while male authors receive more negative reviews it cannot be said this is due to the shift in gender of the main character.

Some issues that this research stumbled upon is the fact that most reviewers are from the female gender themselves. It is difficult to completely exclude the existence of bias that favours the female authors, but based on the qualitative analysis it does show that reviewers are especially harsh when they negatively review a novel written by a female author. This would sooner indicate that there is no bias that favours the female authors than that there is. Another issue was in the selection of the novels and was similar to the issue Cheryl Lange experienced in her research. Authors tend to have a preference to write from either gender and hardly ever write a novel from the perspective of the other gender, meaning it proved difficult to find authors that had two novels that matched all the criteria of the research. Therefore, the research had to resort in some cases to stories that were written from multiple perspectives, which was not that problematic as long as the reviewers mentioned the character of the right gender for that category. A third and final issue was found with the reviews themselves, since Goodreads reviews are sometimes more like comments than actual reviews. The comments that had nothing substantial to add for the research had to be filtered out of the top voted reviews for that reason, which may have had the slightest influence on the results of the research, though nothing ground-breaking. Using professional reviews instead would have resulted in a lack of corpus, so this was the only option.

It must be noted that this research focused solely on the young adult genre and its reception on Goodreads. There are many ways in which the possible misconception of male authors being incapable of writing an authentic female character could and should still be further researched. The introduction of this research mentioned the ratings given to the selected novels and those ratings could be further looked into for a minor research. Perhaps a

research into prizes won by novels could also help debunk or prove the presented theory. Something that could be interesting to do as well is interviewing anonymous readers so that precise and relevant questions can be asked and answered. These questionnaires could even add questions that will help determine if there is truly no bias involved in reviews. Lastly, a research similar to this one could be extended to help sort out the cultural appropriation debate mentioned by Lionel Shriver in the introduction of this research, though, as mentioned in there, this appears to be a touchy subject and should be handled with extra caution. It could also be extended to the different genres with regards to gender appropriation. Though the results in this research do not resolve the gender appropriation debate or debunk the theories with regards to male authors writing female characters, it does provide the research field with a foundation on which to build the research.

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Appendix

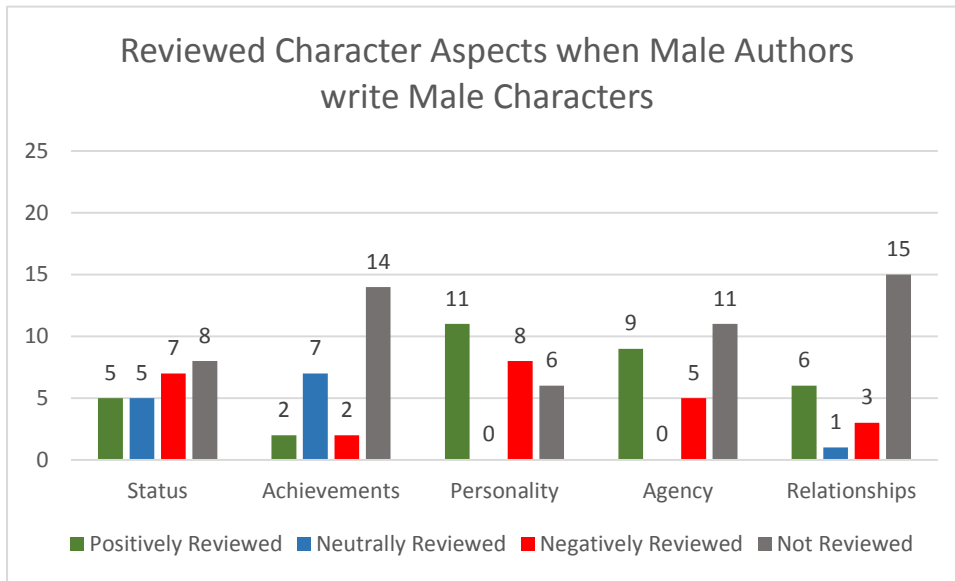


Figure 48. The number of times specific character aspects were mentioned in the researched reviews on novels written by male authors about male main characters.

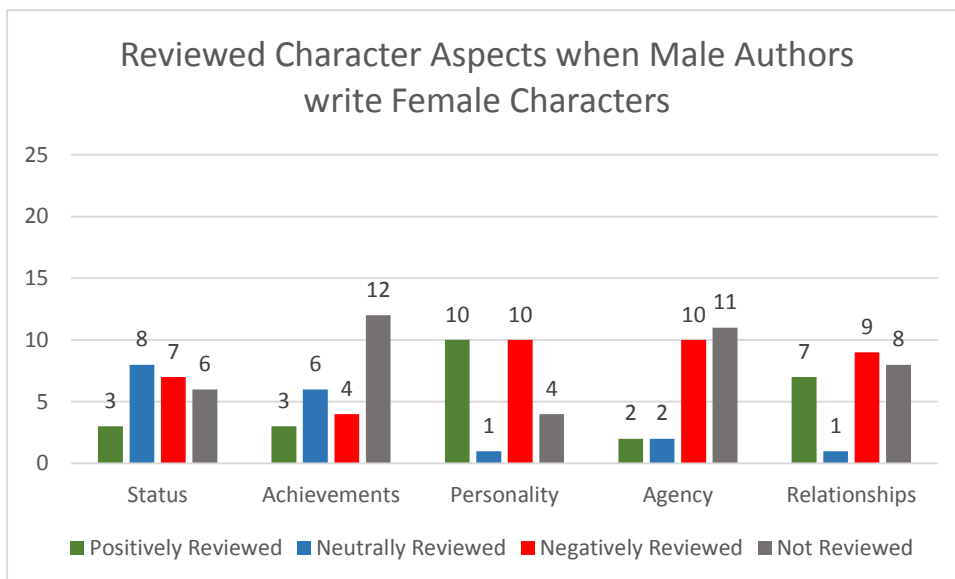


Figure 49. The number of times specific character aspects were mentioned in the researched reviews on novels written by male authors about female main characters.

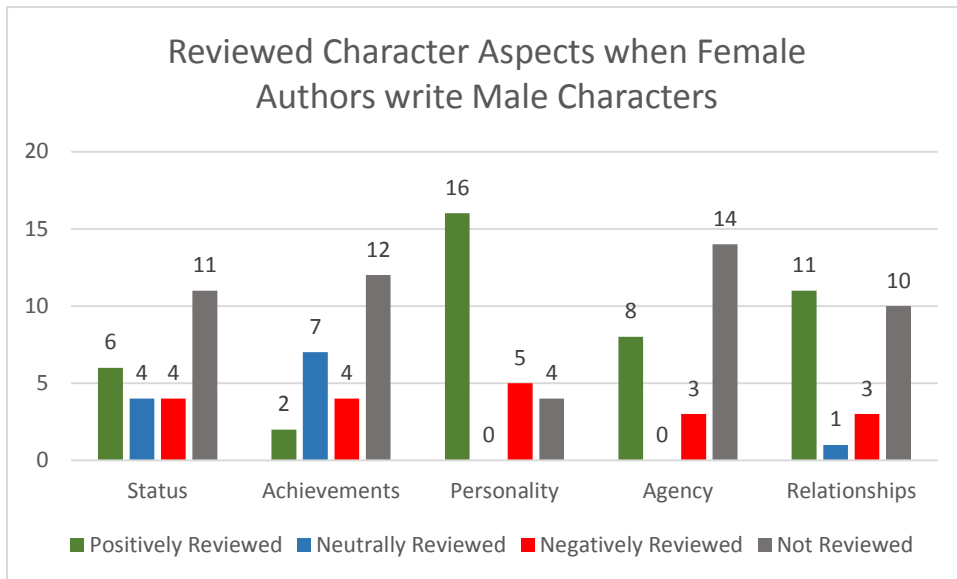


Figure 50. The number of times specific character aspects were mentioned in the researched reviews on novels written by female authors about male main characters.

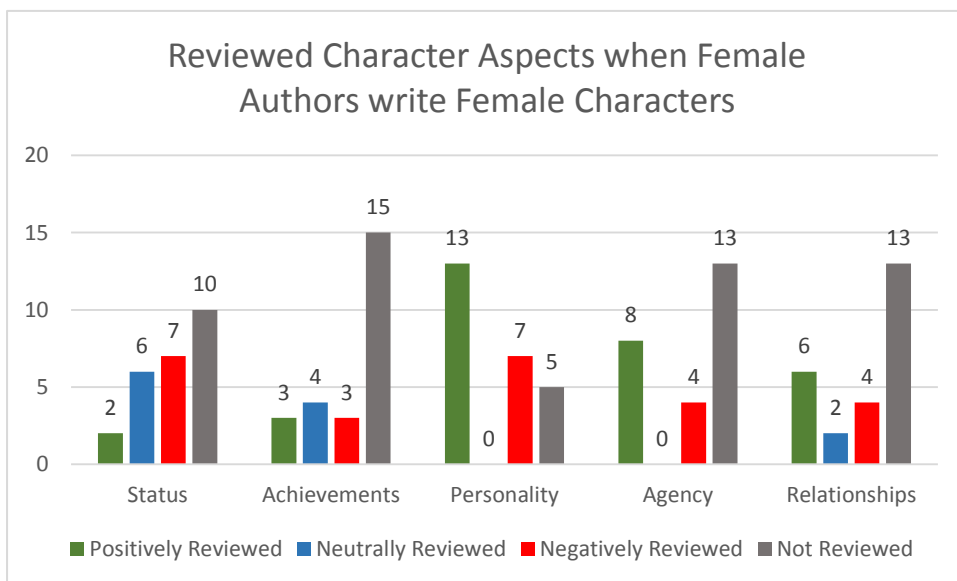


Figure 51. The number of times specific character aspects were mentioned in the researched reviews on novels written by female authors about female main characters.