

The Dangerous Women Game

Recent studies on the appalling gender (mis)representation on TV have led some media analysts to conclude that the more television a boy watches, the more sexist he becomes, while the more a girl watches, the fewer options she believes she has in life. I am a television addict but resisted the TV series *Game of Thrones* because I'd heard about the abundance of gratuitous violence, sexual and otherwise. When my two teenage sons became hooked, however, I did too, and I like to think we watch for more than just the soft porn. Although *Game of Thrones* is no feminist manifesto, at least it has a veritable battalion of female characters. Whores galore, scantily clad wenches and waifs, beaten and abused sex slaves, yes -- but there are several women and girls who are surprising, have considerable agency, and are generally more fully-drawn and complicated than the usual female fare in our movies, television, and books -- that is, sidekicks, arm and eye candy, and damsels-to-be-rescued.

So when I came across *Dangerous Women*, a cross-genre anthology co-edited by George R.R. Martin, who wrote the book *Game of Thrones* that preceded the show, I was curious. Does Martin have a feminist consciousness, if not an agenda? As the introduction by Martin's colleague Gardner Dozois points out, though "dangerous" women, both real and imagined, have been around longer than Boadicea and Medea, the pervasive cultural image of women persists as "hapless victims who stand by whimpering in dread while the male hero fights the monster or clashes swords with the villain." Martin and Dozois challenged a wide array of authors, both male and female, to write on the theme of "dangerous" female characters. With the news overwhelmed with recent cases of women crushed by patriarchal powers-that-be -- Farzana Parveen, Meriam Ibrahim, the kidnapped Nigerian girls, Elliot Rodgers's killing spree, the Supreme Court's Hobby Lobby decision -- I was eager to read about heroines, be they zombies, vampires, dragon queens, historical queens, femme fatales, or phantoms, who kick some ass. The anthology, for the most part, delivers.

In the first story, Joe Abercrombie's "Some Desperado," Shy, a bank robber in some alternative version of the Wild West, is hunted down by her lover and his brother after she runs off with the loot. The yarn sets the tone for the collection: Shy is a fully realized character, not just a woman dressed as a man doing mannish things, though she is also that. Since our predominant cultural model for a hero is so deeply gendered, today's heroines often suffer from gender confusion, uncomfortably imitating men in both look and attitude. In *Game of Thrones*, for example, two of the best characters, Arya Stark and the knight Brienne, are riddled with it. I like to think this perplexity is a transitory syndrome that will fade away as things female lose their stigma.

The "queenpin of crime," Megan Abbott, editor of the excellent *A Hell of a Woman: An Anthology of Female Noir* and author of the study *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir*, provides, in "My Heart is Either Broken," a Hitchcockian tale of a woman who isn't believed when her child goes missing. The police, her neighbors, friends, and family barrage her with all sorts of misogynistic assumptions and accusations, both blatant and subtle. The story, a brilliant sleight-of-hand, draws us into the-mother-is-always-to-blame mind set, only to expose our own prejudice.

The anthology offers three exceptional historical pieces, one by Cecilia Holland entitled "Nora's Song" about an episode in the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Sharon Kay Penman's "A Queen in Exile," about Constance de Hauteville, a twelfth-century German queen who is also heir to the Sicilian throne. In both stories, the authors show how powerful women must cleverly and ruthlessly manipulate patriarchy to get what they want. Carrie Vaughn's "Raisa Stepanova" tells the harrowing story of a Russian fighter pilot during World War II who dreams of glory and does all she can to achieve it, only to be foiled by both patriarchal resistance and herself. Both Megan Lindholm's "Neighbors" and Pat Cadigan's "Caretakers" deal innovatively and effectively with the aging parent theme, particularly emphasizing how elderly women are treated by society -- dismissed, denigrated, denied.

There are a few duds. Though Joe R. Landsdale's one-liners rival Raymond Chandler's, his story "Wrestling Jesus" offers as a "dangerous woman" a mostly silent and trivial femme fatale over whom two men fight. Melinda Snodgrass's "The Hands That Are Not There," a compelling sci-fi story, aims to expose human male hypocrisy via an alien posing as the ultimate submissive female in order to finally destroy him and his misogynistic government. However, she spends too much time describing the alien's slavish behavior. Lawrence Block's noir "I Know How to Pick 'Em" begins promisingly with a femme fatale set-up reminiscent of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* but fast dissolves into run-of-the-mill serial killer trope with the woman having virtually no voice. The nearly 800-page anthology includes many more distinctive and satisfying stories involving female zombies, wizards, dystopian rebels, P.I.s, and superheroes.

The last story, George R.R. Martin's "The Princess and the Queen, or, The Blacks and the Greens," recounts an episode in the history of the House of Targaryen in which a queen and a princess battle for the Iron Throne. In many bloody battles among the members of the clashing clan, both male and female royalty and nobility ride upon their dragons, fighting to the death. Martin's genius is that however many characters he introduces with complicated lineages, he somehow manages to guide the reader with such authority that one trusts all is clear. Even more impressive, no matter how treacherous the characters -- and they are all, even the good ones, Machiavellian at heart -- he manages to make them sympathetic, or at least realized enough for a reader to passionately despise. "The Princess and the Queen" particularly gratified me because it provided back story to my favorite character in *Game of Thrones*, Daenerys Targaryen, Mother of Dragons, whose family once reigned over the Seven Kingdoms.

Daenerys, or Dany, a petite blonde much victimized as a child, sheds her meek demeanor to

become a confident, courageous, iron-willed leader. She transforms herself into the great emancipator whose mission is to abolish slavery throughout the Seven Kingdoms and will stop at nothing to accomplish her goal. I particularly appreciate that though Dany is a powerful, "dangerous" woman, she has no gender confusion. She asserts her femininity proudly and consistently. She parades her erotic allure but does not trade on it. Her mother instinct toward humans and dragons is fundamental to her identity and to her strength as a leader. Vulnerable and flawed, she is constantly compelled to make difficult moral and political choices. She is not afraid to ask for help, but knows she ultimately must rely on her own intelligence and instincts. Dany is a true heroine for our times and a viable role model for all, including my teenage sons. I look forward to a time when there is no need for an anthology devoted to heroines because they will have become as ubiquitous as heroes. In the meantime, *Dangerous Women* is a welcome addition to our literature.