

Performing Girlhood, Performing Self: The *Alice* Books by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

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Gender Trouble and Realistic Fiction

If Judith Butler is right in her book *Gender Trouble*, then each person's everyday actions are laden with signs of gender, and **children enact their gender everyday**. Rather than having constant, fixed identities, girls and boys create their identities through their actions, within the constraints of cultural norms of gender identity. By challenging the notion of fixed identity categories, Butler highlights the active process of performance. The process of conforming to or performing male or female identity in comprehensible ways, in accordance with male/female gender norms, is a continuous part of the social and narrative worlds of young people.

How do girls learn to perform girlhood? How do they learn to perform their female identities? In addition to the many sources of input from magazines, television, websites, and other media, girls also learn the traits of girlhood from realistic fiction featuring female characters. Series such as the *Alice* books by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor present engaging female protagonists who grow and change during girlhood. Naylor's *Alice* series consists of 21 books so far (published since 1985) that cover the everyday life experiences of character Alice McKinley from age 8 into high school.

Performative Gender in Realistic Fiction

In one way of seeing, the coherence and the narrative reproduction of everyday life events in **realistic fiction reinforces hegemonic norms of gender**. Understanding how gender is enacted within the narrative constraints of realistic fiction may offer useful analogies to understanding the restrictive gendering of children's experiences. In another way, **realistic fiction offers empowerment to young readers**, because it shows characters who seem *just like them* successfully navigating everyday challenges. Although constrained by gender, the agency of characters and the active behaviors they model for readers represent another important element of feminist understandings. Such agency can be overlooked by an analysis that focuses too deterministically on the hegemonic force of gender. **Butler's notion of "performance" opens the door to a richer understanding of agency within the historical and cultural constraints of gender norms** by defining gender identity as:

"...a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction." (Butler 1990, p. 138)

Butler's theory of performativity offers a framework for examining the ways that fiction reflects, produces, and reproduces gender for readers through depictions of female characters.



Why the *Alice* Books?

Realistic fiction portrays everyday life, offering accessible role models for young readers who face similar challenges and hardships. Nevertheless, the kind of **realistic fiction** portrayed in series books, narratives of everyday life, is **typically devalued** in critical appraisals of children's literature. In her analysis of the critical reception of the *Ramona* books by Beverly Cleary, Deborah Stevenson demonstrates that everyday life stories are often overlooked for awards and for the kind of critical attention garnered by individual novels on more serious topics. The importance of everyday life stories consists of the main character's "overall growth and reflection, not the events that cause them." (Stevenson, p. 26) Rich portrayals of realistic characters allow young readers to identify with the characters in series such as the *Alice* books.

Like the awkward, self-conscious, pre-teen Alice, these books are in-between in terms of their literary status. They are not award winners themselves, but some of Naylor's other writings are critically acclaimed (her book *Shiloh* won a Newbery award), and Naylor's writing consistently garners positive reviews. Although the *Alice* books are series fiction, they are not formulaic fiction. The *Alice* books sit between statuses in the children's literary world; they are critically well-received without winning awards. They are also quite popular with reading audiences, as the *Alice* website attests (www.simonsays.com/alice).

Readers Identifying with Characters

Alice, the main character of the series, is flanked by her two best friends, Elizabeth and Pamela. On the back of the book *Including Alice* (2004), publishers Atheneum include several quotes gathered from Naylor fans on the Alice web site (www.simonsays.com/alice)—one of them from a group of fans:

"We love the Alice books sooooo much we call ourselves Pam, Liz, and Al."

This and other quotes from the website show similar statements of girls identifying strongly with characters. Through this identification, readers are experimenting with the kinds of gender performances enacted by these three characters, each of whom has differing experiences of adolescent girlhood. Interestingly, the publishers are using readers' identification as advertising for the books themselves, emphasizing the identification of readers with characters.

Realistic fiction helps readers to see multiple possibilities for performing their own lives by showing characters as role models who enact gender in various ways. Although those performances function within historical and cultural constraints, characters (and the readers who imitate them) nonetheless make choices about how to perform themselves.

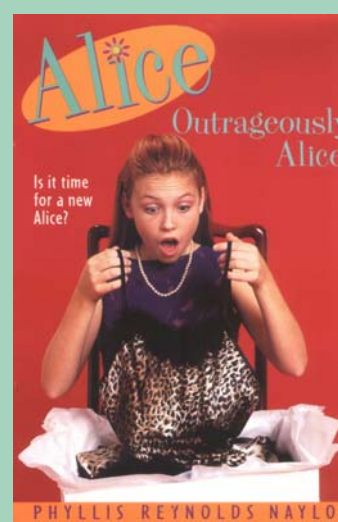
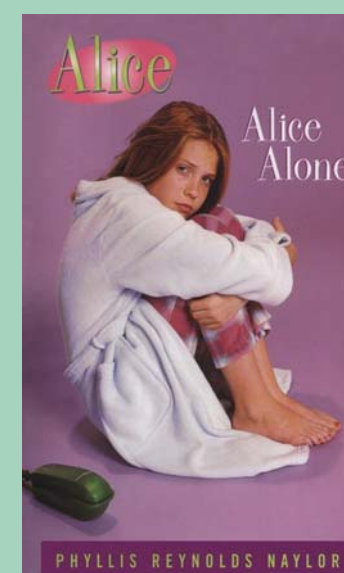
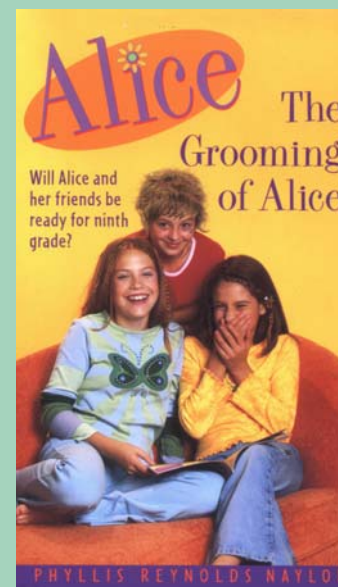
Alice in Search of a Role Model

The importance of role modeling as a means of learning how to perform one's gender is highlighted throughout the stories told in the *Alice* books. Alice's mother died when she was about four years old, and her nuclear family consists of her father and her brother, neither of whom offer her a viable role model for learning how to become a woman. Alice frequently bemoans her lack of a female role model, usually in the introductory first pages of each of the books in the series. This **lack of a mother creates a problem of identity** for Alice; throughout her elementary school and junior high years, **Alice actively assesses the women in her life** to see which of them might make a good mother and/or a good role model for her.

"One of the problems of growing up without a mother is that there's no one around who has any idea what it's like to be a girl. [...] Mom died when I was four, and ever since, I've had to pick up all my information about being female from my aunt and cousin and friends at school." (Naylor 1994, *Alice In-Between*, p. 2)

Because Alice is searching for someone to tell her how to be female, the *Alice* books invite readers to explore and question their own role models, gender performances, and identities.

As shown above, readers identify with the characters of Alice, Pamela, and Elizabeth, each of whom may serve as role models for readers. The emphasis on Alice's own search for a role model invites the reader to search with her, initiating questions about identity as self-presentation in a more direct way than in most realistic fiction. Readers "play" with "being" one of the characters in the *Alice* books, experimenting with multiple paths through girlhood.



Multiple Choice Performances

Alice, Elizabeth, and Pamela each have a distinct approach to gender self-presentation. For example, their choices of clothing vary dramatically. Pamela embraces gender markers of feminine sexuality, such as makeup, low-cut clothing, and earrings. Elizabeth enjoys some elements of feminine performance, such as earrings and clothing, but shies away from low-cut clothes that might highlight sexual attraction. Alice falls in-between the two, choosing sexually attractive clothing for special occasions, but tee-shirts and jeans on most days. Of the three, Alice shows the least interest in clothing and makeup, perhaps influenced by her all-male household.

In each case, the gender performances shown are **both typical and individual** to the thoughts and experiences of each character. Alice, as the protagonist, is portrayed with the most depth regarding her experiences and choices, but Pamela and Elizabeth are also accorded motivations, albeit seen through Alice's eyes. In these characters, Naylor shows multiple modes of being female which offer readers several possible role models.

Constraints on Performances

The expressions of adolescent sexuality and bodily awareness represented by each of the three characters, Alice, Elizabeth, and Pamela, are constrained by not only historical and cultural norms of gender, but also by norms of class, race, and sexual orientation. While they show **three modes of being female**, Alice, Liz, and Pam each represent **performances of female within white, middle-class, heterosexual America**. Other characters represent individual exceptions to these norms, including Sarah and Patrick, who are poor and rich respectively; Gwen, who is African-American and who will apparently have a larger role in the last few books; and the lesbian characters Lori and Leslie.

Nevertheless, the majority of the characters in the *Alice* books are white, middle-class, heterosexual characters. These characters' portrayals of gender performances may actually limit readers' concepts of available or acceptable ways of being female. They fail to represent experiences outside of narrow norms, instead showing three specific and limited paths through adolescence.

Choices Within Constraints

However, Alice's agency is emphasized, even within these constraints. Readers are privy to Alice's thoughts and her process of choosing, evaluating, and re-directing her everyday performances of self. While earlier books emphasize Alice's fears and worries over her lack of a mother and therefore a female role-model (*The Agony of Alice*, 1985; *Naylor 1989*); (*Alice in Rapture, Sort Of*, 1989); (*Reluctantly Alice*, 1991), later books show Alice becoming more confident about making her own choices, even when they conflict with her friends' expectations (*Alice on the Outside*, 1999); (*Simply Alice*, 2002); (*Including Alice*, 2004). **Alice makes active choices** about how to live her life, reflecting on her choices and growth throughout the course of the books. In this sense, Alice is a role model for readers' independence. Alice considers her performance choices in relation to gender norms, choosing whether to enact the expected role, as when she surprises her friends by ending her relationship with Patrick (*Alice Alone*, 2001). Alice's active choices may serve as a model for young readers in building stronger senses of their own autonomy.

Tension Between Choices and Constraints

In one sense, the *Alice* books offer readers only three roles from which to choose, each conforming to aspects of female gender norms. However, from another perspective, offering three characters with which readers can identify might be seen as additive, giving more choices beyond the reader's own singular subjective experience, and thereby enhancing individual girls' abilities to choose how they perform gender and perform themselves. Perhaps three roles actually imply more roles, in that each character's individual

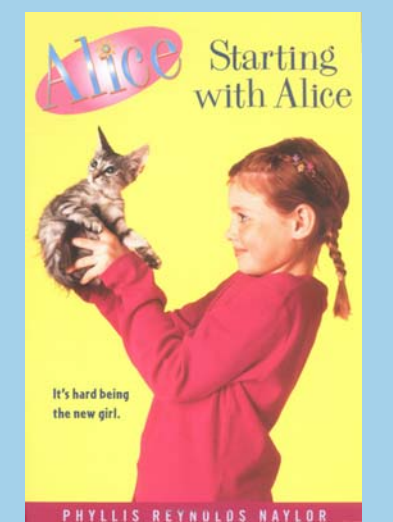
choices add up to many more variations and permutations that readers might play with, try on, or experiment with as they choose performances in their own lives. Analyses of such books must **acknowledge the tension between conformity and agency**, allowing for both restriction and empowerment through realistic, gender-norm-conforming series fiction for girls.

Identity Play and the Personality Quiz

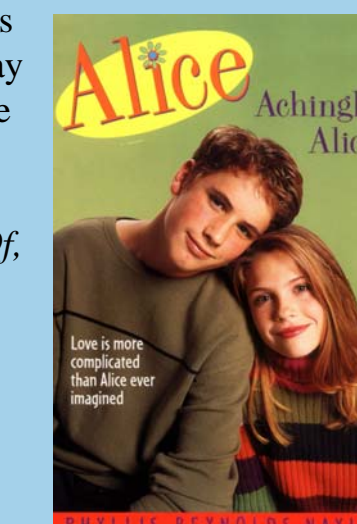
Personality quizzes are, like realistic fiction series books, perennially popular with adolescent girls. Such quizzes invite readers to play with their identities, trying on different roles, and thinking about their own performances of self. At the same time, the quiz tells them who they "are," at least in a limited framework.

If the characters in the *Alice* books offer different role models for adolescent identity, then the natural extension of trying on these different identities is the personality quiz. **Could it be that the "quiz" taps into these tensions between the received wisdom of gender norms and the active choice of performances of self?** Like Butler's notion of performative gender, quizzes don't offer ultimate liberation from norms, but they do offer a range of choices within limits. A quiz is an apt metaphor for the ways that the several gender performances of girlhood function to engage readers with role-models in the *Alice* books. Because such quizzes are multiple choice, the taker's engagement is passive in relation to prescribed categories. However, the process of choosing an answer to each question is active, as is the taker's own assessment of how well the quiz captures their personality. After all, in addition to the roles, characters, and performances in the *Alice* books, each reader also brings herself to the story.

In the spirit of playfully extending Judith Butler's concept of gender as performative, the following quiz invites you to engage with the gender performances in the *Alice* books.



Take the Quiz!



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