

THE BROADSHEET

THIS ISSUE:

META-NARRATIVE AT THE HEART OF *BLACK SAILS*

PRODUCER SHONDA RHIMES AND UNCONVENTIONAL *ANATOMY*

JOHN R. AHERNE POETRY CONTEST WINNING POEMS

BATGIRL, AGENCY, AND THE CLOSING GENDER GAP: *THE KILLING JOKE*

AMANDA GORMAN: FIRST-EVER YOUTH POET LAUREATE



Writers House students attend Mass Poetry Evening of Inspired Leaders event (Photo by Danielle Jones-Pruett)

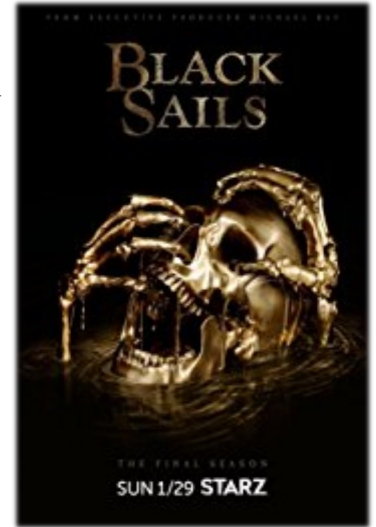
PIRATING NARRATIVES: STARZ NETWORK'S *BLACK SAILS* by Kiera Duggan

Popular television shows, such as HBO's *Game of Thrones* and History Channel's *Vikings*, follow a formula to attract an audience. Starz network's *Black Sails* appears, at least at first, to employ the same template. It features a fair amount of graphic violence and sexual content, and often appears to be aiming for a masculine audience. Making a lackluster 2014 debut, *Black Sails* wound up in the shadows of more popular counterparts and unfortunately remained there until its finale in 2017. The fourth season received approximately one hundred reviews on RottenTomatoes, compared to *Game of Thrones*, which garnered approximately 2,600. Despite the drama's unremarkable impact, however, the audience for *Black Sails* remains shocked over the show's lukewarm reception. A simple Google search yields results from fansites and official publications alike debating its quality. "Why isn't *Black Sails* popular?...I've watched over 25+ TV shows including *Breaking Bad*, *Prison Break*, *Lost*...and *Black Sails* is the best by far" reads one Reddit thread, while a Daily Dot article declares "*Black Sails* is the best show you didn't watch in 2017." An article written for Hypable bears a similar title, "Why *Black Sails* Made Me Question Everything I Know About Good TV." Beyond fantastic cinematography and a compelling cast of actors, I would argue the drama's cult success derives from its capacity to subvert stereotypes

An official publication of the Merrimack College English Department, The Broadsheet is published four times during the academic calendar year. Its mission is to celebrate the English Department's role in promoting the literary arts on campus, to acknowledge the accomplishments of faculty and students, to profile students and alumni, and to create a forum in which issues relevant to English studies can be discussed.

and expectations. *Black Sails* is a show with a clear and powerful message about society, but even beyond that, it is a show inherently about the nature, ownership, and impact of narrative.

Producers based *Black Sails* on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Starz billed it as a prequel series to the novel. Whereas Stevenson's book followed Jim Hawkins and his pursuit of deceased Captain Flint's treasure, *Black Sails* focuses on Flint himself, who lives among a community of pirates on New Providence Island, warring not only against one another but against the world. From the very beginning, *Black Sails* blends history and fiction with its cast of characters, some of whom were real life pirates, such as Anne Bonny, Calico Jack Rackham, and Edward Teach, while others, such as James Flint, Long John Silver, and Billy Bones, emerged from Stevenson's imagination. In many ways, these characters remain aware of their own personal histories and the marks they will leave on the world. As pirates, they threaten maritime trade and embrace anarchy, becoming enemies of civilized society, its values and social conventions. They fight, of course, to secure their own survival, but their greatest battle involves winning the chance to write history themselves.



Personal reasons motivate them. Much like real-life pirates, central cast members find themselves spurned from England not simply because they violate law and defy the conventions of morality, but because of who they are—people who do not fit England's chosen historical narrative. Captain Flint's ten-year career as a pirate has little to do with stealing from others and everything to do with realizing a vendetta against English society for dishonorably discharging him from its navy, forcing him into exile, and institutionalizing his male lover because of their illicit relationship. His nation branded him a monster and this burden haunts him throughout the show. In the first season, it shocks Silver to recognize that "it bothers [Flint]... what they think," despite "the things [he's] done." Flint himself, in the fourth and final season, encourages Silver and the audience to look beyond the limits of social expectations and conventions, observing: "they paint the world full of shadows and tell their children to stay close to the light. Their light. Their reasons, their judgments... But it isn't true. We can prove that it isn't true." The pirates' conflict with mother England is necessary, because without it Flint agonizes that "we will have been for nothing. Defined by their histories, distorted to fit into their narrative until all that is left of us are the monsters in the stories they tell their children." Stories, Flint believes, shape our world and it is both our duty and our responsibility to illuminate the stories that the chosen narrative of others have deleted.

Though Silver is perhaps surprised to find out the extent to which the discriminatory and arbitrary judgments of English society chafe at Flint, he himself develops his own struggle with narrative. His past is never fully explained in the show. The audience knows only that it is horrible enough for him never to speak of it, even to the point at which he must fabricate lies to feed his counterparts in order to manipulate their opinions of him. When Silver loses his leg in the third season, his deepest fear is that the crew will now see



him as weak. It is precisely his skill at storytelling that prevents this from happening, though. In place of the more fun, conniving personality he had adopted in the first two seasons, he reforms himself into a formidable and powerful figure in order to foreclose on the possibility that the crew will see him as “the one-legged creature.” Over the course of the third season, Silver and crewmember Billy Bones construct a narrative that will frighten the Nassau population into backing Flint rather than the English governor in their approaching war, in which Silver, not Flint, serves as the pirate king. Bones creates the legend of Long John Silver upon which *Treasure Island* relies, and resurrects an old wives’ tale about the fabled pirate “black spot” featured in the book. Simultaneously the character most and least affected by narrative, Silver becomes perhaps the most dif-

icult to define, his manipulative storytelling abilities surfacing as the most formidable weapon he wields. He often recycles stories he tells to his crewmates and the others often “can’t trust a . . . thing out of his mouth,” but ultimately “the power of the telling . . . that’s clearly his.”

Though the action of *Black Sails* revolves around Flint and Silver and their partnership, other major characters also struggle to compose their own stories in a world that would otherwise erase them. Madi, whose mother leads a colony of escaped slaves on Maroon Island, seeks to ally herself with Flint and exact revenge against England for its treatment of her people. Jack Rackham, obsessed with the idea of his own legacy, diligently attempts to secure his own place in the history of Nassau and New Providence Island after he was forced to flee England and the debtors-workhouse, a consequence of his fathers’ unpaid bills. His partner, Anne Bonny, seems less interested in the ways others perceive her, but, after suffering an abusive marriage at the age of thirteen, she combats expectations placed on her as a woman in the 1700s and her own realizations about her sexuality. The daughter of a slave and slave-owner-and-prostitute-turned-madam, Max struggles to secure a financially protected future for herself with the woman she loves while deeply aware that the

time of piracy—and freedom—approaches an end. Each character takes issue with the narratives England presents as the limits and foundations of civilization, though each displays their own diverse ways of operating both inside and outside those conventions. In order for the characters of *Black Sails* to achieve what they desire, each must compose his or her own story and decide whether to uphold or to resist England's representation of who they are. Ultimately the producers of *Black Sails*, by foregrounding the defining power of storytelling, conceive episodes highlighting the tales of the underrepresented, those whose narratives have been either devalued or quite literally eradicated from the master narrative of Western culture. “Everyone is a monster to someone,” says Captain Flint to a civilized audience in the civilized town of Charleston. “Since you are so convinced I am yours, I will be it.”

Jack Rackham concludes the final episode of *Black Sails* with a monologue about stories and the impact they generate. As the fictional characters of Stevenson's tale wait on Nassau for the events of *Treasure Island* to commence, the adventures of the real-life pirates are still far from over. Anne Bonny—accompanied by a disguised Mary Read in a historical nod—prepares to raise the black sail and leave Nassau and says, “A story is true. A story is untrue. As time extends it matters less and less. The stories we want to believe...those are the ones that survive, despite upheaval and transition, and progress. Those are the stories that shape history...It's the art that leaves the mark.” Each of us is living proof of the significance, of the defining power, of the written word, and close examination of the nature of history jeopardizes the distinction between the fictional and the non-fictional. Fiction, in novel or film, often represents the emotion and struggle of people who have fallen between the lines, yet they are just as vital parts of our story as those whom dominant narratives celebrate. *Black Sails* underscores the possibility that fiction is reality and that reality is always a fiction.

For those of you who have not seen the series but have been encouraged to do so after reading this review, all four seasons are available on the Starz website, as well as Hulu and Amazon Instant Video. A fan-run podcast called “Fathoms Deep,” which discusses the show's character development and narrative, and occasionally features the actors, is also accessible on iTunes and Common Room Radio.



MEDIA TITAN SHONDA RHIMES REDEFINES CONVENTION

By Rachel MacKelcan

Forty-eight-year-old African American, single mother of three, full-time genius, and entertainment industry Titan: this is how many define critically acclaimed writer and producer, Shonda Rhimes.

Known for her hit dramas *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and the Netflix Original *How to Get Away with Murder*, Rhimes attributes her success to tireless effort. Since the debut of her breakout hit series *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), Rhimes has used scriptwriting to evoke potent emotion and place relevant social issues at the forefront of public consciousness. By addressing concerns involving race, gender, sexuality, and emotional maturity,

“I have what most people would call a dream job. I'm a writer. I imagine. I make stuff up for a living. Dream job. No. I'm a Titan... I create television. I executive produce television. I make television, a great deal of television.” –S. Rhimes

Rhimes manages to shape public perception and trigger serious conversations that reach beyond her stories to touch the lives of all her viewers. She has mastered the ability to create poignant and relatable television. This ability, this talent, has made her special in her industry.

Her most successful and longest running show, *Grey's Anatomy*, exemplifies what she brings to popular culture. For those of you not familiar with *Grey's Anatomy*, the drama has garnered Golden Globe, Peoples Choice, and Emmy awards. Rhimes focuses the series on the life of surgeon Meredith Grey and her colleagues.

Rhimes's favorite tactic for generating conflict in this series involves creating circumstances that force surgeons to perform extraordinary, nail-biting procedures that sustain lives and stories. Each episode presents a new love, a new obstacle, or a new disease that stretches the boundaries of conventional medical treatment, and each one often seems to push the envelope farther than its predecessor had. However, there's more to a Rhimes production than just sexy actors and engaging narrative threads. What moves *Grey's Anatomy* to the top of the list of medical dramas is its writer-producer's gift for creating deep, rich and complex characters that defy convention. Her work demonstrates her knack for conceiving relatable men and women beset by compelling issues, challenges and illnesses. She succeeds at constructing complex individuals rather than cardboard props and after a while her characters develop a startling recognition of self and identity.

In Rhimes's stories, gender norms play less obvious roles when compared to other television series, such as *The Walking Dead*, or films such as *Star Wars*. Unlike other stories in which women play leading roles, but often take a back seat to more powerful masculine heroes, Rhimes' narratives showcase women, and the action allows us to see them in ways the television and film industries rarely permit. Take Meredith Grey for example. In 2005 Meredith Grey met Derek Shepherd in a bar. A relationship developed immediately, but the magical love affair began and ended the next morning, or did it? Shortly after Shepherd left Grey's home, the couple met again, only this time the news that Shepard had been hired as a lead surgeon at the same hospital where Grey was starting as an intern inflects the encounter. As a consequence of their unconventional introduction the night before, conflict arose. But the conflict would fail to produce the amplitude of tension it does without the magnificence of Meredith Grey's character profile.

Grey's history of calamity and hardship makes her stand out. She is a survivor. She experiences a plane crash, almost drowns, loses her mother and her husband, serves as a single mother to three kids, and houses most of her fellow surgeons under one roof. All of these setbacks she overcomes, rising to the post of head surgeon and part owner of the hospital where she works. She accepts the heavy burden her mother has passed on to her and she exhibits remarkable strength of will and strength of character. In so many ways she reflects the writer that made her. Like Rhimes, Grey embraces all challenges and never apologizes for knowing who she is.

Rhimes will not permit the women who populate her universe (she refers to it as "Shonda Land") to conform to conventional entertainment models—especially not the damsel in distress. She refuses to write women that simply fulfill the role of love interest; instead she constructs complex, often conflicted, characters and imagines them becoming powerful in professions traditionally dominated by men, such as medicine and politics.

The core genetic profile common to Rhimes women would seem to involve the willingness and the drive to cross established lines and to beat the odds. These characters are at their best and are most compelling when they remain true to their own self-perceptions. Meredith Grey explains, "When we follow our hearts; when we choose to not settle. It's funny; isn't it? A weight lifts. The sun shines a little brighter. And, for a brief moment at least, we find a little peace." For decades women in pop cultural media have played supporting roles. They were princesses, love interests, warm bodies to come home to, no more. Rhimes challenges narrative conventions dictating that women should not be central to a story. Iconoclastically, she places them in charge and at center stage. The first episode of *Grey's Anatomy* might initially have persuaded viewers to think that the story would be about the love between Grey and Shepard. It isn't. This story is about a woman and all those around her, all who love her, a woman who finds herself and stakes her claim to that individual.

"When we follow our hearts; when we choose to not settle. It's funny; isn't it? A weight lifts. The sun shines a little brighter. And, for a brief moment at least, we find a little peace." - (M. Grey)

Rhimes once said she was appalled that people found her characters to be revolutionary. She responded that she knew them as women. Implied stereotypes run deep in our culture and its mirror image, the entertainment world. Rhimes sets out to divest herself and her viewers from that image. The popular impression that smart women are rare signals that women are inherently dumb and shallow. Similarly, to be surprised at the appearance of strong women on television serves as a reminder that our culture perceives women as fundamentally weak. Personally, I don't believe in weak women, but I do believe that our generation encourages women to cultivate insecurity. We say we are not ready to dive in head first. Me? I'm not afraid; therefore, I consider Rhimes's work revolutionary, because her storylines are not about guys; they are about women and what it means to be a woman in our society. For me, it's about being yourself and being relatable and being irritable, which isn't a sin.

"It's all job, all work, all reality, all blood, all sweat, no tears. I work a lot, very hard, and I love it." - S. Rhimes

Surveying the television landscape today might suggest that it doesn't take much to write a good story, create likable characters, place them among challenging circumstances and then watch them survive or break. Rhimes herself admitted that there is no shortage of shows out there, but finding the good ones, finding the ones worth watching, that's hard. For Rhimes, creating good television has become a passion and resisting stock-and-trade stereotypes fuels that passion. The lead roles she creates refuse to apologize for wanting more. Male leads have exemplified that desire for generations and, therefore, we expect it of them. *Grey's* provides the key to understanding the cornerstone of Rhimes's mission: displaying the true DNA, the genuine *anatomy*, of woman and heroine.

"Don't let fear keep you quiet. You have a voice, so use it. Speak up. Raise your hands. Shout your answers. Make yourself heard. Whatever it takes, just find your voice, and when you do, fill the damn silence." —M. Grey

In television today, we need to see more women like Rhimes; we need more stories like *Grey's* and we need women to stop settling. So if you are reading this, here's your challenge... Be a Titan. Don't settle; don't apologize, and be yourself. The world needs more people like you, so go out there and get to it.



JOHN R. AHERNE POETRY CONTEST WINNERS

1ST PLACE: BRIDGET KENNEDY

Where I'm From

I am from jet engines in my backyard.
From one Polish festival town to another,
the Irish girl who can't get enough pierogi.

4-1-3, not 1-4-3
with Snake Mountain behind me,
and rusted swing set chains,
mud puddles in giant holes we dug with spoons.

From hair pulling fights with Goldilocks sisters,
of chipped teeth and sprained wrists from playing too recklessly.
from twisted roots along the path that leads to the cow fields.

From grease and sugar scented air
and long hours on warm summer nights
dancing to the rhythm of push-down-pull-up-visual scan-all-clear,
I have enjoyed the ride.

I am made of mosh pit scars,
duct taped shoeboxes full of CDs.
Love for so many lyrics and words that my head can barely hold them all,
so they spill out on paper, notebooks like self-storage units.

I am from musty basements and fur covered furniture,
hills in the carpet and peeling linoleum.
From warm blankets and cartoons on Sunday mornings.

Of anxious over-planning
and color-coded task lists.
I talk too much,

I can never learn enough to quench my undying curiosity.
I am from handwritten notes in the margins of books.

I am from shelves I pull up chairs to reach,
from scrapbooks and arts and crafts.
From sneakers worn through the sole,
and broken shoelaces tied to hand-me-down bikes.
From late night car-rides,
and one-lane dirt roads begging for mischief and ghost stories.

2ND PLACE: DANIEL ROUSSEL**Things I've Never Done**

I've never seen the beach
 on a winter night, when the sand is frozen
 to my feet in clumps, when the moon is frosty
 against the black sky, when the frostbitten seafoam
 rolls along the gritted shore, when the gulls shiver
 in the wake of the wading dark—I like to imagine
 that it's beautiful.

To me, it is the “more”
 we crave in nicotine and war.

3RD PLACE: DAKOTA DURBIN**Deer**

She stands in a snapshot of sunlight, brilliant
 against brown boughs and greenery,
 pink sponge tongue lapping river water. Her hip
 shifts slightly, tight furred skin
 furrows across her hind and stomach, white
 splotches lick her sides, swirling
 like ice, branching along her breast, an avalanche
 against her chocolate fur. Her pupils pulse—

a camera shutter— flash before flood,
 twig legs shoot, a gallop, fluid reveries,
 leaves crunch, as hoof follows
 hoof, and she's gone, and I'm left
 with the snapshot of what was.

Lucy Brook

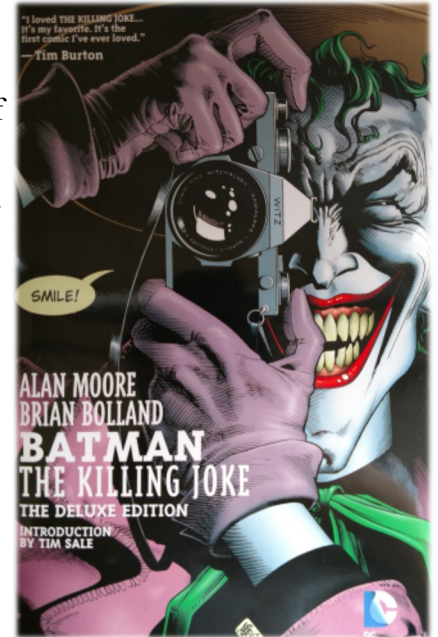
Waves pool and pulse, sliding smoothly
 as my skin kisses her current, the hairs
 on my legs like minnows, free-flowing,
 and pulled along the river. I give my body

to her, folding and flexing, her breath
 as cold as spring thaw. I wear goosebumps
 on my back and prunes on my fingers,
 until I stretch and bake on the boulder beds
 next to her stream, and chase midday dreams
 to the sounds of her sprite songs.

Batman: *The Killing Joke* & The Batgirl Problem

By Dakota Durbin

In 1988, writer Alan Moore and artist Brian Bolland released one of the most haunting and iconic Batman graphic novels to date, *Batman: The Killing Joke*. This comic was particularly revolutionary for its time because of its intimate portrayal of the psychologically troubling relationship between Batman and his arch-nemesis, the Joker. This graphic novel was well received and loved by Batman and comic fans alike upon its release. Fans of the Joker often cite this story as a turning point in the demented Clown Prince of Crime's backstory, as it portrays a more sympathetic and misunderstood Joker. For his part, Moore adds new levels of intensity and intrigue to the character, and Bolland's dark and heavily shadowed graphics capture perfectly the horrific atmosphere generated by the narrative; furthermore, they underscore the madness and insanity that shape the story's characters.



In *The Killing Joke* Batman attempts to confer one-on-one with the Joker in an effort to forge an understanding between the two of them. He fears that if he and the Joker continue to fight, the conflict will ultimately lead them both to their deaths. The plan backfires, however, when Batman learns that the Joker has once again escaped from prison. This development proves catastrophic. Joker brutally shoots, cripples, and sexually assaults Barbara Gordon (A.K.A. Batgirl) in her home. He also kidnaps her father, Police Commissioner Gordon, subjecting him to mental torture in a twisted theme park designed to drive the Commissioner mad. The “point” Joker wants to make to Batman is that one bad event can turn someone into the type of insane person Joker has become. Ultimately, Batman rescues Gordon, who managed to preserve his sanity, and now insists Batman bring the Joker in “by the book.”



Since the final confrontation between Batman and Joker forms the climax of Moore's and Bolland's graphic novel, many readers perceive *The Killing Joke* as a Batman and Joker story; however other notable characters figure large in the narrative and significantly steer its arc. Specifically, Barbara Gordon becomes the sacrificial lamb the Joker attacks as the means to pressuring Batman and the Commissioner. Barbara doesn't speak many lines and appears in only two scenes throughout the comic, once when the Joker assaults her at home and once again when we find her crippled in a hospital bed. Despite her relatively low visibility in this short graphic novel, *The Killing Joke* qualifies as a narrative just as much about Barbara Gordon and Batgirl as it is about Batman and the Joker.

Looking at Barbara's role in the comic, readers do not see the fearless and powerful Batgirl that many fans have come to expect through the years. Instead, they see a defenseless and scared young woman, whom Joker has attacked for reasons that do not directly involve her. The Joker uses her as a vehicle for communicating to Batman and the Commissioner the message that even the sanest person succumbs to insanity once trauma strikes. Barbara becomes the pawn between the two parties engaged in this match. Moore and Bolland cast Barbara as a supplement to the main conflict conducted by the story's major male protagonists and this decision creates a problematic gender divide in the novel.

In 1999, Gail Simone, a feminist comic book writer and critic, published a website blog titled "Women in Refrigerators" (WiR), in which she delivers an extensive list of female characters in comics who have been killed, disempowered, raped, or injured in some way as the means to advancing a male-protagonist storyline. This zero-sum arrangement also seems to inform *The Killing Joke*. Feminists and critics of the comics genre responded positively to the website and helped spark a necessary and important debate over the representation of female characters in graphic fiction. Barbara Gordon's paralysis and sexual violation served as a mechanism for cultivating Batman's anger and fueling his motivation to confront his enemy. Consequently, Barbara emerges as a weak character in the Batman universe. Though some comic book fans might argue that Barbara regains some level of agency and power after her paralysis by becoming the Oracle, the right-hand man (or woman) that helps Batman run communications and monitor the streets of Gotham from the Batcave, she never regains her ability to walk or exert herself physically. In a separate Batman story, Bane, a villain who overpowers the caped crusader mentally and physically, breaks Batman's back, temporarily paralyzing the crime fighter. However, Batman manages to fully regain control of his physical body and vanquishes Bane, returning as an even stronger character. The comparison reminds us of what convention dictates: whereas the disabled male character must regain his physical strength and agency, the female character should remain powerless and permanently altered.

In 2016, Warner Brothers Entertainment released a feature-length animated *Batman: The Killing Joke*, which featured many of the original voice actors of the Batman animated universe whom fans of the series have come to recognize and love, such as Kevin Conroy playing Batman, Tara Strong playing Batgirl and Mark Hamill reclaiming his role as the Joker for his final performance to date. Upon hearing about the film's release, I was eager to see how the adaptation would turn a roughly 50-page comic into a 77-minute movie and how years of feminist criticism would shape the portrayal of Barbara Gordon in the film. After all, I figured that, after almost 30 years, the film's makers would finally manage to give Batgirl the justice she and her fans deserved. Sadly, however, the extended run time of the film diminished further Barbara's character, reducing her to the role of a sexualized school girl lacking strength and moral fiber.





The first half of the film features no Joker and very little Batman. The film attempts to flesh out Barbara as a character, an effort, no doubt, to prepare the audience for Joker's assault on her; however, I found that her added scenes did very little to portray her in any sympathetic or human way. The majority of the time, she runs around as Batgirl in the pursuit of a sadistic playboy who attempts to frame her for his uncle's murder and seduce her into joining his mob gang. After some close calls, Batman forbids Batgirl from pursuing this villain because he worries about her safety. Batgirl and Batman get into an argument that ends with them having sex. While the direction of the film may have been aiming at building some sort of personal relationship between Batman and Batgirl, the execution of the plan felt entirely wrong and in bad taste. Batgirl fails to come across as a strong heroine; instead she becomes the stereotypical young girl who has a crush on her mentor. Rather than guiding her along the right path, Batman abuses his role by taking advantage of her physically and emotionally. The forced relationship between the two crime fighters does nothing to add texture to either character and to my mind this film adaptation only deepens the sexist portrayal of Batgirl and its male protagonists in Moore's and Bolland's graphic novel. I also find it disappointing that, even though writer Brian Azzarello saw that *The Killing Joke* as, in many ways, a Batgirl story, he chose to create an even more problematical portrayal of its characters than what appears in the original source material.

Justifiably, concerned fans commented critically on the distasteful and sexualized portrayal of Batgirl. As a fan of Batman and his complex relationship with the Joker, I loved the aspects of *The Killing Joke* that illuminated unexplored areas involving the relationship between these two enigmatic figures. However, I am also torn between appreciating the comic for those points and condemning it for its treatment of Barbara. But you might be wondering: how much impact does a comic, which was released almost 30 years ago, still have today? And at what sort of audience do comics creators cater such works?

While some view comic books as an outdated form of expression, especially given the burgeoning of live-action adaptations, animated features, and videogames, the comics industry remains relevant and exerts tremendous impact on mainstream popular culture. Film makers, for example, continue to produce superhero movies and trailers, and fans regularly attend comic book conventions and events such as Comic-Con. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the most noteworthy trends occurring in the comics industry involves a rise in the number of female readers and fans. The ranks of female artists and writers has also grown. In an article called "Kapow! Unstoppable rise of female comic readers," (*The Guardian*, 2015), David Barnett reveals that the online website called Graphic Policy annually reports on the demographics relevant to numbers and types of comic book readers.* These Graphic Policy reports have established that the stereotypical gender gap separating male and female comics readers has decreased substantially in recent years.

The report for 2015 demonstrates that, of the 42 million people surveyed, men accounted for 23 million (54.76%) and women for 18 million (42.86%) of the comics readership (Barnett). While men still constitute the majority of comics readers, the gap appears nowhere near as wide as people might imagine. Evidently, women more often than ever before seek out the comics medium as a source of enjoyment and it would seem to make sense that they would want what men have come to expect: characters that accurately represent their gender's strengths and capabilities. Comics writers have been forced, therefore, to create rich, complex heroines that amount to much more than pawns or sacrifices in the service of male character development.

Readers and fans of comic books face the difficult task of weighing the good against the bad, the well-done portrayals of characters against the problematical ones. It is not always easy to acknowledge fault in a beloved work or, worse, in a beloved genre, but I believe it is our responsibility to hold the characters we love up to a high standard, not fearing to subject them and their creators to close scrutiny. After all, readers revere the best comic book characters, because they recognize and perhaps relish in the humanity that lies at the core of their heroism, specifically the ability they develop to undergo hardships and ultimately overcome them. By resisting and calling out vapid, insensitive, or sexist character castings and narratives, such as the stripping down of Barbara Gordon in *The Killing Joke*, fans can force a more inclusive and diverse comics universe, one that properly represents the characters we know and love.



*Barnett, David. "Kapow! The unstoppable rise of female comic readers." *The Guardian* (2015). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/18/female-comic-book-readers-women-avengers-a-force>.



Mass Poetry's Evening of Inspired Leaders Welcomes the First-Ever Youth Poet Laureate

By Bridget Kennedy

Originally, I intended to write this article as a cultural review about the Mass Poetry Evening of Inspired Leaders held in Boston, on February 5th at the Huntington Theatre. This event showcased leaders from across the state and the nation who came together to share poems that inspired them or changed their lives in a big way. I was ready to write about that too, until Amanda Gorman, the very last speaker, stepped up to the podium. Gorman's chosen piece was the famous lyric by Maya Angelou "On the Pulse of Morning," read by Angelou herself at the 1993 Inauguration for President Bill Clinton.

The Library of Congress appointed Amanda Gorman as the first-ever Youth Poet Laureate of the United States, one among a multitude of achievements she has managed to complete before the age of 20. Gorman's speech was witty, compelling, and delightful, and her delivery of "On the Pulse of Morning" absolutely breathtaking. Right then, I knew I had an angle for my story: Why do we need a Youth Poet Laureate?

Nineteen-year-old Amanda Gorman fills the position of Poet Laureate as a voice for the often-overlooked youth demographic. During her presentation she commented that she often went to events and "felt like a Who on the clover....I'm here! I'm here!" The Dr. Seuss *Horton Hears a Who* reference resonated in my mind as a very good reason for the position of Youth Poet Laureate to exist in the first place. Young people experience first hand a host of crucial issues, contribute to society, and certainly have important insights to offer. Amanda Gorman, Harvard Class of 2020, has made a tremendous impact on the clover we call society already. Not only does she prove that young people have something vital to pass on; she does so with incredible poise and power. Amanda Gorman resets the precedent for what young people can do.

Gorman hails from Los Angeles, California. Before entering Harvard, she started a poetry outreach program called One Page, One Pen at just sixteen years old, an organization making efforts to promote quality education and safe schools, procuring funding for resources, and ending gender disparity. In 2015, she published her first book of poetry, *The One for Whom Food is Not Enough*. Gorman met former First Lady Michelle Obama in honor of Obama's scholastic program called National Student Poets, which aims at creating more of a space for creative youth voices. Gorman also worked as a Youth Delegate at the UN Headquarters in New York City and received a HERlead Fellowship in training with girl leaders in Washington D.C. and London. Her achievements would measure up to someone perhaps twice her age, and she has no intention of slowing down. Gorman wants to run for President of the United States in 2036.

The title of Poet Laureate resonates with prestige, even amongst those, like myself, who were never quite sure about the exact details of the position. Recent events compelled me to seek out the job description for U. S. Poet Laureate and to think about what that means for the first-ever Youth appointment in our nation. Congress honors annually a select poet for his or her achievements and charges that writer with the responsibility of promoting the genre. The Library of Congress website lists the Poet Laureate's official job description as "the nation's official poet...seek[ing] to raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry." The Poet Laureate's term lasts just one year and the post is usually filled by an adult and, as such, that individual presumably has a strong grasp of current political affairs. The Poet Laureate also

attends many political events, writes timely, poignant verses relevant for special occasions. Why the implied adult status? Perhaps the reason is that young people (or anyone under the age of 30, really) could not possibly have any idea or reason to care or write about what is going on socially or politically in our society. This prevailing misconception is exclusionary and narrow-minded. Young people represent the future and have every right to be concerned and to share their passions, their interests, and their perspectives. In light of recent events involving gun violence in Florida and elsewhere, young adults, teenagers and adolescents have more to say and more at stake than people recognize.

Poetry's role in consciousness-raising efforts has expanded recently because of internet influence, reawakening an audience whose only exposure and understanding of poetry likely consisted of reading canonical writers. While most people won't admit that they enjoy reading poetry, performance poetry changes things. Poems, when performed live and feel more like storytelling—and most people do enjoy hearing stories. As a genre, poetry is quick, powerful, and succinct and yet bursting with often jarring insights. Not everyone has the time or capacity to read a book and every article on an issue. But lyric poetry is versatile in that its often compact nature makes it easier to perform or present out loud. It engages its auditors in a tactile, experiential way. In today's technological world, performances of poetry are easily shared in a video (recall my last article on Button Poetry). Vital, poetry lives in so many ways and has much to say. Regard this excerpt from Gorman's "American Lyric," for example,

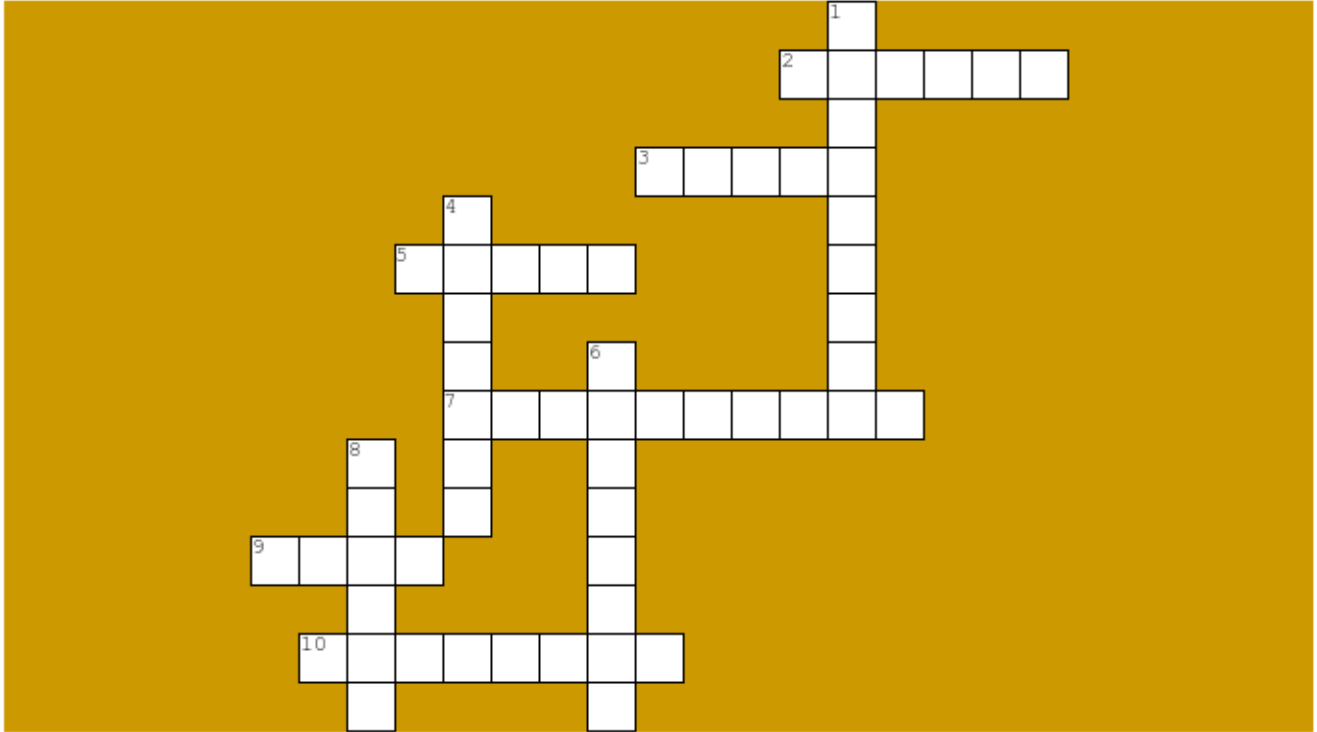
"There's a poem in this place—
 a poem in America
 a poet in every American
 who rewrites this nation, who tells
 a story worthy of being told on this minnow of an earth
 to breathe hope into a palimpsest of time—
 a poet in every American
 who sees that our poem penned
 doesn't mean our poem's end."

(<http://www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database/poem/in-this-place-an-american-lyric>)

The poem reveals that history is story and implies that, because nations consist of individuals, their stories, all of their stories, are worth writing and hearing. Her words reinforce the important storytelling-capacity housed within poetry. She recognizes this, even at such a young age. Gorman is a young woman of color, and her current social platform (a Harvard student and Laureate appointee) gives her a chance to be a voice for an underrepresented demographic. The excerpt from "American Lyric" describes America as a seedbed for poetic utterance—stories in need of telling composed by individuals. These timely narratives swell in importance in the wake of recent events and in support of movements like Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name, #MeToo, #NeverAgain, and others.

The stories reach as far back as first European contact with indigenous populations up to the time you are reading this piece. The past and present are symbiotic; one cannot exist without the other. The future too, plays a role in this symbiosis but a much less tangible one. New stories begin, continue and end every day. The sooner society takes all of these stories into account, the sooner these stories can inspire and manifest change—the stories from young voices like Amanda Gorman's are especially important, about as fresh as they come and, perhaps, therefore, more capable of serving as the catalyst for change.

Complete the literary crossword below!



Created with TheTeachersCorner.net [Crossword Puzzle Generator](#)

Across

- 2. English Department Khaleesi
- 3. Complete the MJ lyric: 'Are you okay _____'
- 5. 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.'
- 7. Sullivan 208K
- 9. She dwelt among the untrodden ways.
- 10. Writer's Coven

Down

- 1. 'Quoth the Raven _____'
- 4. Tempest's Island Indigent
- 6. 'What happens to a dream deferred?'
- 8. Shelley's Monster

Please unscramble the literary words below!

Created on TheTeachersCorner.net [Word Scramble Maker](#)

The Broadsheet

Production Staff:

Isabella Connor

Kiera Duggan

Dakota Durbin

Cassi Kacoyannakis

Bridget Kennedy

Rachel MacKelcan

Faculty Editor:

Professor Paul Vatalaro

1. ostnen

2. knalb serev

3. eaiterl

4. hwrahto ne

5. yaeneh
