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### Unveiling the Comfort of Female Narratives: Tragedy, Identity, and Embodied Power

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Essay Submission

Neureuther Competition

16 February 2024

Unveiling the Comfort of Female Narratives: Tragedy, Identity, and Embodied Power

**“Some people read books to escape their circumstances. They wish to open the book and get lost in the thin, flimsy pages. I read books to enter my circumstances. I don’t care for getting lost in the pages, I want to be *found*.” ~ Brooke Sanchez**

The Recollection of Collection

When I sat down to write this, I found the prompt to be more challenging than expected. I love reading, so I initially presumed it would be a breeze. However, my assumption was swiftly refuted when I faced my irregular book collection. For a while, I hesitated in front of my wooden shelf with rows of dusty books. My romance novel collection— *too vague*. My successful celebrity biography collection— *too impersonal*. My thick, half-used AP textbooks— *definitely not*. All of my traditional book “collections” —that were all of some unanimous genre and plot— just did not resonate enough with me. Throughout my “book picking” journey, I realized I unconsciously set aside three books repeatedly. I have wholeheartedly cherished these books throughout different eras in my life. I asked myself why I was so deeply connected to them. After careful consideration, it dawned on me that they represent an amalgamation of my life. This sentiment resonates with the power inherent in female narratives, where tragedy, identity, and power converge. That is how I came upon these books in the first place— I wanted to delve into stories that would take me back in time, forcing me to *feel*. As a young, naive, low socioeconomic woman, I encountered so many trials and tribulations. Throughout my life, these books helped me find solace in every obstacle. They allowed me to immerse myself in my

circumstances and pursue a journey towards understanding and connection. Through the powerful trio of literary works— *My Dark Vanessa*, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, and *Beautiful Little Fools*— I hold a collection of books that amplify the voices of women, ensuring that their stories are not only heard but also shared. Now, with the help of my collection, it is my turn to share mine.

*Book #1: Darkness Is Not My Fault*

In this stark testimony of a woman enduring her trauma, *My Dark Vanessa* was my first time buying a book I knew would invite me to feel pain. Within the pages, I am forced to share the main character's struggles with being groomed by her teacher; a deeply rooted battle to reconcile past trauma with the present reality. Whenever I sit down in my bed and read, the pages of this book are no longer paper but beaming reflective mirrors. Through the raw honesty of Vanessa's story, this novel acts as a safe space for me to unravel so much that I have repressed. During high school, I experienced similar circumstances. My teacher, accomplishing years of unnoticed grooming, crossed the line one unfateful day. My whole life was changed. Isolation crept in and my voice was shut out. So many of my questions had to go unanswered; so much of my memory scattered into pieces.

When I tell people how much comfort this book brings me, they wonder if I am a masochist (inflicting pain upon myself for some level of self-gratification). This could not be so far from the truth. *My Dark Vanessa* acts as a haven for young women just like me in this world who feel silenced and manipulated by men in the innocence of their youth. This book offers a shared language that validates my experiences, offering me a glimmer of hope amidst the darkness. With Vanessa's help, I have gained the courage to write this now. In my collection of

strong feminine voices, this book emerges as a profound testament to the lasting scars inflicted upon women conveying that despite all odds, these stories matter.

*Book #2: Ho(m/p)es and Dreams*

In this dazzling world of 50s Hollywood glamour, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* acts as a reminder that identity is not bounded by blood. This was the first book that taught me to understand that it is no one's fault for leaving and growing up. The main character, Evelyn, leaves her home at a young age to pursue her desired career in Hollywood. Even as Evelyn hopped her way through the roaring city, risking it all for a chance, she did so alone. She understood that in order to succeed, she needed to put as much distance away from her abusive family as she could. Towards the end, she achieved something more than just fame, she achieved happiness within herself.

I was raised by a drug-dealing father and a drug-dependent mother. My whole family generation was a constant reminder that I emerged from nothing. When I read this novel for the first time, I found myself in tears. This book helped illustrate beautifully to me that love, kindness, and loyalty are so much more important than DNA. Whenever I feel alone amongst people who talk about their families, I remember this book and realize I already have a family in the shape of friends. They give me more love than any white picket fence family I could have asked for. For so long, I let my identity be highlighted by the fact that I was a foster kid from failed parents. Because of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, I too can be vocal about reshaping my identity; in addition, to finding true love in the people around me who care.

*Book #3: Am I a Daisy?*

In this transformation of *The Great Gatsby*, *Beautiful Little Fools* is a bold retelling through the narrative of female experiences. When I first read the former, I was intrigued by the

characters Daisy and Gatsby. Daisy represented everything I felt on the inside as a woman. If you are a woman it is better to be a “beautiful little fool”, because maybe then you can save yourself from a life of struggle. On the other hand, Gatsby represented everything I wanted to portray on the outside. If you are a man who works hard, despite your looks, you can get far in life. When I bought *Beautiful Little Fools*, I knew this would be the first book to answer my questions about Daisy: whether or not I embody her. This book was able to dive deeper into Daisy’s character, specifically her journey of self-discovery. Sifting through all the pages in one day, I realized that being pretty and valued should not be dichotomous categories.

Daisy is not this passive symbol of ditzzy beauty that we have all painted her out to be. She is smart because she chooses to be a fool. In this paradox, I realize I never want to be a Gatsby. Gatsby ends up dead at the bottom of a pool, but Daisy continues to grow amongst the weeds. She grows out of the constraints of society by playing the game, enduring the quest for fulfillment in a world fraught with expectations. She *is* a fool, and *so am I*. As a young woman, it is easy to feel silenced and overpowered in a male-dominated narrative. The last book of my collection serves as a bright reminder that women who appear to be losers never lose their opportunity to win.

Fe in Fe(male)

Fearless, ferocious, and feminine. Collectively, these three narratives help me unveil my life through the comfort of female voices. I believe these works transcend the confines of fiction and can resonate with the shared experiences of women across the world. I will continue to reread these novels because I know I will find myself in a position where I need these empowering stories from strong women to keep me driven and optimistic.

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