

A READER'S COMPANION TO

boysgirls

(a very strange work)



by its author
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you were hoping to escape unscathed?

AN INTRODUCTION TO **boysgirls**

THE “FOURTH WALL” is a polite literary convention: it’s the imaginary wall that separates the story from the real world—the reader gets to peer in, but the characters don’t get to see out, and usually the narrator doesn’t either. But *boysgirls*’ narrator, the madwoman, doesn’t just break the fourth wall; she punches a hole through it, so she can take you, dear reader, by the throat. *I can feel you swallowing*, she says. *It’s a natural reflex to having your esophagus squeezed*. It is a shocking beginning to a book. As readers, we’re used to being respected by the narrator, who typically disappears into the background of their own stories. The madwoman, on the other hand, is insolent, supercilious, uppity, and utterly confident of her ability to *change* the reader in the course of sixty short pages. She gnashes her teeth as she issues you an invitation to read further.

She scares the crap out of me, and I wrote her.

The madwoman appears again in four places—closing out “No Coy Leo” by demanding the reader turn away rather than see the end of the story; narrating the entirety of “A Riddle”; briefly complicating the question of who exactly is sitting in the Inventor of Invented Thing’s waiting room in “The Invention of Love”; and finally in the defiant “*apologia*” that closes the book. With the exception of “A Riddle,” in each of these instances, she’s speaking directly to the reader, calling them back into the text, and reminding them of their presence in the book—readers need not only be observers, she is constantly reminding us, but can be actors in their own right.

The story has been changed. It is my body. Eat from it and live, she urges in the final words of the book. And it is the reader’s choice—will we choose to open ourselves up to this experience? Will we take *boysgirls* into our lives, make it a part of our bodies like food? Or will we toss it aside into the midden heap, beneath the this and the that of the words the villagers speak, just one more bone in a growing pile of bones? That is one of the central questions of *boysgirls*: what is the reader’s role: passive observer or active participant?





EXTENDING THIS IDEA of the active participant, the most important piece in this book is “A Riddle”; without it, the book would not exist. As I was writing *boysgirls*, I had a stack of “girls” pieces and a stack of “boys” pieces, and I had a problem; the last thing I wanted to do was to present gender as a binary. How could I create a transition from one section to another?

I thought of writing a sonnet, but the sonnet form has traditionally been a form of dialectic, an argument between two positions, which enforced the idea of the binary. I thought of writing a whole third section dedicated to trans and enby and genderqueer characters, but I felt those were not my myths to invent. I broke my brain trying to think of a way through this wall I’d built between the two sections; I wanted to build a bridge.

I had turned away from the problem and started reading *The Exeter Book*, a collection of the oldest literature in the English language. A good portion of the text is dedicated to Old English riddles, a form I’ve always enjoyed. And suddenly I realized that the answer to my question of what to do with the middle of the book was not an answer at all—it was a question! A question can be answered by whomever reads it; it is porous; the riddle is a door, not a portrait. And once again, the reader must make a choice as they proceed through the text; they must identify themselves however they choose to, or they can choose to ignore the question. Either way, a choice is made.

This piece is dedicated with love to anyone who’s been misgendered and especially those who feel that every answer is the wrong answer: those who contain multitudes. *Alpha and omega you are.*



I CALL THIS BOOK a hybrid-form text. It's not poetry, or fiction. It's not fairy tales, or myths, or monologue; it's a little bit of all of these things, woven together. The idea of resisting labels, of choosing resistance and difficulty over simplicity and clarity (which are often deceptive, dangerous, and hurt those who are most vulnerable) is all throughout *boysgirls*, especially in its *form*. The way that the text attempts to resist a gender binary with the riddle, with the title, with the colors on the book jacket—all these details have been thought through—is also reflected in the ambiguous form of the pieces. Each piece has elements of both poetry and fiction.

Form always shapes ideas: the novel is a wonderful form for telling a story about someone who rises from rags to riches. It's a great form for revealing a character's transformation, because that's the way it's been built. The sonnet is a great form for writing an argument, from its rhyme scheme to its length to the little turn at the end of the piece called its "volta." Whatever form you choose to write in will ultimately shape your ideas.



On the other hand, hybrid genres build form from the ground up. This gives the writer an opportunity to tell stories that have never been told before, articulate ideas no one has ever articulated before, and to relate experiences no one has ever expressed before. You probably already know a bunch of hybrid-form texts—like Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*. I think it's not a coincidence that many of the exemplary hybrid form books out there were written by women and people of color; they are building forms to tell their own stories, instead of relying on forms that were built for another time, another culture. Hybrid forms give you the opportunity to think *new* thoughts, impossible thoughts, and that's what *boysgirls* is always dangling before you—the opportunity to engage, to think differently, to be *changed*.

So were you?

discussion questions

FOR READING GROUPS & TEACHERS

If you are teaching this book, and would like to ask me questions, or have your students ask me questions, or have me Skype into class, please contact me through Facebook or Twitter—I am always happy to help! To get you started, here are some questions that might help create a productive discussion:



Why is the introduction/implication written in italics? Who is speaking in this section? Are there any other times where there are italics in the text? Why do you think that voice returns in these particular moments? What is the function of the voice?



Is the madwoman a narrator or a character? What's the difference? What's the difference between a narrator and an author? Why do you think that's important?



What are some possible answers for the riddle in the middle of the text? (It might be helpful to have students assigned to speak about the story of Tiresias and the section from Plato's "Symposium" where Aristophanes tells his story. Here's a wonderful animation of the story, if you'd like to show it to students:

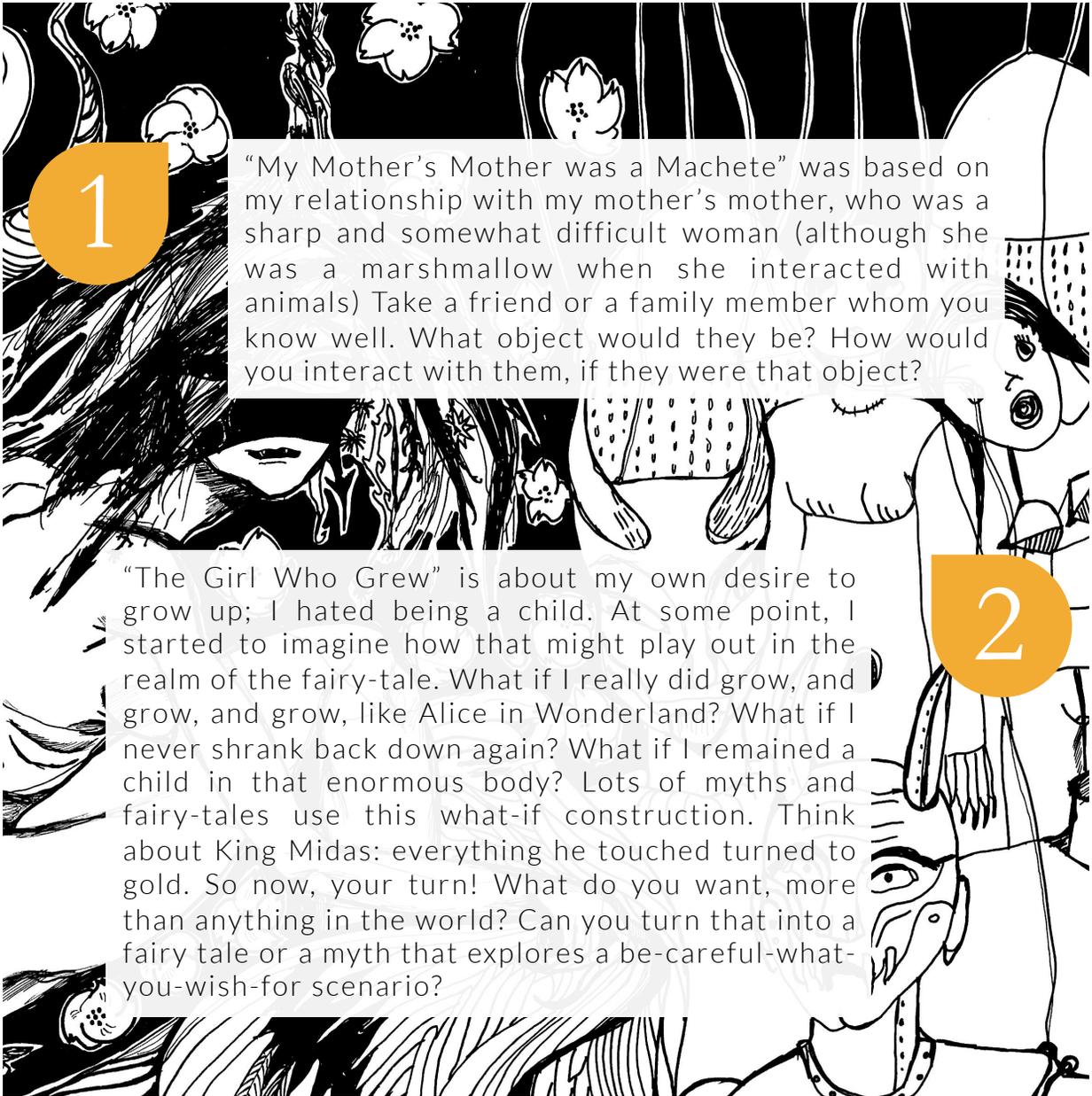
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4paSMgKYXtY>

Why do you think this important idea was presented as a riddle? Why do you think the answer was never given in the text?



In the introduction to the text, the madwoman says "You're used to sitting back and eavesdropping, playing the voyeur on the lives of others. But between these covers, you will participate, whether you desire it or not." Did this book make you participate in its reading? How? Were you changed by this book?

writing exercises



1

“My Mother’s Mother was a Machete” was based on my relationship with my mother’s mother, who was a sharp and somewhat difficult woman (although she was a marshmallow when she interacted with animals) Take a friend or a family member whom you know well. What object would they be? How would you interact with them, if they were that object?

2

“The Girl Who Grew” is about my own desire to grow up; I hated being a child. At some point, I started to imagine how that might play out in the realm of the fairy-tale. What if I really did grow, and grow, and grow, like Alice in Wonderland? What if I never shrank back down again? What if I remained a child in that enormous body? Lots of myths and fairy-tales use this what-if construction. Think about King Midas: everything he touched turned to gold. So now, your turn! What do you want, more than anything in the world? Can you turn that into a fairy tale or a myth that explores a be-careful-what-you-wish-for scenario?

helpful links



KATIE FARRIS'S WEBSITE

<http://katiefarris.net>

LAVINIA HANACHIUC
(ILLUSTRATOR) ON
INSTAGRAM

[https://www.instagram.com/
lavinia_hanachiuc/](https://www.instagram.com/lavinia_hanachiuc/)

INTERVIEW WITH KRISTINA MARIE DARLING
IN THE KENYON REVIEW ON HYBRID FORMS

[https://www.kenyonreview.org/2019/02/the-
impossible-becomes-possible-with-hybrid-forms-a-
conversation-with-katie-farris/](https://www.kenyonreview.org/2019/02/the-impossible-becomes-possible-with-hybrid-forms-a-conversation-with-katie-farris/)

AUDIO OF INTERVIEW BETWEEN KATIE FARRIS
AND JOHN KING

[https://thedrunkenodyssey.com/2015/03/21/
episode-144-katie-farris/](https://thedrunkenodyssey.com/2015/03/21/episode-144-katie-farris/)

INTERVIEW WITH MONIKA ZOBEL

[http://www.californiapoetics.org/interviews/795/an-
interview-with-katie-farris/](http://www.californiapoetics.org/interviews/795/an-interview-with-katie-farris/)