Gender Wars: The Listicle **[1]**

March 18, 2015 Media Debate [2]
Diversity [3]

Talking Discrimination

Focus on AWP 2015: *Don't miss TW's panel "The Politics of Empathy" [4]—and "Making Diversity Happen" [5] with editor Martha Nichols.*



About this Reading List

On being told a woman had preached at a Quaker meeting, Samuel Johnson famously quipped, "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."

It's no stretch to leap past Dr. Johnson in the 1700s, but in the 21st century, why can't writers of any gender twirl on their hinder legs? This listicle spotlights recent pieces published in *Talking Writing* and other magazines about the literary gender gap. TW editors Martha Nichols and Lorraine Berry provide commentary.

It's a highly opinionated list and far from exhaustive, focusing as it does on post-millennial gender fouls. In the last five years, much of the discussion has been sparked by the VIDA Count. Since 2010, VIDA has publicized data on its website about the ongoing disparity between male and female bylines. Several pie charts from the 2013 VIDA Count appear below (the 2014 Count is due out this April).

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The Numbers and the Backlash

"Scent of a Woman's Ink" **[6] by Francine Prose, *Harper's*, June 1998.**

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Lorraine and Martha: One of the ur texts on literary gender discrimination in recent times. "Are women writers really inferior?" Prose asks, then takes apart the male critical assumption that we can neither preach nor hold a pen. Twelve years before the first VIDA Count, "the statistics outdo one's grisliest paranoias," Prose reports. She compares excerpts from Flannery O'Connor and Frederick Exley (among others); if you didn't know their gender, she points out, O'Connor's "hard-boiled" omniscient stance would seem male and Exley's "claustrophobic" first-person POV female. Nodding to Cynthia Ozick's 1971 essay, "Previsions of the Demise of the Dancing Dog," Prose notes that when Ozick's students learned O'Connor was a woman, they began calling the great ironist's work "sentimental."

"On Women Writers and V.S. Naipaul" **[7] by Francine Prose, *Harper's*, June 9, 2011.**

Martha: After Naipual told a *Guardian* interviewer, "I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think [it is] unequal to me," Prose revisits her 1998 article. She wishes something she wrote more than a decade before seemed outdated rather than fresh as a daisy.

"Why I'm Canceling My Subscription: An Open Letter to *Harper's* from a Loyal Reader" **[8]by Lorraine Berry, *Flavorwire*, March 15, 2013.**

Lorraine: What started as a way for me to blow off steam became an article in the pop culture magazine *Flavorwire*. in the first VIDA counts, *Harper's* did poorly. The numbers got worse the year I wrote this letter to the editors, as if those in charge decided to employ even more male writers in a fit of pique. I never received a reply, but *Harper's* has made some progress since then. Rebecca Solnit has been given the front-of-the-book essay for six issues a year—a spot previously reserved for heavyweights like Lewis Lapham and Thomas Frank.

"A Profound Absence" **[9] by Martha Nichols, *Women's Review of Books*, Nov/Dec 2013.**

Martha: In my 30th-anniversary tribute to WRB, I discuss why a journal that highlights women's studies seems more relevant now than when I joined the staff in 1993. At a time when far too much pre-Internet feminist scholarship has vanished from the public record, male writers like Stephen Marche turn out pieces such as his "The Masculine Mystique," arguing that men have been excluded from the debate about childcare policy. Betty, give me strength.

"Nice Girls Still Finish Last" **[10] by Martha Nichols, *Women = Books*, January 2014.**

Martha: Here, I review Lynn Povich's *The Good Girls Revolt: How the Women of Newsweek Sued Their Bosses and Changed the Workplace*, happy to see the groundbreaking 1970 discrimination suit resurrected for today's ADHD generation of journalists. But Povich, one of the original plaintiffs, downplays her own anger, and the collective amnesia about '70s feminism on display is disturbing. As one young female *Newsweek* writer tells Povich, "Funny…we're trained in digital journalism, so we think if it's not on Google, it doesn't exist."

"The Unsafety Net: How Social Media Turned Against Women" **[11]by Catherine Buni and Soraya Chemaly, *Atlantic*, October, 9, 2014.**

Martha: A well-documented and distressing account of the current harassment of women online, be they female video game designers or journalists. A Facebook group called "Men are better than women," rape videos, death threats—it's all here, and it makes me want to push back harder than ever.

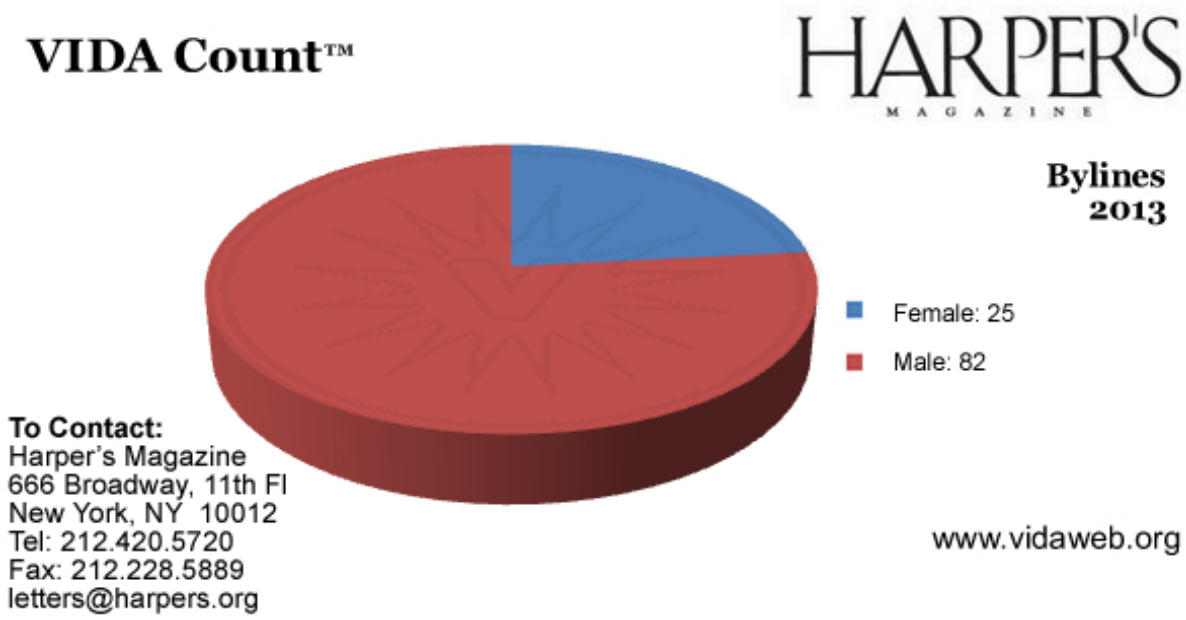
"Cassandra Among the Creeps" **[12] by Rebecca Solnit, *Harper's*, October 2014.**

Lorraine: Solnit uses Cassandra, the truth-telling prophet of Troy, as a touchstone for sailing "through the choppy waters of the gender wars." Solnit is credited with coining the term "mansplaining" (though she says she didn't actually come up with it). In this essay, Solnit extends her "men explain things to me" idea to the damage done to women when their stories aren't believed. Whether it's a girl who claims rape or a public figure like Anita Hill, women are told repeatedly that what they know and think has no credibility.

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"The Backlash" **[13] by Martha Nichols, *Women = Books*, December 2014.**

Martha: Speaking of credibility, last November, *Rolling Stone* published the now infamous feature "A Rape on Campus." It opens with a dramatic narrative anecdote from the perspective of an alleged victim of a gang rape at the University of Virginia. Discrepancies in the young woman's account came to light after the article was published. And yet, the media frenzy it sparked got me to write this commentary for WRB. The implication that all young women who "cry rape" are liars, I argue, is a clear indication of patriarchal backlash.



Articles from *Talking Writing*

"'A Woman's Place' in the *NYT Book Review*" **[14]by Lorraine Berry and Martha Nichols (2012).**

Lorraine: While some editors at magazines have been embarrassed by the VIDA counts and started integrating more female bylines into each issue, the NYTBR opted for a "very special ladies' edition" (my words) in 2012, guaranteeing that no men would read its pages that week. The print cover featured an absurd and offensive graphic of a cherry-red high heel stomping on a man's dress shoe.

"Women Writers and Bad Interviews" **[15] by Lorraine Berry (2013).**

Lorraine: This essay was triggered when I heard Terry Gross, the revered host of NPR's *Fresh Air*, ask Booker Prize-winning author Hilary Mantel what it felt like to be fat. (I call it my "drive the car into the bushes moment.") I was so horrified I then conducted an informal survey about personally invasive interview questions, receiving a flood of responses from other women and some male writers of color. Let's just say Mantel's interview was not an isolated experience.

"Can Editors Change the World?" **[16] by Martha Nichols (2013).**

Martha: I wrote this in response to AWP 2013 in Boston, where the VIDA Count was the topic of a number of contentious panels. It was disheartening, except that I also attended a wonderful centennial celebration of Muriel Rukeyser, an activist poet who continues to influence my work as an editor and a writer.

"What Should We Do About Wikipedia?" **[17] by Martha Nichols and Lorraine Berry (2013).**

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Lorraine: In 2013, author Amanda Filipacci noticed that Wikipedia was removing writers who happened to be women from its "American Novelists" category, shifting them into the subcategory of "American Women Novelists." Filipacci called out Wikipedia in the *New York Times*; her own Wikipedia page was quickly hacked. In this piece, we look at Wikipedia's hidden biases and include comments from a number of other writers about what happened to Filipacci.

"Why Mainstream Critics Fail Writers of Color" **[18]by Aimee Phan (2014).**

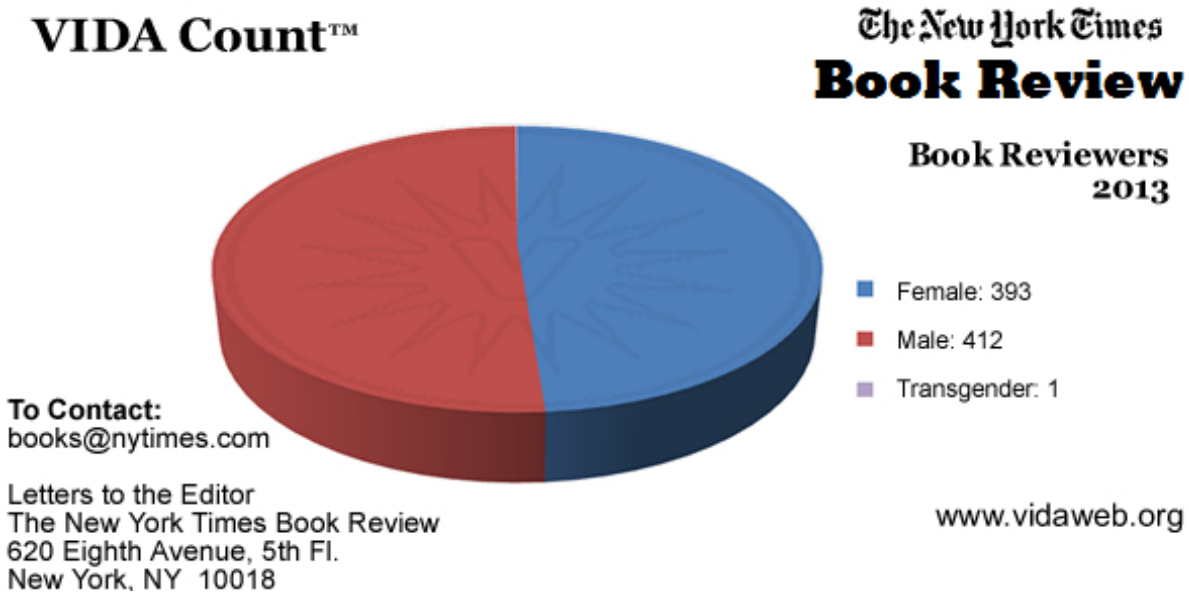
Martha: Phan looks at the ways critics shy away from race when writing book reviews. Just prior to the 2014 AWP conference, her TW essay went viral and was reprinted in a number of venues, including *Salon* and *Ebony*. She was part of the TW "Literary Politics" panel Lorraine moderated at that AWP conference; Phan will also be on TW's "The Politics of Empathy" panel at AWP 2015.

"'Women and Power' in the *NYT Book Review*" **[19]by Lorraine Berry and Martha Nichols (2014).**

Lorraine: We wrote this critical response to a 2014 NYTBR issue that grouped books about women and power. The very existence of another "special" issue, along with the problematic advertising it contained, led us to argue that NYTBR editors still haven't figured out what to do about their female trouble.

"Caitlin Moran: 'You Just Can't Argue with Cool.'" **[20] TW interview by Lorraine Berry (2014).**

Martha: Lorraine and Moran dish about taboo female subjects like miscarriages, masturbation, feminism, and economic class—and Moran joyously talks about how liberating it is to break those taboos as a writer, even if Internet trolls "aren't kind, literary professors pointing out how you might improve your syntax."



Literary Dudes vs. Chick Lit

"Institutional Sexism of Books World Needs New Girls' Network" **[21] by Jennifer Weiner, *Guardian*, March 2, 2012.**

Lorraine: Two of the most vocal recent critics of gender discrimination have been Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Weiner. In many venues, they've argued that their popular novels about marriage and family have been classified as genre fiction—chick lit—while male writers get the literary stamp of approval for work that's otherwise dubbed "domestic." Here, Weiner lays out the issues, including, but not limited to, the problem of distinguishing literary fiction worthy of review from genre fiction. Guess which one is dominated by which gender?

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"On the Rules of Literary Fiction for Men and Women" **[22] by Meg Wolitzer, *New York Times*, March 30, 2012.**

Lorraine: In her analysis of Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Marriage Plot*, which garnered rafts of critical acclaim, Wolitzer opens with this question: "If [it] had been written by a woman yet still had the same title and wedding ring on its cover, would it have received a great deal of serious literary attention?" She admits to loving Eugenides's book, but notes that "[t]he truth is, women who write literary fiction frequently find themselves in an unjust world."

"Jeffrey Eugenides: 'I Don't Know Why Jodi Picoult Is Belly Aching,'" **[23] interview with David Daley, *Salon*, September 26, 2012.**

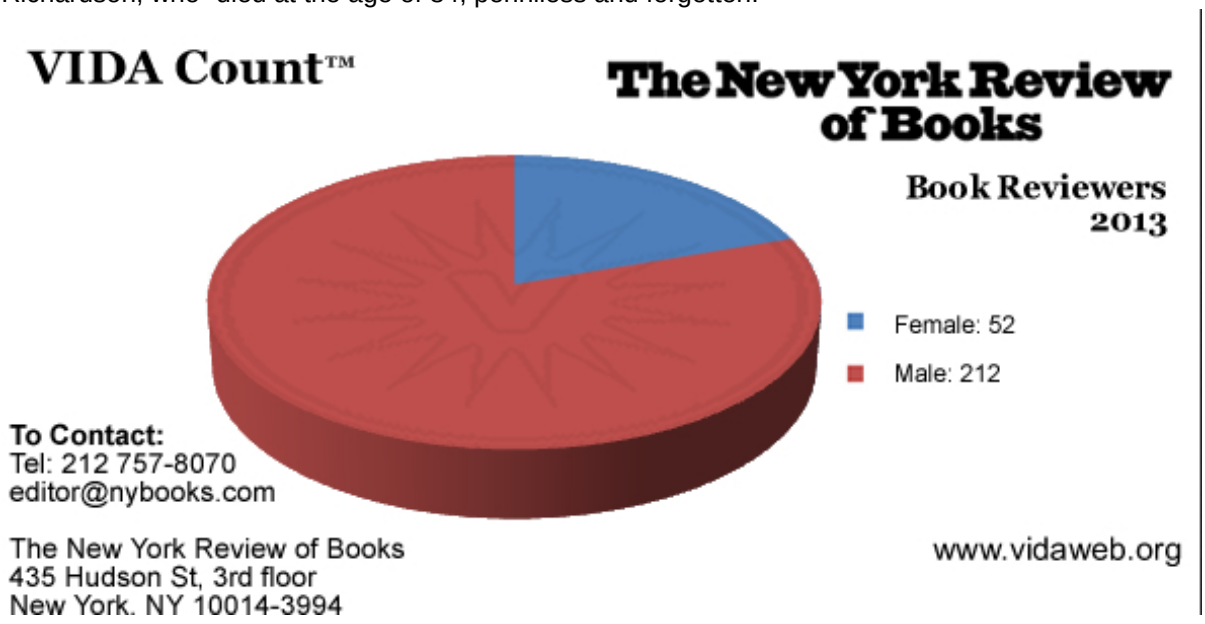
Lorraine: Eugenides proves he only sees what he wants to see when reading about himself. He claims Wolitzer's *Marriage Plot* piece got him to wonder whether "women get treated differently in the way that their covers are marketed," then uses it as a cudgel against Picoult, as if "a huge best-seller" who "doesn't seem starved for attention" has no right to complain.

"Jonathan Franzen on Jennifer Weiner: 'She's Freeloading on the Legitimate Problem of Gender Bias'" **[24] by Erin Keane, *Salon*, February 15, 2015.**

Lorraine: Franzen's most recent tone-deaf response to Weiner. The *Salon* article excerpts quotations from an interview with Franzen, self-styled curmudgeon, at the literary journal *Booth*. Franzen calls Weiner "an unfortunate person to have as a spokesperson" for literary gender equality. Why? Because, according to him, nobody likes her commercially successful novels.

"It's Women Writers, Not Novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard, Who've 'Struggled'" **[25]by Amy Shearn, *Dame*, March 2, 2015.**

Lorraine: Shearn points to another of the myriad instances where a male writer is praised for doing something a female writer would be criticized for. Early twentieth-century modernist Dorothy Miller Richardson wrote the kind of obsessive, detail-oriented account of the quotidian for which *My Struggle* author Knausgaard is currently enjoying rave reviews. Shearn provides a ton of links to the fawning over Knausgaard, while filling in the blanks of what became of Richardson, who "died at the age of 84, penniless and forgotten."



For a call to activism, read "Dear Young Writers," *[26] a TW open letter in honor of Women's History Month.*

Art Information

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- "Broad Vocabulary Bookstore" [27] © Galen Smith (a feminist bookstore in Milwaukee, Wisconsin); Creative Commons license.
- 2013 VIDA Count pie charts [28] © VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts; used with permission.

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[28] http://www.vidaweb.org/category/the-count/the-2013-count/

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