



**Outsiders and Onlookers:
Formulations of Girlhood in Two Novels by Mariko Tamaki**
—Nyala Ali

Tamaki, Mariko. *This One Summer*. Illus. Jillian Tamaki. Toronto: Groundwood, 2014. 320 pp. \$18.95 pb. ISBN 978-1-55498-152-6. Print.

Tamaki, Mariko. (*You*) *Set Me on Fire*. Toronto: Razorbill, 2012. 352 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 978-0-14318-095-1. Print.

In a recent interview discussing their award-winning graphic novel *This One Summer*, which was given a Caldecott Honor Award for children's picture books in the United States and the Governor General's Award for children's illustration in Canada, cousins Jillian and Mariko Tamaki both affirm that they are proud feminists who strive to present real stories and real people to their readers (Clark). Their earlier collaborative work *Skim*, a coming-of-age graphic novel set in a Catholic high school, is a nuanced portrayal of a teenage girl on the periphery of social cliques. *Skim* was critically acclaimed for its theoretically adept, sophisticated formulation of girlhood, queerness, and adolescent sexuality. These qualities are also evident in their subsequent works: both *This One Summer* and Mariko Tamaki's young adult novel (*You*) *Set Me on Fire* navigate the spectrum of fears and desires bound up

with female personhood while showcasing further the Tamakis's talent for writing girlness from the perspective of an outsider.

The narrative of *This One Summer* is focalized through the perspectives of Rose and Windy, two preteen girls who are privy to adult conversations only through eavesdropped snippets, highlighting the incompleteness of their perspectives as outsiders. As girlhood scholar Catherine Driscoll notes, "the only boundaries which define the teenage years are boundaries of exclusion, which define what young people are not, cannot do, or cannot be" (206). *This One Summer* is interested in how a positioning within the already tenuous space of preadolescence might shape the young female gaze. As the narrative unfolds through Rose and Windy's surveillance of their surroundings, they are both revealed to be keen, almost

anthropological observers, updated versions of Louise Fitzhugh's 1960s *Harriet the Spy*. As a result, the story is framed much as it would be through Harriet's own spyglass, a microcosmic bubble with well-defined, abrupt edges, but blown up to 300%.

The fictional rural Ontario town of Awago is rendered in vibrant yet imperfect detail. Jillian Tamaki works magic with the graphic medium, using self-contained panels and wide, expressive brush strokes to make a series of snapshot-like images that take on a larger significance when seen through the girls' eyes. Jillian Tamaki's vivid art becomes especially indispensable where the accompanying text is necessarily piecemeal—for example, during conversations heard through a wall, through a gap in a fence, or from behind the convenience store counter—when the human absence that accounts for the partial text is made evident in the images. The skilled interplay between image and text positions Rose and Windy quite firmly on the other side of an adulthood that still governs the world around them.

The narrator of *(You) Set Me on Fire*, Alison Lee, is also a self-proclaimed outsider with a similarly anthropological gaze. When readers meet her, Alison is fresh out of high school and visibly scarred from two separate fires, and she attempts to navigate college and the “freshman threshold of opportunity” (38), complete with dorm rooms, frat parties, and messy female friendships with the queer potential to become something more. Mariko Tamaki's vivid descriptions are both apt

and amusing as Alison identifies her classmates visually through such observations as “nose pierce and slight B.O.” (55). Tamaki has a great ear for the teenage voice. Alison's first-person narration is sardonic but hopeful, lively without succumbing to the type of valley-girl teenspeak that veers often into caricature, Alison herself remarking that it is “amazing how a word like ‘cool’ can land like a lame penny falling from your pocket onto the sidewalk” (74). Tamaki's novel also reads very much as a piece of media meant for current teens: the paragraphs are brief and sometimes written in all caps, often structured like text messages between close friends. Such a narrative form establishes Alison as a plausible ally for teenage readers: frustrated and wounded, she seeks comrades to read about her secrets.

This One Summer also explores the idea of comradeship, as Rose and Windy strive to make meaning of their surroundings. Why does Rose's secret crush, Duncan, refuse to call his crying girlfriend back? Why does Rose's mother, Alice, seem so distracted and sad? Each uncovered answer complicates the girls' comradeship by affecting not only their worldviews but also the ways in which they perceive themselves and one another. We are thus treated to two distinctive, often conflicting viewpoints on the other characters as the events of the summer unfold. Duncan, for instance, is gawky, apathetic, and even casually misogynistic when Windy sees him; through Rose-tinted glasses, however, he seems just a bit more conventionally handsome and a

little kinder. The Tamakis portray Rose's confused desire for Duncan as an idealized fantasy that is caught between childhood and adolescence. In this threshold space, Rose is not granted any real agency, sexual or otherwise. She adds Duncan's name to a game of Mansion, Apartment, Shed, House (or MASH, a game played by preteen girls with the intention of predicting their futures, usually with a specific crush in mind). Although Rose is not-so-secretly pleased when she and Duncan end up together on paper, she later insists, "It's not like I want him to be my boyfriend or anything. He's like eighteen. That's like perverted" (251). Rose, of course, enjoys every second of Duncan's good-natured attention (often renting horror DVDs at the convenience store just to see him working at the counter), but Windy is revolted, genuinely baffled as to why her friend would ever give "the dud" the time of day.

Rose's crush, along with Windy's confusion about the object of her friend's desire, is amalgamated in Alison from *(You) Set Me on Fire*, who takes another step toward her lesbian identity upon meeting classmate-turned-love-interest Shar. What sets this story apart from many other LGBTQ books for teens is that Tamaki begins her story with a heroine who already identifies as queer *and* has had past lesbian experiences, instead of one who discovers her queer self through the narrative under the eye of readers. Alison's queerness establishes her further as an outsider, a position on which she remarks prior to meeting Shar:

I'm into girls, but I have some pretty strong reservations about this decision on my heart's part. For me, "lesbianism," if you want to call it that (I hate that word), is like a kind of Tourette syndrome. It's like, why, given my MANY experiences with the claws and fangs of girls, would I decide to put myself on the path of pursuing them for the rest of my life? . . . Although, you know, let's not exclude the possibility that some boy will come along and sweep me off my feet. Boys, it seems, are just so cool and everyone wants one. Why not me? (28)

Although Alison's relationship to the word "lesbian" is shrouded in negativity, she aligns that word productively not simply with a gender label but with ongoing identity negotiations and personal developments that she struggles to work through as a queer young woman. The implication in Alison's musings is that bisexuality is perhaps the safer route, but later she remarks that she's "not really sure what bi is, to be honest. . . . Does it mean you have to sleep with a boy after you do it with a girl? What if all the boys in your town are stupid?" (126). Tamaki takes great care to illustrate the complications arising from trying to label one's sexuality as she spells out the concrete (and humorous) logistics.

This One Summer also uses humour as a lens through which to address adolescent sexuality, although Rose and Windy's perception of sex veers more toward ignorance and inexperience than hormonally charged



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adolescence. Mariko Tamaki scripts spot-on girlhood conversations about the logistics of oral sex, and whether or not one can, in fact, get herpes from a flip-flop. Here, both girls exhibit what girlhood studies scholar Michelle Fine calls “the missing discourse of desire” in relation to the effaced nature of adolescent girls as sexual subjects. Although Rose’s desire is unfulfilled physically, both she and Windy also lack the language even to discuss sex or their own complicated feelings in relation to sex, since they have access only to second- or third-hand information on the subject. Interestingly, Windy is repelled by heteronormative sex but is intrigued by her own body, especially by both her and Rose’s emerging breasts, although largely in the curious, exploratory way reminiscent of a preteen Judy Blume heroine. Windy is also quite tactile and affectionate with Rose, talks enthusiastically about her cool lesbian aunt, and is obviously threatened by Duncan. Given the Tamakis’ elegant depiction of queerness in *Skim*, a queer reading of Windy definitely is possible, her choppy, unruly haircut, thick eyebrows, and round features even suggesting a young, possibly butch lesbian identity. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Windy’s potential queerness, though, is Rose’s obliviousness to it. She still views Windy with the same childhood innocence that has defined their friendship up until this point and is too self-absorbed to realize that Windy is growing up as well. The social dynamic between Rose and Windy and their conflicting viewpoints concerning and interest in romance point to the different ways in which budding sexuality shapes emerging female identities, queer or otherwise.

In *(You) Set Me on Fire*, the interplay between emerging sexuality and female identity is intertwined even more as the social dynamic between Shar and Alison is made up of lesbian romance

and female friendship gone amiss in equal parts. Although Tamaki displays a clever grasp of the type of behaviour that often sullies female friendships in girls' books, she refutes the idea of toxic friendships as simply a trope of young adult fiction, adding another dimension through romance while pointing out that harmful relationships of this sort exist well past high school. Shar's characterization in particular subverts what is found in a typical teen narrative. At first glance, it would be easy to classify Shar as a Queen Bee, as defined by girlhood scholar Rosalind Wiseman (and on whose book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* the teen film *Mean Girls* is based). Usually the undisputed leader of a large clique, the Queen Bee "feels power and control over her environment. She's the center of attention and girls pay homage to her" (89). Although Shar is definitely the centre of Alison's world, she is actually an anti-Queen Bee, often solitary, rejecting the notion of cliques entirely, and remarking that the best part of college is "not even having to pretend to be a part of anyone else's stupid shit" (93). Part of the reason Alison is so drawn to Shar in the first place is that she is *also* an outsider, albeit by choice. Here, Tamaki shows us how outsiders can function as antagonists precisely by disrupting already established social dynamics: Shar's whirlwind personality inflicts chaos on what Wiseman refers to as "Girl World" (10).

This One Summer also presents a nascent version of Girl World to the reader, although with a much

narrower, more detailed focus. The Tamakis propel Rose and Windy toward their adolescent identities by removing them from the privacy of their parents' Awago cottages and from what foundational feminist scholars Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber call "bedroom culture" (182). According to them, girls negotiate different spaces than boys. Although girls are relegated often to the home, boys are allowed instead to "escape the claustrophobia of the family, into the street and 'caff'" (182), and be active in these less controlled and less confined public spaces. Consequently, the agency girls might claim by engaging in activities within bedroom culture in the home is still of a more personal, less publicly visible nature than that granted to boys. Although Rose and Windy occupy both private and public spaces throughout the story and function mainly as onlookers to other characters, they are still most visible as female subjects through their public interactions outside the home.

Mariko Tamaki deploys the concept of bedroom culture in *(You) Set Me on Fire* as well, when Alison and Shar dress up as Sonny and Cher for the campus Halloween party. Shar's suggestion that the girls choose a couples costume echoes the idea that coming-of-age narratives informed by female-oriented bedroom culture, as scholar Mary Celeste Kearney points out, easily are able to "take this girls-only theme a step further by reconfiguring the bedrooms of female youth as a place of lesbian bonding" (138). Playing

dress-up for one another's pleasure suggests the queer possibilities of similar acts taking place between close female friends in real life. That Alison is made to dress in drag, as a man, before fooling around with Shar, is telling, as Shar later treats their relationship as simply a dalliance, something to try on and then discard as easily as a Halloween costume. Tamaki also displays the positive effects of costumes as self-reinvention, however, as the campus party introduces queer possibilities for Alison's classmate Carly as well. Uncharacteristically excited about dressing as Danny Zuko from *Grease*, Carly later adopts the look permanently, replacing her previous head-to-toe pink attire and long hair with stiff blue jeans, a leather jacket, a short, spiky haircut, and, incidentally, a girlfriend. Cleverly using the Halloween party as a type of coming-out, Carly also emerges as Alison's true friend by the end of the novel. Comfortable in her own skin, Carly shows Alison genuine concern and empathy, in contrast with Shar's selfish manipulations, which are rooted in her own insecurities.

Shar's insecurities are confirmed to readers when they discover that she has lied about a number of issues, including having been a victim of domestic violence. That Shar (a supposed victim of abuse herself) seems to be quite comfortable bullying Alison is especially troubling, given the fact that many real victims of domestic violence do struggle to be believed. With this in mind, such a sensitive issue could have been

handled more cautiously, especially in a text with otherwise very honest, considerate storytelling. Despite this oversight (and to Tamaki's credit), the text does not present empathy for Shar as a viable option, in spite of Alison's defense of Shar's behaviour. Instead, Tamaki's narrative amplifies Shar's manipulative antics as a means for readers to empathize with *Alison* and to cheer when Alison starts challenging Shar after having found some true friends (Carly and her pal Danny who, incidentally, is also queer). Shar eventually feels threatened by Alison's new friends, given that Shar's own lack of community is at the root of her insecurities. Once Shar is gone from the narrative, Alison embraces her lesbian identity fully with support from Carly, who has already come out. Carly's emotional availability also makes Alison genuinely hopeful that she is capable of healthy relationships, both with friends and potential romantic partners, now that she has finally been able to parse many conflicting feelings about her queer self.

The complicated ways in which identity, insecurity, and friendship play off each other also make up the narrative through-line in *This One Summer*. Once again, the Tamakis depict a true friend as someone who is comfortable in her own skin; although Windy is quite conscious of her own body, she is not at all self-conscious about it, often depicted munching happily on gummy feet and Twizzlers from the convenience store. In one scene, Jillian Tamaki gives us a gorgeous splash page of Windy dancing in frenzied, confident circles around

a seated Rose, who laughs at her friend while likely wishing that she possessed the self-confidence to be that uninhibited. In this sequence in particular, Windy, who is adopted, could easily be read as Japanese Canadian, her plump, animated face reminiscent of a Miyazaki heroine. Unfortunately, Windy's ethnicity is not explored further, and intersections of race and girlhood largely are absent from this narrative. Although the Tamakis have looked at these issues before—*Skim* featured an explicitly Japanese Canadian teenage girl as its protagonist—it would have been wonderful to see race explored in relation to a younger heroine, especially one who is quite obviously a burgeoning feminist.

Windy's feminist views emerge further as she draws attention to the attempts of Rose's jovial, somewhat adolescent father to explain how to gather kindling for the bonfire. She also gleefully calls out the misogynistic T-shirts Duncan's sidekick is fond of wearing. Most notably, Windy is not afraid to challenge Rose for dismissing all the teenage girls in Awago as sluts, an important scene that highlights Rose's own insecurity as the root of her sexist viewpoint, as she is forced to think about why Windy's intervention has upset her, and, more specifically, why her judgmental tendencies toward other women are so prevalent. Rose clearly favours her father over her mother, oblivious to the fact that, while he gets to be the "fun dad" on this trip, Alice is still suffering the emotional effects of a miscarriage that happened the previous summer.

Rose's strained relationship with her mother reflects her own insecurity over the idea of women as sexual subjects as she struggles to resolve her nascent adolescent desire with her previously childish attitude toward sex. She is repulsed by her mother's *Sex and the City* DVDs because the women in the series are forty and unabashedly sexually active, and she faults Jenny, Duncan's girlfriend, for being pregnant, convinced that the teen must have deserved this outcome through her own carelessness. It is fitting, then, that the eventual reconciliation between Rose and her mother also involves Jenny, whose adolescent desire has marked her as precisely the type of sexual subject of whom Rose previously had been afraid. Throughout *This One Summer*, Rose and Windy's developing views of themselves and other women serve as a spirited reminder that every girl or woman's relationship to her feminist self is an ongoing negotiation.

Seemingly assuming that outsiders are usually the best observers, the Tamakis write developing identities for their heroines that counter (and call attention to) societally prescribed scripts of female personhood. As such, *This One Summer* could well serve as a feminist primer for preteen girls at the same time as the scope of its intertwining stories and the variety of body types, facial features, and ages among its female characters might be expected to appeal to a wide range of readers. Though *(You) Set Me on Fire* falls quite neatly into the young adult genre and thus is less likely to attract a

broad audience, its merit lies in Mariko Tamaki's deft ability to write vivid characters who embody many of the nuances and questions of queer adolescence. The Tamakis' rich storytelling reveals their careful attention to real stories and real people. Both *This One Summer*

and *(You) Set Me on Fire* invite readers to engage with lively, complicated formulations of female personhood, offering readers critical feminist insights, the significance of which extend past the pages of these important books for girls.

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