

Excusing Coercive Control in Popular Young Adult Fantasy Texts

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Abstract

This article utilises a feminist lens to conduct close textual analysis of *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* and the Cursebreaker series (Kemmerer 2019) and *The Cruel Prince* and the Folk of the Air series (Black 2018-2019) to demonstrate how elements of coercive control are excused and minimised in the narratives. By highlighting the postfeminist sensibility evident in these young adult fantasy novels, this article argues that female protagonists are characterised in contradictory ways. They are both 'empowered' and subjugated, yet this is diminished by a rhetoric of choice and agency. As female protagonists, Jude and Harper each possess physical strength, intelligence and humour which positions them as agential and empowered. Yet, at the core of their romantic and sexual relationships they are both victims of coercive control. While the novels ostensibly present strong female protagonists, implied girl readers are positioned to excuse the removal of agency, manipulation, and even physical violence towards these postfeminist heroines.

Keywords: postfeminism, girlhood, young adult fiction, fantasy, coercive control

When Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior emerged on the pages of young adult (YA) fantasy novels *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008) and *Divergent* (Roth 2011), a new kind of adolescent heroine was born. She was an empowered young woman, making choices for herself, engaging in romantic and sexual relationships, and using physical strength to reach her goals, characteristics that can be considered postfeminist. Since then, many YA fantasy novels have adopted similar modes of girlhood that incorporate postfeminist ideology and feature female protagonists embracing both pro- and anti-feminist positions that simultaneously offer power while reinscribing normative modes of girlhood that restrict

agency. Instead of just being the strong female protagonist, the girls in popular YA fantasy are not critical of patriarchal power structures and restricted gender roles. Nowhere is this more evident than in their romantic and sexual relationships.

This article argues that popular YA fantasy novels minimise the negative implications of coercive control in intimate relationships. In addition to behaviours initially understood as domestic violence that encompassed physical and sexual assault, coercive control is a key facet of intimate partner violence. It includes a range of behaviours that are more discrete, such as isolation, monitoring, denying true autonomy, reinforcing gender roles, and gaslighting (Stark and Hester 2018). These behaviours are less obvious than physical violence and therefore, I argue, not yet adequately scrutinised in popular YA fantasy texts. This article explores girl protagonists' dual positionality through a close analysis of Harper in *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* (Kemmerer 2019) and Jude in *The Cruel Prince* (Black 2018). Both the 'Cursebreaker' series and 'The Folk of the Air' series won Goodreads Choice Awards in their respective years and have been rated by over 1 million users. Their popularity among teenage girl readers, particularly in high school libraries I have taught in, initially brought them to my attention. In each novel the two characters are initially depicted as strong and agential women, yet in their romantic relationships they accept and minimise manipulation, power imbalances, imprisonment, and even violence. The lack of clear critique of the abuse they endure from the perspective of the girl narrators and others in the narrative excuses the coercive control experienced by the postfeminist heroines in these YA fantasy novels.

This article utilises a feminist lens to analyse the *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* and *The Cruel Prince* series to question existing truths about gender, power, and sexuality and their intersections. While there are many feminisms operating in society today, in this analysis I

draw on theories of fourth-wave and intersectional feminism to ‘orient’ the discussion (Dale and Overell 2018). The work of bell hooks (2015) and Roxanne Gay (2018) in particular led to a feminist approach that connects ideas to activism by using feminist theory to critique misogyny and sexism. Contemporary feminist theorists acknowledge that this involves more than just the ‘civil, intellectual, social, economic, and legal rights’ that early feminists pursued but now also includes ‘sources of oppression’ such as ‘stereotyping, violence’ and the domination of ‘women’s bodies’ (Scholz 2010, pp. 6-7). In this article feminist theory is used to drive consideration of the romantic and sexual relationships presented in the novels and how coercive control is perpetuated.

The current cultural moment is distinctly postfeminist. Postfeminism is a contested term with debated meaning and for this article is conceptualised as a ‘sensibility’ with a ‘contradictory nature’ and ‘entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes’ (Gill 2007, p. 149). In postfeminist theory, the feminist movements’ goals are sometimes considered to have been achieved and feminist politics are ‘made redundant’ (Charles 2013, p. 25). Angela McRobbie argues that postfeminism is ‘feminism undone’ and the gains of early feminists are being ‘eroded’ (2009, p. 16). Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon, however, view postfeminism as a productive space that ‘moves from the exclusionary logic of either/or to the inclusionary logic of both/and’ (2018, p. 32). Society is no longer faced with a choice between being feminist or not but exists in a contested space where people are free to adopt aspects of feminism that suits them. This article situates the entanglement and contestation of feminist ideas in postfeminism as harmful for society. Girls, women, and other marginalised people need the continuation of feminist politics and further transformation of

society towards true gender equality. Postfeminist ideology presents serious challenges for contemporary girls and women.

Critiquing postfeminism is particularly relevant when discussing media that includes depictions of girls. Scholars claim that girl characters in contemporary YA fantasy novels are ostensibly more powerful and agentic than ever before. Joanne Brown and Nancy St Clair note that ‘female empowerment – especially among girls – is one of the most significant issues to come out of the 90s’ and is one of the themes frequently explored in YA fantasy texts (2002, p. 119). Tolmie argues that YA fantasy fiction draws on ‘ideas about medieval patriarchy to delineate exceptional women’ and establish the ‘exceptional heroine’ that breaks down gendered barriers (2006, p. 146). Wilkins similarly suggests that ‘young adult fantasy has reset the horizons for fantasy heroines’ (2019, p. 26). While increased representation of girl characters has been lauded as an improvement, feminist critics have noted ‘what they see as the co-option of feminist ideals in popular images of “can-do” girl heroes’ (Driscoll and Heatwole 2016, p. 263). Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy suggest that feminist ideals have been ‘subsumed’ into narratives featuring strong female protagonists and are ‘implied by empowerment’ rather than explicit, and therefore ‘shorn of political context’ (2003, p. 4). Jessica Ringrose wonders whether girls’ agency ‘simply means the capacity to speak and think’ (2012, p. 62). Postfeminist sensibilities undermine girl characters’ true agency by employing notions of empowerment and individual autonomy without adequately considering the broader societal and cultural contexts in which girls operate.

Therefore, postfeminist culture also has clear influences on female characters’ involvement in romantic and sexual relationships. YA fantasy novels include some of the most explicit sexual encounters, with female sexuality sometimes celebrated and characters

empowered in their choices. These texts are breaking down barriers in the representation of female sexuality and offering readers a way to ‘conceptualise and express the sexuality’ of young women (Taylor 2014, p. 396). Feminist analysis of these texts celebrates the idea that ‘heroines can be active and agential in their sexual experiences’ (Little and Moruzi 2021, p. 93). However, the prevalence of postfeminist culture continues to restrict how some female protagonists are able to express their sexuality. In her discussion of contemporary YA romance, Amy Pattee (2011) found that even ‘updated’ novels adhered to ‘romantic sensibilities’ that positioned girls in ‘troublesome’ and ‘problematic’ ways (p. 6). Girls may be encouraged to express their desires, but only in ways that satisfy patriarchal notions of appropriate female sexuality.

Importantly, media texts such as books are recognised as sites of contestation for girls as they navigate societal expectations. As Emma Whatman argues, ‘postfeminist sensibilities are embedded *within* cultural artefacts’ (2019, p. 5, emphasis in original). While the surface ideology of texts may purport to be feminist, analysing the passive ideology (Nodelman and Reimer 2003) reveals the way that girls are positioned to embrace postfeminist notions of girlhood that reinscribe patriarchal systems of power. Anita Harris (2004) asserts that popular media texts frame girls as having better opportunities than ever before. However, as Gill (2007) questions in a debate in the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, perhaps girls are simply being restricted and disciplined in new and nuanced ways. In YA fantasy novels the perpetuation of unequal power structures and the guise of empowerment and choice restricts girl characters and maintains the patriarchal status quo.

The confluence of ideas outlined here results in a type of novel that depicts coercive behaviours through the postfeminist framing of individual responsibility and autonomy. The

postfeminist rhetoric of empowerment and agency in these texts contributes to the ongoing minimisation of coercive control as a form of domestic violence. Storer and Casey (2021) highlight the connection between postfeminist discourses and coercive control through the emphasis on rhetoric of individual responsibility and agency. They note that ‘survivors’ entry into abusive relationships’ is framed through discussions of ‘choice and personal responsibility’ which minimises the role of the abuser (Storer and Casey 2021, p. 497). I argue that, in these novels, the underlying characterisation of the girls as strong and empowered in fact works to further remove their agency in romantic relationships. Through postfeminism, victims of coercive control are ‘culpable’ in their own submissive and coerced position (Storer and Casey 2021, p. 497). Contemporary YA fantasy novels embrace the contested ‘both/and’ space of postfeminism to the detriment of ensuring the safety of the implied girl reader. The female protagonists and implied girl readers are positioned to excuse coercive control through the embedded postfeminist ideologies in *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* and *The Cruel Prince* series.

In *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* (2019), Harper is a fearless and intelligent teenage girl from a rough, crime-riddled neighbourhood in Washington D.C. Her father is absent, her mother is terminally ill, and her brother is involved in criminal activity, and consequently Harper bears the weight and responsibility of providing for her mother. When she tries to save a stranger on the street, Harper is kidnapped and taken to the magical world of Emberfall. She has cerebral palsy and is used to being underestimated by her friends and family.¹ She describes herself as ‘not quick and not strong’ (p. 7). However, her fierce determination is driven by her desire to be recognised as capable. In this ‘Beauty and the Beast’ adaptation, Harper inevitably falls in love with Rhen, the cursed Prince. As Warner notes, fairy tale

adaptations often emerge as ‘an instrument of social adaptation’ where ‘women cast themselves as civilizers in the tabooed terrain of sexuality’ (1996, p. 294), and indeed in this novel Harper must ‘civilize’ Rhen. However, unlike the original tale, Harper battles Rhen in his dragon form to break the spell, drawing on her physical strength to defeat him. Once he has been returned to his human form, Harper and Rhen quickly resume their romance and the novel concludes with a kiss between them. But importantly, Harper’s ‘heroism’ is emphasised by her ‘great skill and cunning’ and how she uses these to ‘do good’ in the narrative (D’Amore 2021, p. 6). The story characterises Harper primarily through her strength, intelligence, and quick humour, establishing her role as a strong female protagonist.

Harper is, however, the victim of one of the most prevalent trends in YA fantasy novels published in the last few years: the development of relationships where the agency of characters is limited or removed as they pursue sexual relationships and romance when they are ‘essentially a captive’ (Little and Moruzi 2021, p. 84). In this article, agency is understood as a character’s ability to make choices, enact those choices and maintain ‘power and control over [their] life’ (Kokesh and Sternadori 2015, p. 141). Despite being held hostage by Prince Rhen, Harper pursues a romantic relationship with him. Popular texts such as *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (Maas 2015), *The Bone Season* (Shannon 2015) and *The Wrath and the Dawn* (Ahdieh 2015) feature female protagonists who enter into romantic relationships with unequal power dynamics but where the narration makes little mention of the heroine’s captive status.²The relationships develop despite the female character having limited control over their situation, which normalises restricting a partner’s movement in romantic relationships.

In contrast to these novels, however, Harper is openly aware of her captive status. She declares that, ‘for the record’, she did not come ‘willingly’ (p. 27). While it only takes a few

hours in Emberfell for Harper to notice that the Prince Rhen is ‘handsome, chivalrous and well-mannered’, and that her ‘body wants her to stay *right here*’ beside him, she maintains that ‘underneath all that, he’s a kidnapper. He turned the key in that lock this morning’ (p. 74). When Commander Grey, Captain of the Royal Guard, explains the curse to her, Harper considers that she has ‘never fallen in love with anyone, much less someone who snatched [her] right off the street’ (p. 125). She ‘know[s] about Stockholm Syndrome’ and is not sure if any feelings she develops would be ‘real love’ (p. 125). Harper also notes her lack of agency to the Prince himself, demonstrating her confidence in asserting her autonomy. She tells him she keeps ‘thinking about all those women [he] kidnapped’. When Rhen suggests that her decision to be on the street the night she was taken means it was her ‘choice’ that ‘led’ her to Emberfell, she retorts, ‘don’t try to pin this on me’ (p. 188-9). Harper is initially very alert to her position as a captive who lacks agency.

However, even when Harper does acknowledge that her agency has been removed, the ensuing romance soon overtakes any negative emotions and this minimises the initial critique. Harper later declares that she believes Rhen was just ‘doing what [he] had to do’ in order to break the curse and protect his kingdom (p. 188). She starts to develop feelings for him because she has ‘seen the truth’ that others could not see, that he is ‘caring’, ‘deeply loyal’, ‘unexpectedly patient’ and ‘gentle, in fact’ (p. 293). The development of Harper’s romantic feelings for Rhen minimise the central role he has played in removing her agency. While she was acutely aware of the power imbalance between them, the romance excuses the coercion she is experiencing.

The development of a physical relationship further minimises Harper’s lack of agency. Rhen and Harper kiss after several chapters of growing sexual tension and spending the night

in bed together to ward off her nightmares. Importantly, this chapter is focalised through Rhen and as such the implied reader does not experience Harper's emotional or cognitive response to being kissed by her captor. Every few chapters are focalised from his perspective, but this is the first time the intimacy between them has been described in detail. Harper's response and perspective is erased. Instead, we have Rhen's recount of kissing her with a 'question, not a command' that she answers by 'kissing back' (p. 346). Rhen describes himself as 'terrible' and 'selfish' for wanting to kiss her but continues to 'find her waist' and 'stroke the length of her side' (p. 347). They start undressing each other but are interrupted when Harper cuts her hands on Rhen's newly emerging scales as he begins to transform into the monster. As a part of the curse, Rhen is never sure when he will transform into the monster, which is triggered randomly, so he is surprised by the scales. Harper is even more surprised, as up until this point she did not know that the 'monster' destroying the kingdom was in fact Rhen. This chapter allows Harper to maintain her role as the postfeminist heroine even as she experiences sexual desire. Rhen's focalisation positions Harper as a participant but not the instigator, and her role as confident, but not *too* sexualised, is maintained. Furthermore, although she experiences sexual desires, the encounter immediately ceases after she cuts her hand, so her purity and innocence are maintained. Postfeminist entanglements enable Harper's empowered strength and role in the narrative without compromising her virtue. Importantly, Rhen's description of his emotional response also erases his culpability in taking advantage of his power over her. The negative language he uses to describe himself suggests some remorse, and his manipulation and coercion of Harper is again excused.

The conclusion of the narrative solidifies Harper's position as a postfeminist heroine who is unaware of the consequences of the coercive control to which she has been subjected.

She remains ignorant of the ways her agency has been removed, her emotions manipulated and that she ultimately gives up her life with her mother and brother for Rhen. When Harper tells the Prince she loves him, he has already transitioned from his human state to the monster that he becomes as a result of the curse, and her declaration, 'I love you. I love you' (p. 435), does not immediately break it. For the curse to be broken, Harper must sacrifice her life for Rhen's. As the sorceress and Curse-maker Lillith gives the order to kill Rhen in his monster form, Harper dives in front of the sword's blade, and it 'bites into [her] skin like a million shards of glass' (p. 466). This encounter is an example of the growing links between romance, violence and YA fantasy, as only through a violent act can Harper's love be true. Despite her initial commentary about the impossibility of falling in love with her captor, Harper willingly makes the ultimate sacrifice for Rhen. She becomes the victim of the manipulation she has experienced and the romantic feelings that have developed despite the clear violations of her agency and autonomy. Through the relationship in *A Curse So Dark and Lonely*, love is shown to be more valuable than autonomy. Implied readers are positioned to view romantic feelings as the most important. Initially acknowledging the imbalance of power is evidence of postfeminism since the text resists positioning its main female protagonist as entirely without autonomy. Then, however, the female character makes an individual choice to remain in a subjugated position. The irony and contradiction of this choice demonstrates Harper's position as a postfeminist heroine and excuses the coercion and manipulation she experiences at the hands of her partner.

In *The Cruel Prince* series, the postfeminist heroine Jude Duarte similarly experiences coercive control from her romantic partners. Through the trilogy she is the victim of manipulation, violence, humiliation and gaslighting. Yet, with critique from her narrative

perspective entirely absent, the behaviour of male characters is excused and ‘being completely dominated and controlled by a man’ is presented as ‘a natural part of a mature relationship’ (Armintrout 2012, p. 86). Ultimately, Jude’s position as a postfeminist heroine is established through the postfeminist rhetoric of choice that positions her as ‘empowered by being disempowered’ (Boyd 2015, p. 103) through her romantic and sexual relationships.

Jude is quickly established as a strong, agential, and intelligent girl in *The Cruel Prince*. Despite being a mortal girl brought up in the faerie realm, Jude wants to become a Royal Knight, something that a girl, even a faerie girl, has never done before. While she does not become a knight, Jude does work as a spy for Prince Dain, the heir to the throne, and plays a crucial role in the coup that kills the King and puts Cardan on the throne. By the novel’s end, Jude is the Royal Seneschal, or closest advisor. She is a strong and independent character with intelligence, determination, and strategic skills who initially resists stereotypically feminine attributes. Her preference is for clothing that is ‘dull’ and ‘plain’ (p. 22) and instead of the fine dresses her sister chooses, she decides to wear a sensible ‘tunic’ and ‘leather boots’ (p. 25). She is active and resourceful, and she likes to be comfortable during physical training and at school. Despite her positioning as a strong girl character, Jude experiences manipulation and violence at the hands of her two romantic partners. In keeping with the postfeminist sensibilities discussed above, her initial agency and power is undermined by her acceptance and excusing of coercive control.

In *The Cruel Prince*, inequality and violence between partners is normalised, and female weakness is perpetuated through a connection between desire and violence. Jude first develops feelings for Locke, one of the fae in her class, despite him being part of the gang that bullies her mercilessly. She notices that he treats her differently and flirts with her and this

first attracts her attention. The novel contains extreme situations of physical and verbal abuse, including Jude's near-murder (p. 23). When she questions how Locke can 'stand' the 'horrible monsters' who bully her, Locke replies that 'there is pleasure in being with them... taking what we wish, indulging in every terrible thought' (p. 101). While he may not directly participate, his decision to remain a bystander is also troubling. In one incident, the group of fae force Jude to eat faerie fruit, which gives them total control over her. Jude is forced to take all her clothes off and is humiliated by her classmates as Locke watches. Yet despite this moment, their romantic relationship continues. Locke's behaviour, and Jude's acceptance of it, passively suggest that girls should anticipate violence and neglect in their romantic relationships.

Female subjugation is also perpetuated by the power dynamics in the novel. Locke and others treat Jude poorly because she is mortal whereas they are faerie. Even as their friendship develops, Jude thinks it is 'the strangest thing' that 'Locke would ever notice someone like [her]' (p. 78). She does 'not understand why he likes [her], but it is exciting to be liked' (p. 153). She experiences 'desire and dread' when he asks her to stay at his house – desire for the romance and dread that he is not genuine (p. 165). As they kiss, she has to 'ground' herself 'in what's happening, to convince [her]self that [she is there] and that the moment is real' (p. 163). Jude's lowly position as a mortal, about which she is constantly reminded, undermines her agency. She believes that she does not deserve Locke's attention, and she becomes a victim as her 'low self-esteem and self-worth' are used to explain away his behaviour (Storer and Strohl 2016, p. 1739). Jude's continued doubt about her self-worth leads her to be less discerning about how Locke treats her. It is eventually revealed that Locke was tricking Jude the entire time. He was actually in a relationship with her twin sister, who was told by Locke

that she must 'endure' his affair with Jude 'as a test of [her] love' (p. 274). Through *The Cruel Prince*, implied readers are situated to accept that girls should put up with poor behaviour if they want to receive attention from boys.

Positive female sexuality is also undermined through strong connections between lust, desire, and violent imagery. Eventually Jude's feelings transfer to Cardan, the 'Cruel Prince' himself, though this does not signal any lasting change in his behaviour towards her. Their first kiss is a lustful encounter just after he has seen his family massacred at the hands of his older brother. The narrative focalisation includes commentary on the strangeness of Jude's feelings for Cardan, but she does not refer to the abuse she experienced at his hands nor the violence they both just witnessed. Cardan's violence is established early in the narrative when he 'lunges' at a young faerie (p. 22). His 'balled fist strikes the boy hard across the jaw' before 'Cardan grabs one of his wings' and 'it tears like paper' (p. 22). A romance develops despite his cruel nature and his mistreatment of Jude. Cardan says that Jude is 'disgusting' but that he 'can't stop' thinking of her (p. 307). While Jude says that she does not 'believe him' and thinks it is a 'silly trick', she also acknowledges that he looks at her with 'desire' (p. 308). Jude feels that she has 'power over Cardan' (p. 308). While initially Jude identifies Cardan's cruelty and violence as negative, she quickly reframes his behaviour when her sexual desire grows.

Cardan's violent nature is clearly minimised by the narrative during his first kiss with Jude. She describes the kiss as like 'taking a dare to run over knives, like an adrenaline strike of lightning, like the moment when you've swum too far out in the sea and there is no going back, only black water closing over your head' (p. 308). While the use of dangerous imagery is not unusual when describing teenage lust, each of these examples leads only to pain. This

highlights Jude's vulnerability. For her to enjoy sexual desire, a feminist notion, she must also submit to an interaction which she understands as dangerous and which therefore complicates her agency. This interaction does not draw connections between pleasure and pain however, because Jude's focalisation does not include elements of lust and desire alongside her fear. Instead, we have only her imaginations of drowning and she simply describes her desire as 'a kick to the stomach' (p. 308), without any associated pleasant feelings. The romance between Cardan and Jude challenges her agency by perpetuating violence and female weakness.

As their relationship develops, Jude also recodes previous instances of Cardan's violence. Janice Radway (2009) discusses recoding as changing the meaning of a violent event when romantic feelings develop and the victim wants to excuse the perpetrator's actions. At the beginning of the second book in the series *The Wicked King* (2019a), and after several plot twists, Cardan is High King and Jude is his advisor. By its end Jude has been imprisoned and then released by the Queen of the Undersea, a supposed ally of the faeries, and Cardan and Jude are married, making her the first mortal Queen of Faerie. While Jude's rise to power cements her position as a strong female protagonist, the ongoing manipulation she experiences in her relationship with Cardan impinges on her true agency.

Jude's strength and power is compromised by her marriage to Cardan which minimises all the negative ways he has treated her. For example, prior to their marriage, he kicked dirt into her school lunch (2018, p. 28), and it was 'all his doing' when Jude was forced into a river full of nixies, who pull humans under the water and eat them (2018, p. 48). Cardan forced her to kiss his foot (2018, p. 100) and watched on with a 'dangerous glittering' in his eyes and 'no sympathy' (2019a, p. 102) while Jude was forced to dance in front of the entire court in her underwear. There are numerous examples of emotional and verbal abuse in

the text as well. Instead of addressing these instances, Cardan's violence towards Jude is excused because of their romance. Her agency is undermined not only by these acts of violence, but also by her willingness to forget them. As Cruger notes, 'all too often in YA, "I love you" is used as a justification for female characters being subjected to physical and emotional violence' (2017, p. 118). Black has constructed her strong female protagonist to value romance more highly than agency and fair treatment.

Jude's agency is further diminished as she is blamed for Cardan's emotional abuse of her in *The Queen of Nothing* (2019b), book three in the series. After Cardan banishes her from Faerie and humiliates her in front of the entire court because she won a duel which killed his brother, Cardan claims that the power to return lay in Jude's hands all along. The banishment included the traditional faerie play on words: 'I exile Jude to the mortal world. Until and unless she is pardoned by the crown' (2019b, p. 160). As Queen she wore a crown that could pardon herself. In a rare moment of reflection, Jude feels not only 'foolish', but 'very angry' (2019b, p. 161). While she blames herself for failing to understand Cardan, she is also irritated with him. However, what the narrative fails to acknowledge is the other ways Cardan had manipulated Jude so that it was clear – and indeed likely – that he would treat her like this. She expects it of him, as she has 'every reason to fear his capriciousness and cruelty' (2019b, p. 161). Cardan does not explain why he smiled at her while the knights were taking her away (2019a, p. 317). Instead, he explains that he needs her, and their relationship is instantly restored. Jude goes from saying that Cardan makes her 'feel small, scrubby and very, very mortal' (2019b, p. 122) to being 'comforted' that he 'admires [her] at all' (2019b, p. 163). The same level of strategy and discernment that Jude uses in all other aspects of her life, such as strategizing to protect her younger brother from the Court, does not apply to her

romantic relationship. While she ‘fights for agency’ in some ways, the ‘social norms [of romance] are so well ingrained’ that Jude is unable to see ‘all the ways that [she] conforms’ to Cardan’s subjugation (Stamper and Blackburn 2018, p. 63). This further confirms her position as a postfeminist heroine by affording her appropriate agency that empowers her while still ensuring she is constrained within a romance. As Cruger notes, postfeminist ideals have produced a ‘contradictory bind of ideal womanhood’ (2017, p. 128). As the mortal Jude Duarte, she is permitted to question the status quo and advocate for herself, but as the High Queen of Faerie, she is subjugated, and her agency diminished.

This analysis of *The Cruel Prince* series highlights the perpetuation of coercive control between Jude and her romantic interests. The dynamic she has with first Locke and then Cardan removes her power and autonomy and leads to physical and emotional abuse. The narrative’s lack of critique further erases Jude’s agency and positions the implied girl reader to similarly justify the behaviour of these boys. In *The Cruel Prince* series, the postfeminist preoccupation with choice and individual responsibility ultimately excuses coercive control.

Conclusion

These popular YA fantasy texts embrace postfeminist modes of femininity that perpetuate subordination in romantic and intimate relationships. While female heroines are strong and independent in many ways, they are simultaneously manipulated and coerced. This article has analysed key moments to demonstrate that these YA fantasy novels include relationships that excuse coercive control. These books demonstrate postfeminist sensibilities in the ways female characters and their subjugation are diminished by a rhetoric of choice and agency.

Jude and Harper each possess physical strength, intelligence and humour which positions them as agential and empowered. Yet, at the core of their romantic and sexual relationships they are all victims of coercive control. Postfeminist sensibilities permeate popular texts to the detriment of girl characters and, I argue, the detriment of implied girl readers. Agency is transformed to subjugate girls in the long run, and therefore girl readers are positioned to view abuse and coercion in romantic relationships as normalised and even desirable. While the novels ostensibly present strong female protagonists, implied girl readers are positioned to excuse the removal of agency, manipulation, and even physical violence towards these postfeminist heroines. This article highlights a concerning trend in young adult fantasy novels where postfeminist sensibilities undermine the popular female protagonist's newfound power and freedoms. Novels like *A Curse so Dark and Lonely* and *The Cruel Prince* demonstrate the persistence of patriarchal culture that gives women perceived freedoms while using regressive controls to maintain their subordinate positions.

Notes

1. More could be said on the depiction of Harper's disability and the erasure of ongoing or significant impact of her cerebral palsy. However, that analysis lies beyond the scope of this article.
2. This list is a small introduction to this trend in young adult literature. A search on a book community website such as Goodreads returns 'shelves' (member-created lists) with titles such as 'Kidnapped/Captive Romance' with 'heroines at the mercy of male leads' in over 200 novels.

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Biographical Note

Elizabeth Little is an early career researcher in the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University, Geelong, having completed a PhD project in 2023 that utilises feminist theory to examine young adult fantasy texts and the girls who read them. In 2023 she was awarded an Australian Association for Teaching English research grant and is currently working on a project that interrogates the construction of masculinity in texts taught in senior secondary classrooms. Elizabeth has publications on young adult fantasy, fairy tales and teaching English. She has also written for *The Conversation*, and *Idiom*. She is passionate about literature education, gender and sexuality, and the teens who read young adult literature.