Counterclaim Practice

Selection 1: "The Force Awakens Has a Perfection Problem" By Megan McArdle

Like pretty much all of the rest of you, my family saw "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" over Christmas week. I emerged from the screening into a lively Internet debate over whether Rey, the main hero, was or was not a "Mary Sue": an author's wish-fulfillment character, perfect in every way, beloved by children, dogs and everyone around her. Plotwise, this character is improbably central to everything -- the bride at every wedding, the corpse at every funeral.

I will pause here to provide the requisite SPOILER ALERT. We cannot shield your eyes from it forever; at some point, we are going to have to be able to have an adult conversation about this movie. If you have not yet watched the movie and wish to with an unsullied mind, then best to depart this column right now.

The answer is that of course Rey is a Mary Sue, though not in this case for the author; she is a stand-in for every 10-year-old who imagined themselves into the Star Wars universe, and particularly the women who wanted to be Luke, not Princess Leia. J.J. Abrams has taken all the skills of the main characters of the first "Star Wars" cast and rolled them into one: She is a pilot as good as Han Solo, also a mechanic; she is apparently fluent in multiple languages; she is a terrific hand-to-hand fighter, a good shot and, oh, she knows how to use a lightsaber the first time she picks one up. Also, mid-movie, she discovers that she can do Jedi mind tricks without having any reason to know that they even exist -- apparently not content to make her Luke, Abrams also had to make her her own Obi-Wan Kenobi.

What Abrams left out is twofold: first, the sense that these are skills that have to be trained and developed, not simply inborn traits one has, like blue eyes. Second, and more important, he's omitted the weaknesses that made the original characters so appealing: the genuine streak of nasty self-interest in Han Solo, Leia's bullheaded arrogance, Kenobi's wistful sense of being past his prime, Luke's needy, whining sense of entitlement to greater things than he has gotten from the universe so true to actual teenage boys.

Rey, by contrast, is kind, self-sacrificing and, along with everything else she has going for her, the ineffable moral center of this little universe. Her "weakness," which feels bizarrely tacked on and utterly out of character, is that she's afraid of the revelation she gets when she first touches Luke Skywalker's lightsaber. Why is she like this? What regrettable human tendency or personal life history has made her recoil from it? Ummm, who knows? Rey has no personality traits that are not there to move the plot forward, or attach her halo to her head more firmly.

Selection 2: With Star Wars' Rey, we've reached Peak Strong Female Character By: Tasha Robinson

It's especially thrilling to see a new tough-as-nails, take-no-prisoners heroine in the *Star Wars* franchise — given that *A New Hope*'s Princess Leia was a feminist icon back in 1977. She was one of the original models for modern women heroines: like Rey, Leia is confident, competent, unapologetic, and an active participant in her own rescues. (Even when rocking a skimpy metal slave-girl getup.) But while Leia was

quickly reduced to a secondary character after *A New Hope,* Rey is all Leia's potential fulfilled — jumping right into the pilot's seat instead of moving to the rear of the starship while the boys fly.

So here's a radical suggestion: instead of being concerned about whether her Mary Sue flawlessness is a problem, why not, just this once, enjoy it for what it is?

The fight for equal representation for women, in front of and behind the camera, continues, and will continue for a long time. No one's saying sexism is over and we should put our feet up and enjoy it. And no one's arguing that all female characters should be as flawless and fearless as Rey. It'd be a boring cultural landscape if they were. Characters who have a lot to overcome to become heroes are the bravest and most inspirational — more so than characters like Rey, who are naturally good at everything.

But it takes more than one kind of character to make a world, and joyously proficient ladies are just as important to a diverse, rich, fulfilling cultural landscape as troubled, complicated lady heroes. And there's something deeply suspicious about the early stirrings, on Reddit and 4Chan and especially all over Twitter, about how Rey is just too effective and nifty to be acceptable. She's a fantasy wish-fulfillment character with outsized skills, an inhuman reaction time, and a clever answer to every question — but so are the other major *Star Wars* heroes. Are they all getting the same level of suspicion and dismissal?

Back in 1977, were we wringing our hands over whether Han Solo was *too* suave and funny and cool, or whether Luke's access to the "powerful ally" of an all-connecting, all-seeing, all-powerful Force that "binds the galaxy together" made him way too overpowered? Are all the male superheroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe boring because they can summon lightning or smash buildings? Is anyone whatsoever complaining that Tom Cruise's *Mission: Impossible* character should be needier and more helpless, with bigger, more obvious, more telling weaknesses?

We wouldn't be worrying about Rey's excessive coolness if she were Ray, standard-issue white male hero with all the skills and all the luck. So maybe the most radical, feminist, subversive thing the cultural community can do is accept and enjoy her, instead of interrogating her right to be perfect — and our right to feel represented by her. When we question a female character's coolness and competency, we're giving into that embarrassing tendency to second-guess and undermine ourselves. The impulse to judge Rey comes from the same place as the societally trained impulse to say: "Am I being unfeminine by being too loud? Too confident? Too present? Too assertive? Should I tone it down? Do I deserve to be heard?"

IN YOUR JOURNAL Write a counterclaim (and rebuttal/refutation) that starts with the following topic sentence: **Some argue the character of Rey in <u>The Force Awakens</u> is a poor character because she is unrealistic.**