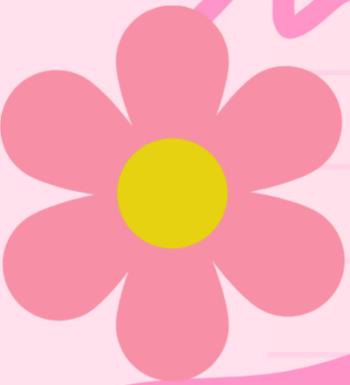


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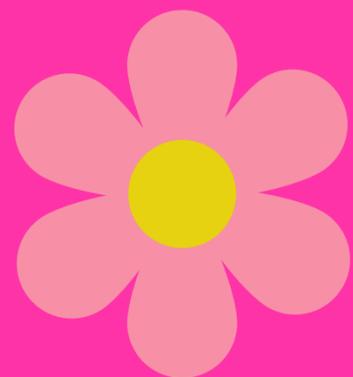
# Writing Female Characters

And why it matters!





Let's be completely clear, this isn't a "male writers" problem, this is a trap any writer can fall into if they aren't mindful...





Make sure your female character has...



Motivation/Goal



Flaws



Strengths



Complicated  
Backstory



Personality  
Conflicts



Growth

# Avoid Stereotypes!

Some of the historical stereotypes seen in literature:

- **Madwoman in the attic**
- **Angel in the house**
- **Sacrificial virgin**
- **Whore who must die for redemption**
- **Witch (but not the cool, fully-rounded kind)**
- **She is formless, passive, subordinate, selfless, and has narrowness of character.**

# Modern Stereotypes:

- Loud and abrasive characters who often take on traditionally masculine roles or skill sets
  - All my friends are guys
  - I'm not like other girls- "Cool Girl"
  - femme fatale fantasy
- Modest, shy woman who doesn't know she's special, beautiful, etc...
  - Takes off her glasses and she's gorgeous
  - Usually has a man bring her out of her shell



# Modern Stereotypes:

## 3. Manic-Pixie-Dream Girl

- Quirky as a personality
- Used as tool to develop male character

## 4. Mary Sue

- Stand in for the author
- Perfect, the chosen one, flat

## 5. Broody McBrooderson

- Everything is always wrong
- Jenny from Forrest Gump

## 6. Can you think of more?





**strong female character =  
well developed character**





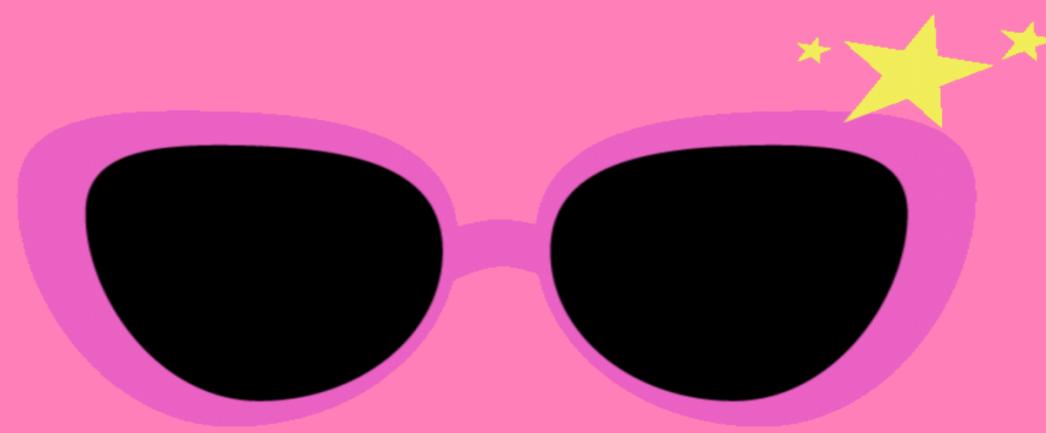
**There is no trait, action,  
or feeling that is  
universal to all women.**



# Litmus test:

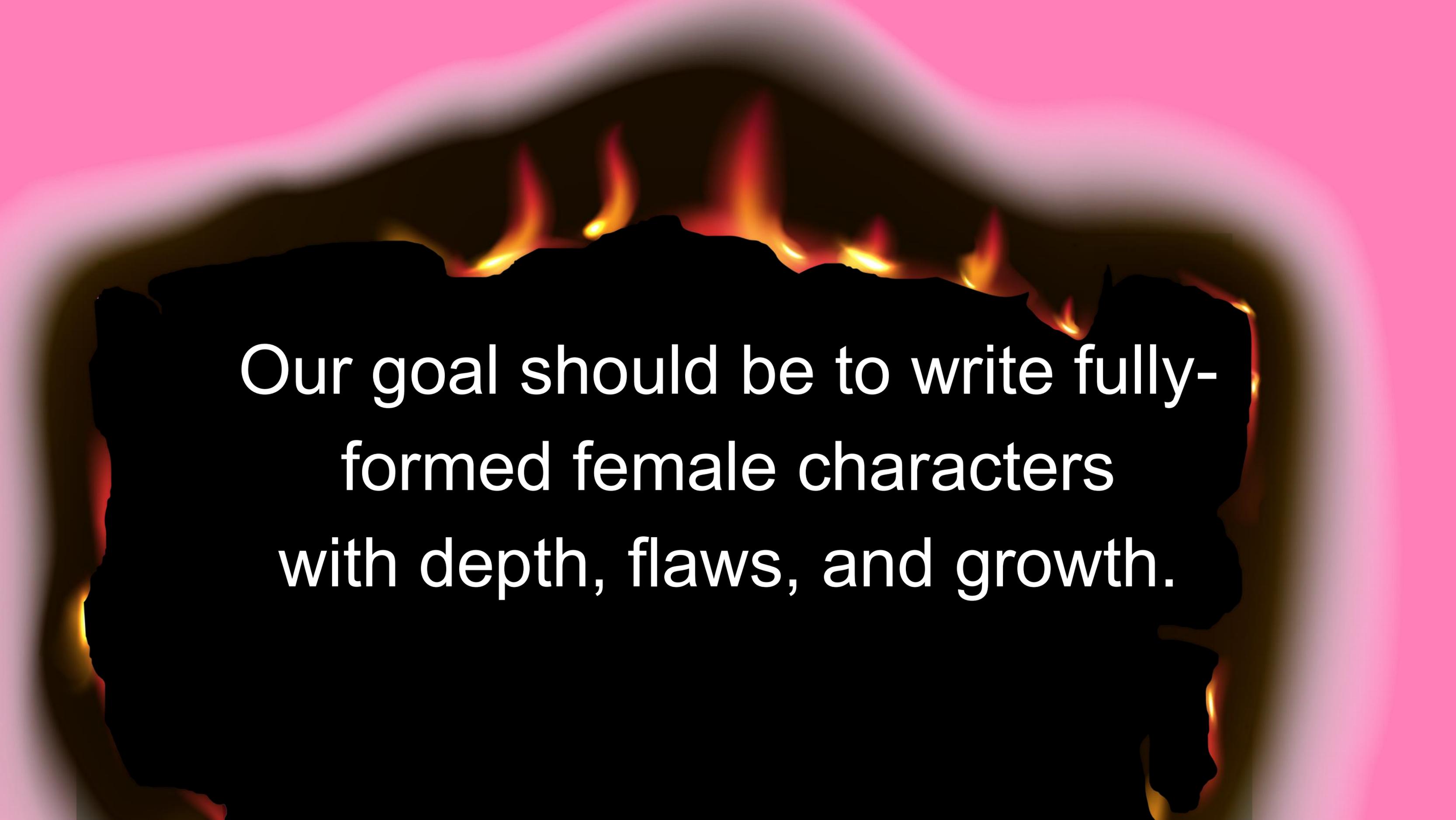
1. Does her story arc depend on male characters?
2. Does her goal or motivation depend on male characters?
3. Are there multiple female characters or is she the "token" woman (queer person/differently abled/ minority)?
4. Do you describe her appearance more than you describe the male characters' appearance?
5. Does she have agency?





**Why does it matter?**





Our goal should be to write fully-  
formed female characters  
with depth, flaws, and growth.



**Give her female friends and allies!**



**Mini Write:**

**Who are the female allies to your female character?**

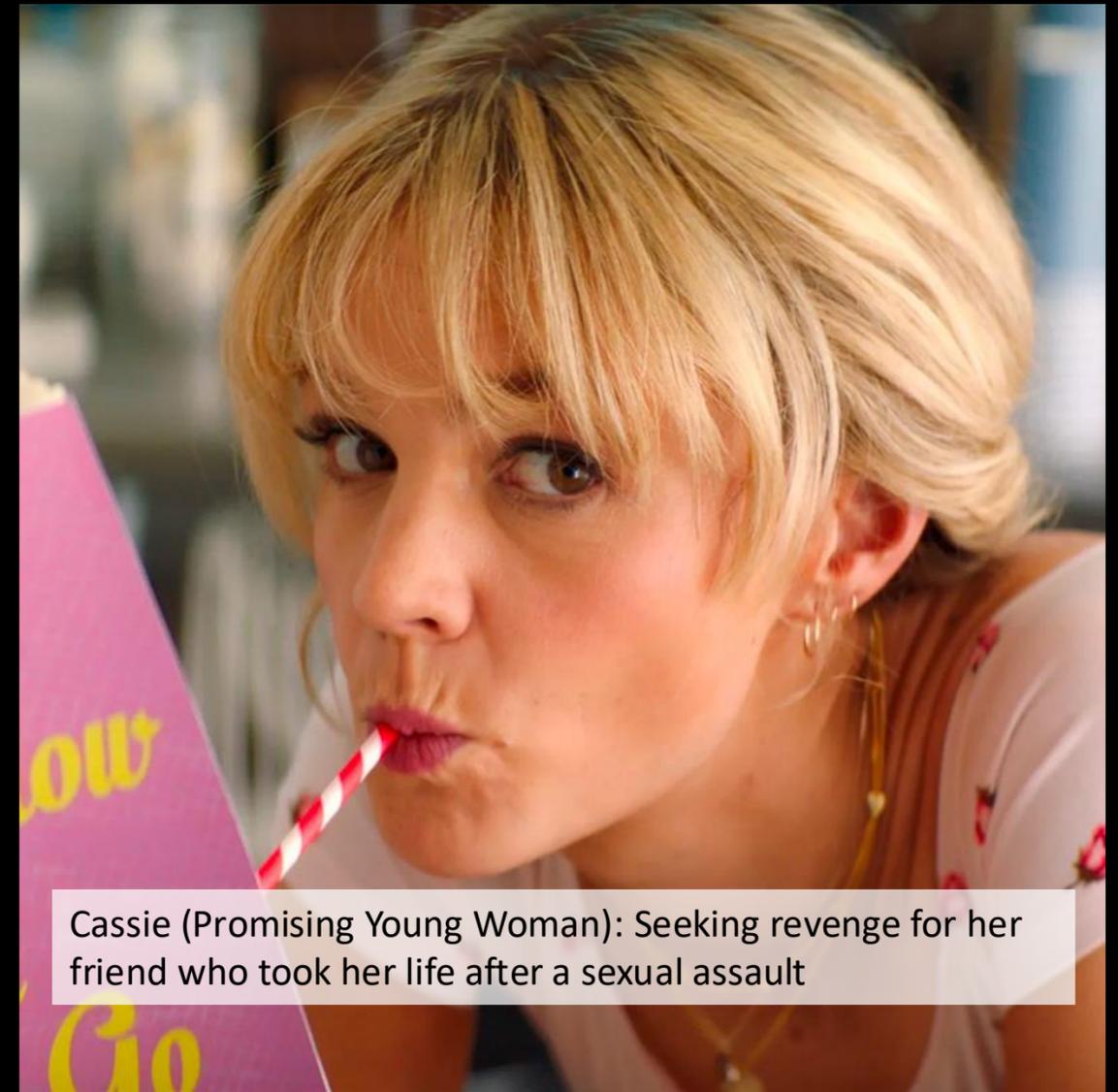
# Give her motivations/goals



Katniss (Hunger Games): Wants to survive, wants to save her family



Jo March (Little Women): Wants to become a famous author, and wants her family to stay together

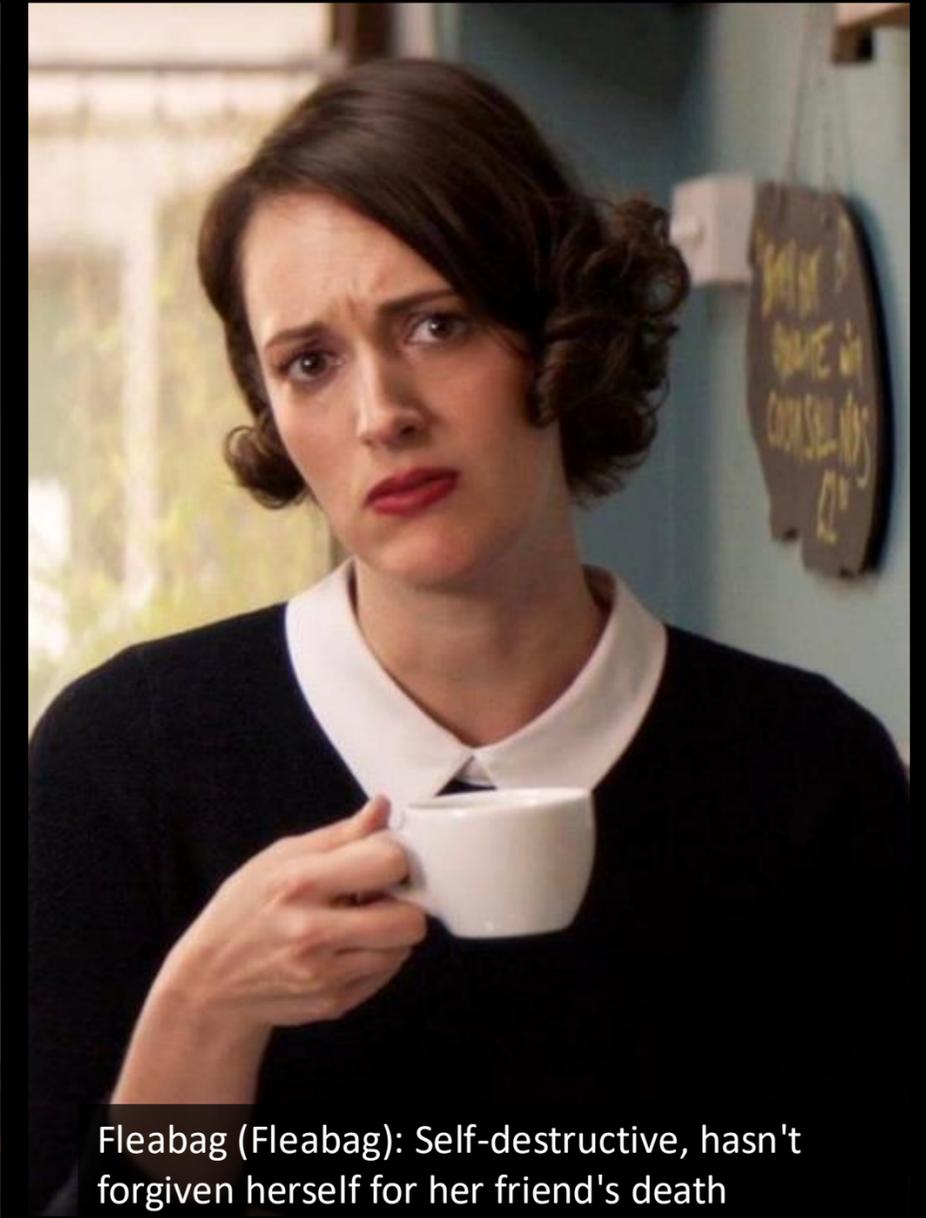
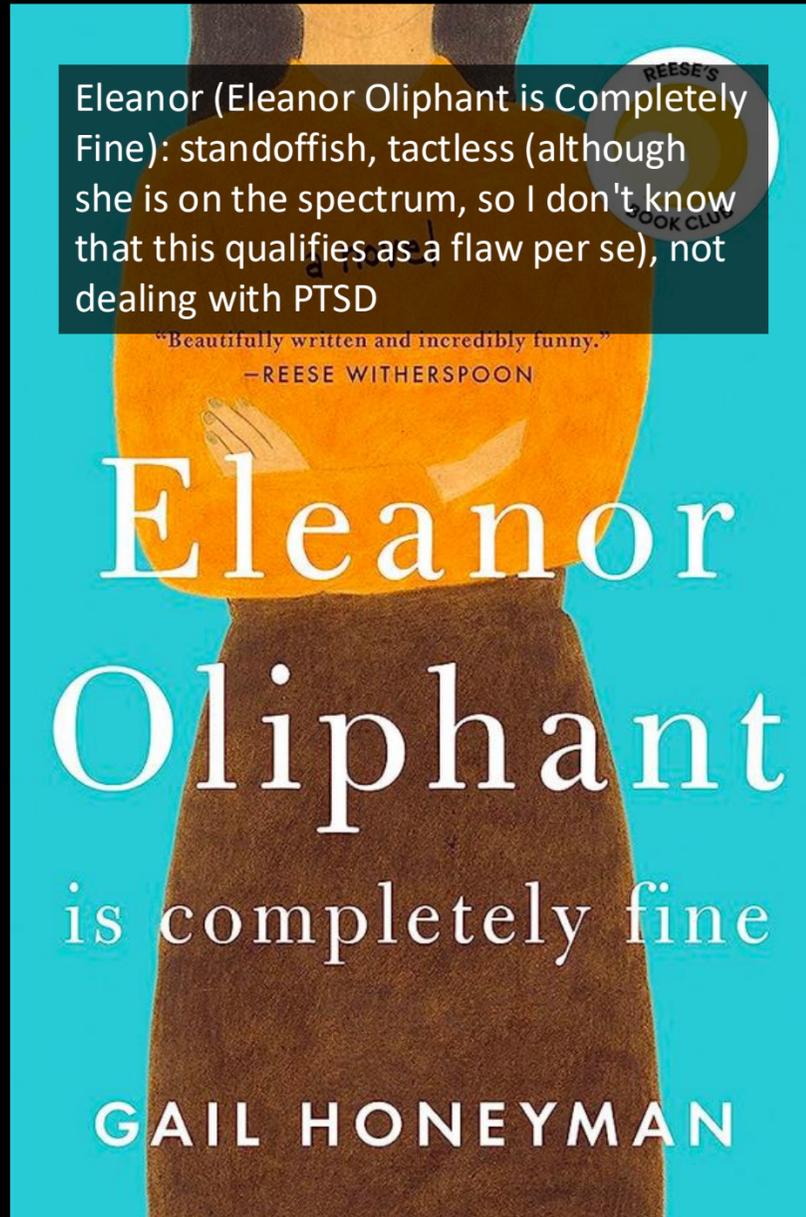


Cassie (Promising Young Woman): Seeking revenge for her friend who took her life after a sexual assault

## **Mini Write:**

**What are the goals or motivations of your female character? If she doesn't have any, brainstorm some ideas.**

# Give her flaws.



## **Mini Write:**

**Come up with a diverse set of flaws for your female character.**

# Give her strengths.



Merida (Brave): Brave, resilient, independent



Hermione (Harry Potter):  
Stands up for others, values  
her education, brave

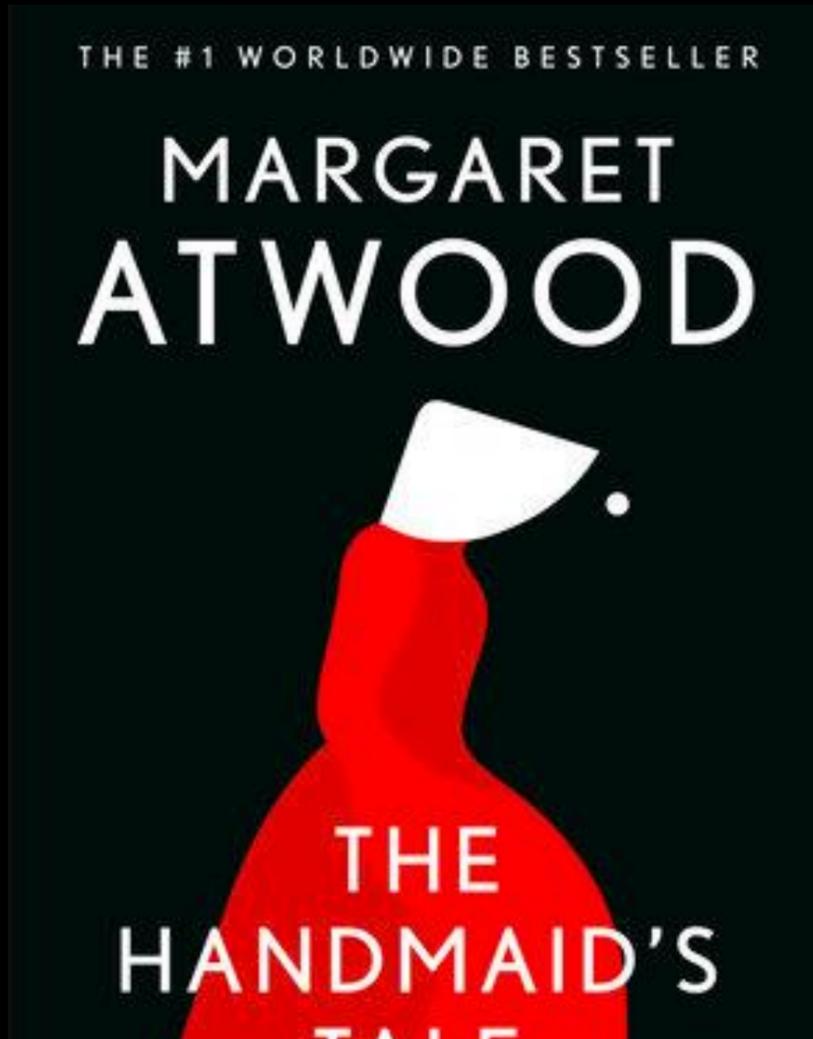


Eleven (Stranger Things):  
loyal, honest, protective

## **Mini Write:**

**Come up with a diverse set of strengths  
for your female character.**

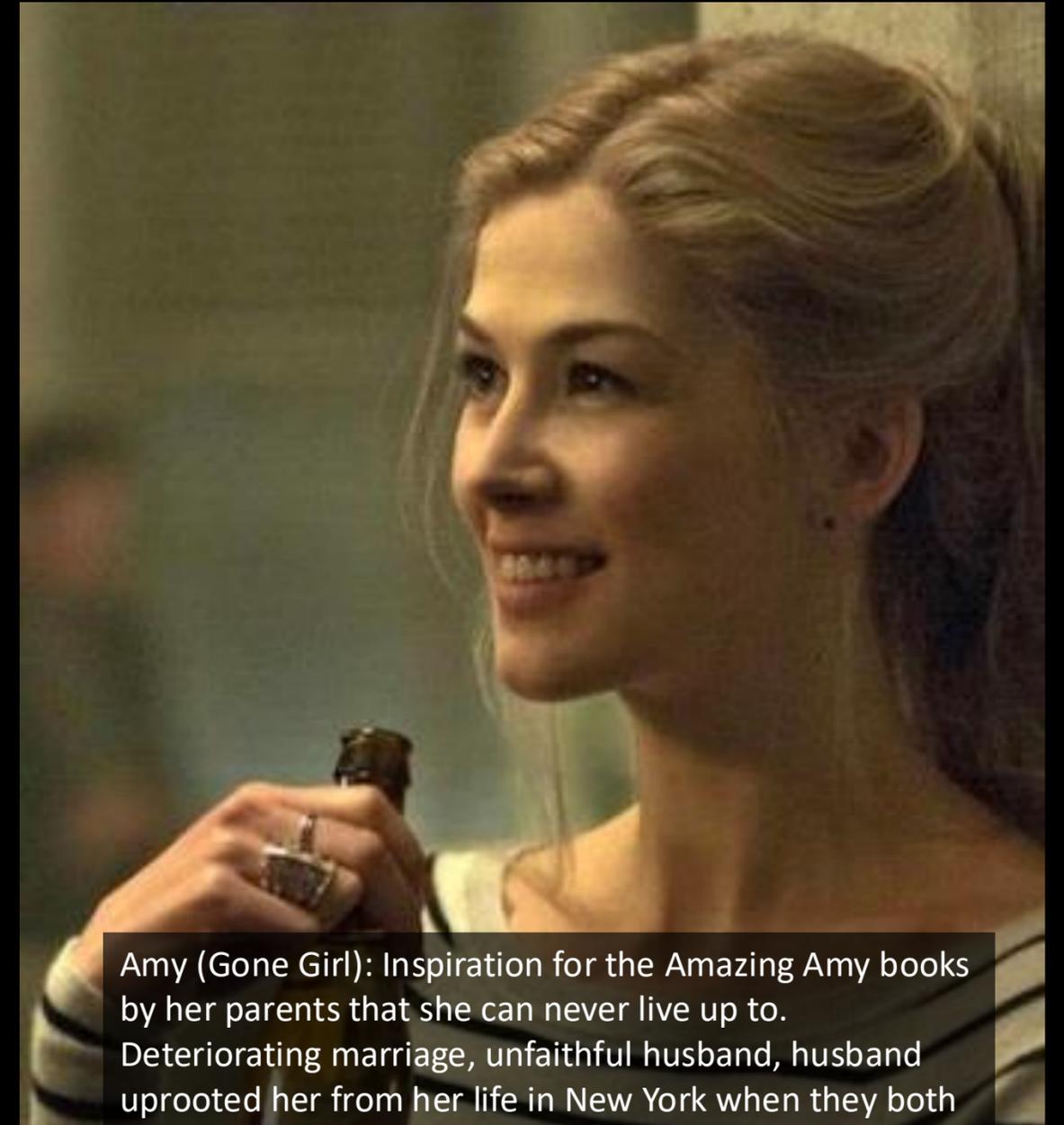
# Give her a complicated backstory.



Offred (The Handmaid's Tale): failed to escape to Canada with her husband and child, indoctrinated into life as a Handmaid by the Aunts, and her friend Moira escaped from the indoctrination facility.



Wanda (WandaVision): Parents killed by Stark weapon, manipulated by people, lots and lots of trauma and backstory.



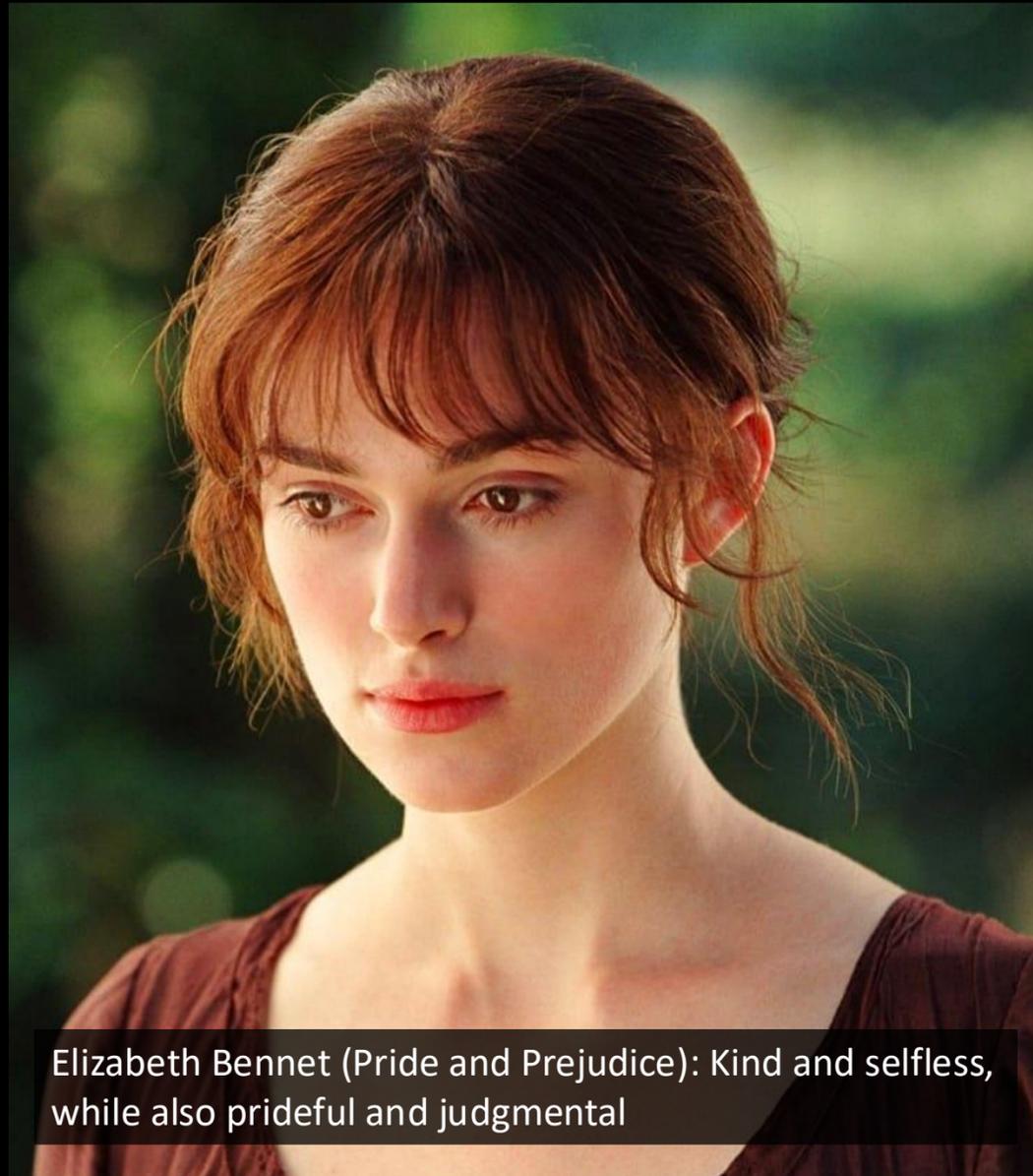
Amy (Gone Girl): Inspiration for the Amazing Amy books by her parents that she can never live up to. Deteriorating marriage, unfaithful husband, husband uprooted her from her life in New York when they both lost their jobs.

**Mini Write:**

**List three things that make your female character's backstory complicated.**

# Give her personality conflicts

Kind, selfless - prideful, judgemental



idealistic, perseveres -  
short-sighted, stubborn



visionary, idealistic -  
unrealistic, ruthless



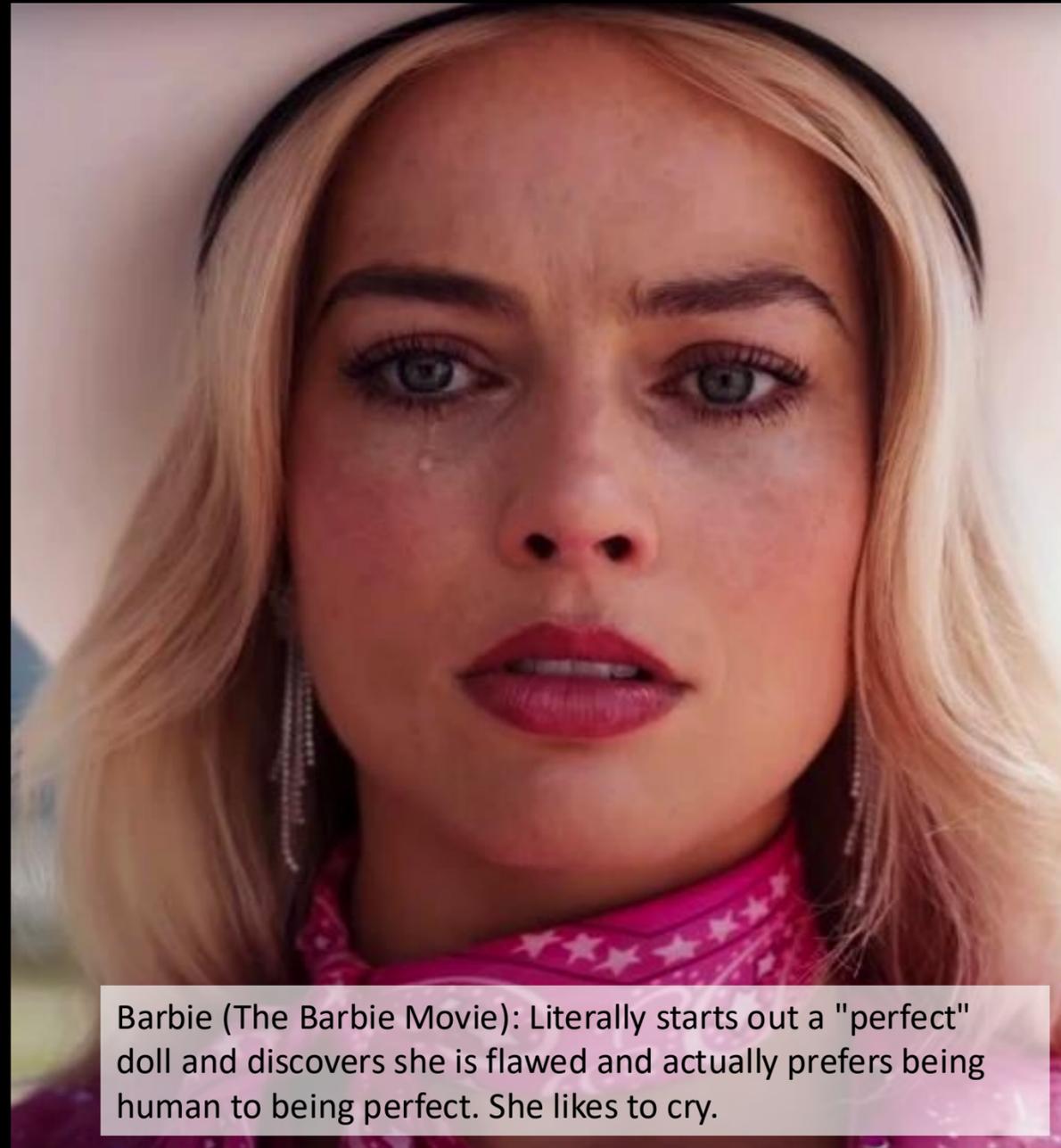
**Mini Write:**

**Come up with as many personality  
conflicts as possible.**

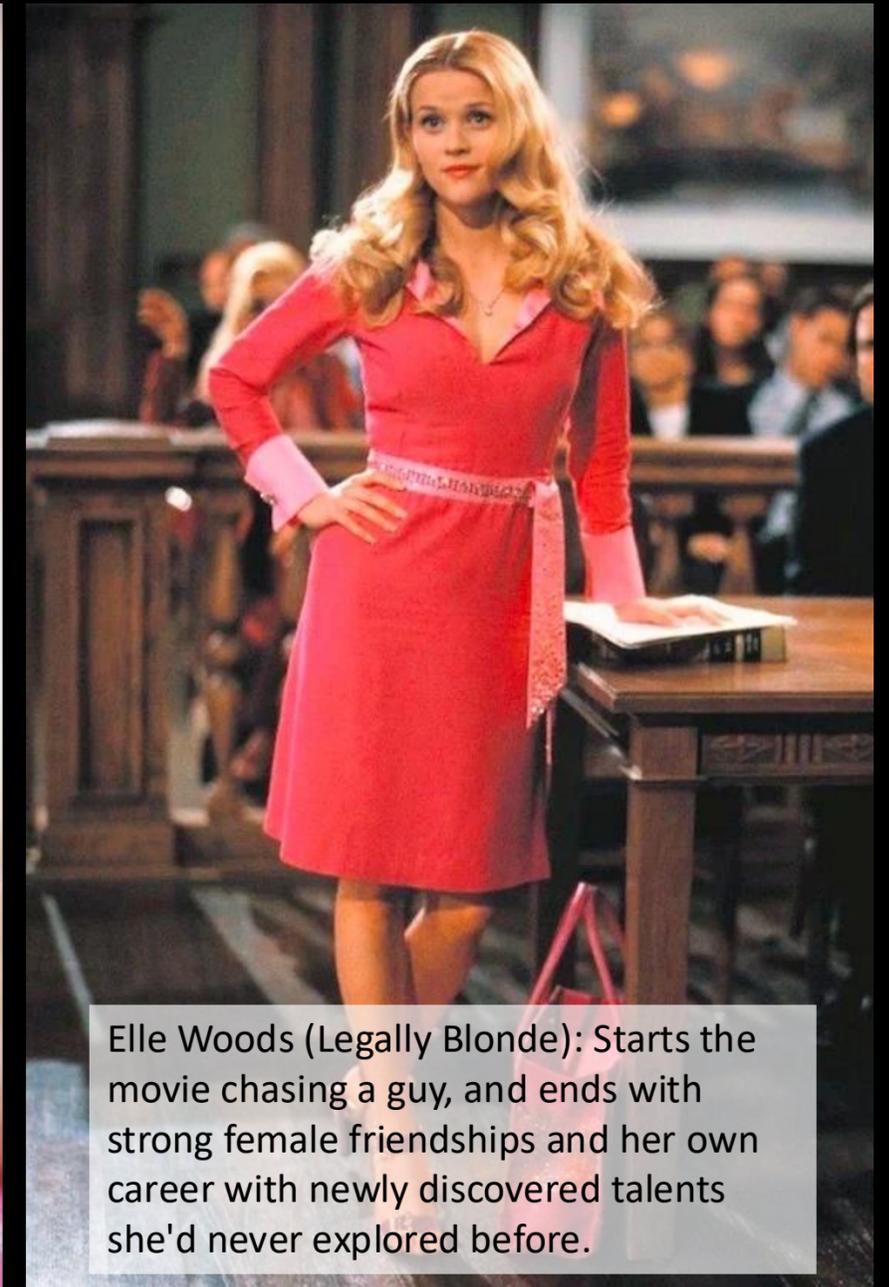
# Give her growth.



Devi (Never Have I Ever): Begins the series as an immature teen not wanting to face the grief she feels for her father's death, desperately wants a boyfriend no matter what. By the end of the series, she has become more accepting of herself and her family. Gains perspective.



Barbie (The Barbie Movie): Literally starts out a "perfect" doll and discovers she is flawed and actually prefers being human to being perfect. She likes to cry.

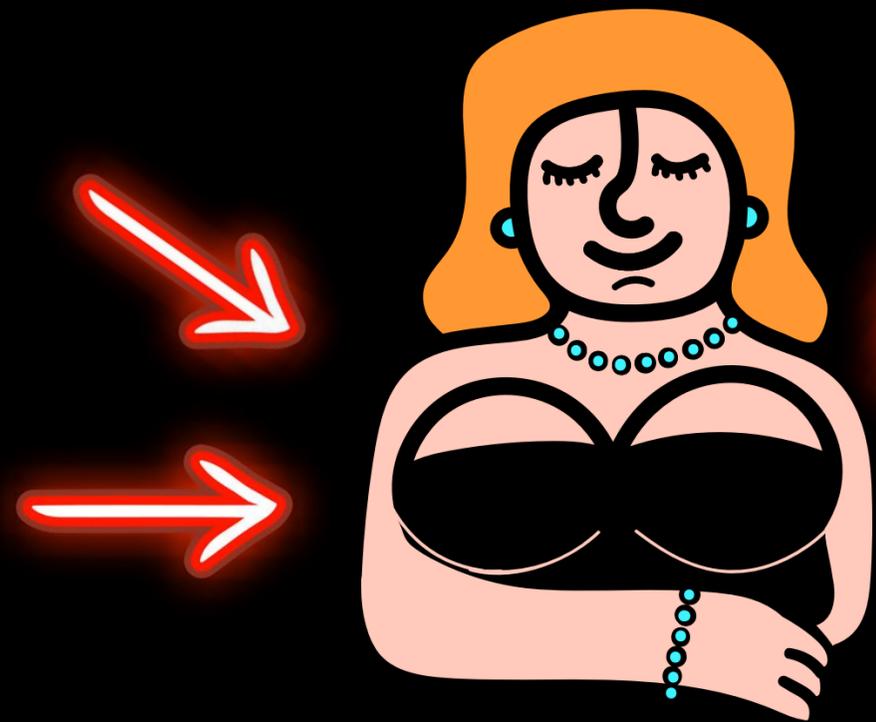


Elle Woods (Legally Blonde): Starts the movie chasing a guy, and ends with strong female friendships and her own career with newly discovered talents she'd never explored before.

**Mini Write:**

**How does your female character grow?**

# Let's talk appearance!



**BOOBIES!**

(But seriously, stop it...)

The following slides are real examples  
of men writing women poorly!

Warning... It's very, very stupid.

When she'd stopped crying, Madeleine composed herself before the mirror. Her skin looked blotchy. Her breasts, of which she was normally proud, had withdrawn into themselves, as if depressed. Madeleine knew that this self-appraisal might not be accurate. A

...almost like it used to.

“No, Craig, I want a big, dumb, fake answer.”

Noelle rolls her eyes. I think her breasts roll in synch with them. Girls' breasts are so amazing.

“Wait, you didn't ask a question!” I smile. “O

shut.

There was only one doorbell and the small front garden was given over to gravel, the dustbins and a couple of empty, bright red plant pots. I was thinking that either Dr Framline owned the whole place or he was sharing with friends. I pressed the bell and a cheerful voice said it was on its way. The voice belonged to a plump, round-faced woman of the sort that develops a good personality because the alternative is suicide.

I showed her my warrant card. 'Good afternoon. My name's Peter Grant, I'm from the police and this is my colleague Beverley Brook, who's a river in south

“Describe yourself,” Nell wrote.

“Nothing special, I’m afraid,” wrote the Duke. “How about yourself?”

“Slightly taller than average, flashing green eyes, raven hair falling in luxuriant waves to my waist unless I pin it up to emphasize my high cheekbones and full lips. Narrow waist, pert breasts, long legs, alabaster skin that flushes vividly when I am passionate about something, which is frequently.”

“Your description is reminiscent of my late wife, God rest her soul.”

**The Diamond Age, Neal Stephenson**

CHAPTER 33

*The Pair of Dappled Greys*

Madame Danglars, whose beauty was quite remarkable in spite of her thirty-six years, was at the piano, a little masterpiece of inlay, while Lucien Debray was seated at a work-table turning over the pages of an album. Before the Count's arrival, Lucien had had time to direct him to Madame

**The Count of Monte Cristo, Alexandre Dumas**

cus, the tongue taut, the expression frank and competitive. There was no visible sweat. She wore white gym shorts. Her legs, he thought, were almost certainly the legs of a virgin, dry and without hair, the left knee cocked and carrying her entire weight, which was just over 117 pounds. Lieutenant Cross remembered touching that left knee. A dark theater, he remembered, and the movie was *Ben-Hur*.

## The Things They Carried, Tim O'Brien

But she was, for the bathroom door didn't altogether close, due to the old frame of the house settling over the centuries, and she had to sit on the toilet some minutes waiting for the pee to come. Men, they were able to conjure it up immediately, that was one of their powers, that thunderous splashing as they stood lordly above the bowl. Everything about them was more direct, their insides weren't the maze women's were, for the pee to find its way through. ~~Sukie waiting neeked~~

Rick did not pause to analyze the psychology of the pregnant woman. It had not occurred to him that pregnancy was a complete paradox. It was paradoxical in that only the female of the species could perform the amazing feat, while perhaps being less psychologically prepared for it than a male would have been. No woman enjoys the sight of sagging breasts and a bulging stomach, no matter how maternal her urge. A woman's good looks are a woman's good looks, and there is little good-looking about a pregnant woman.

...me. You did have a laser beam. It was at  
it-G, on Ganymede, on March 12, 2014.” she sighed  
kill you?”  
one was bitter; her breasts pulsed with resentment.  
irty-five years he had never made another mistake as  
Cupertino said  
“They knew y  
supposed to com  
passage to Terra  
did attempt suic  
“Go on and  
“I’ll show y

**We Can Remember It For You Wholesale, Philip K. Dick**

---

She must have been twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old and was stunningly beautiful. Intensely black hair, tragic eyes that were jungle green, crowned by full eyebrows raised in slight surprise, lips as if silicone filled but in reality fattened merely by the nature of ephemeral ethnic mixtures. Conde saw himself threatened by small breasts pointing skyward like surface-to-air missiles, and perceived the woman's hips either as an oasis of peace or as a battlefield. Her skin shone thanks to a smoothness reached at the point of her maximum splendor, tinged with that color made by a few drops of coffee in milk. Angelina Jolie? Conde's male chauvinism—which could not be helped—forced him to consider that sexy woman who loved other women as a painful waste of evolution.

**With male or female characters,  
how are you using descriptions of their  
appearance to build that character?**

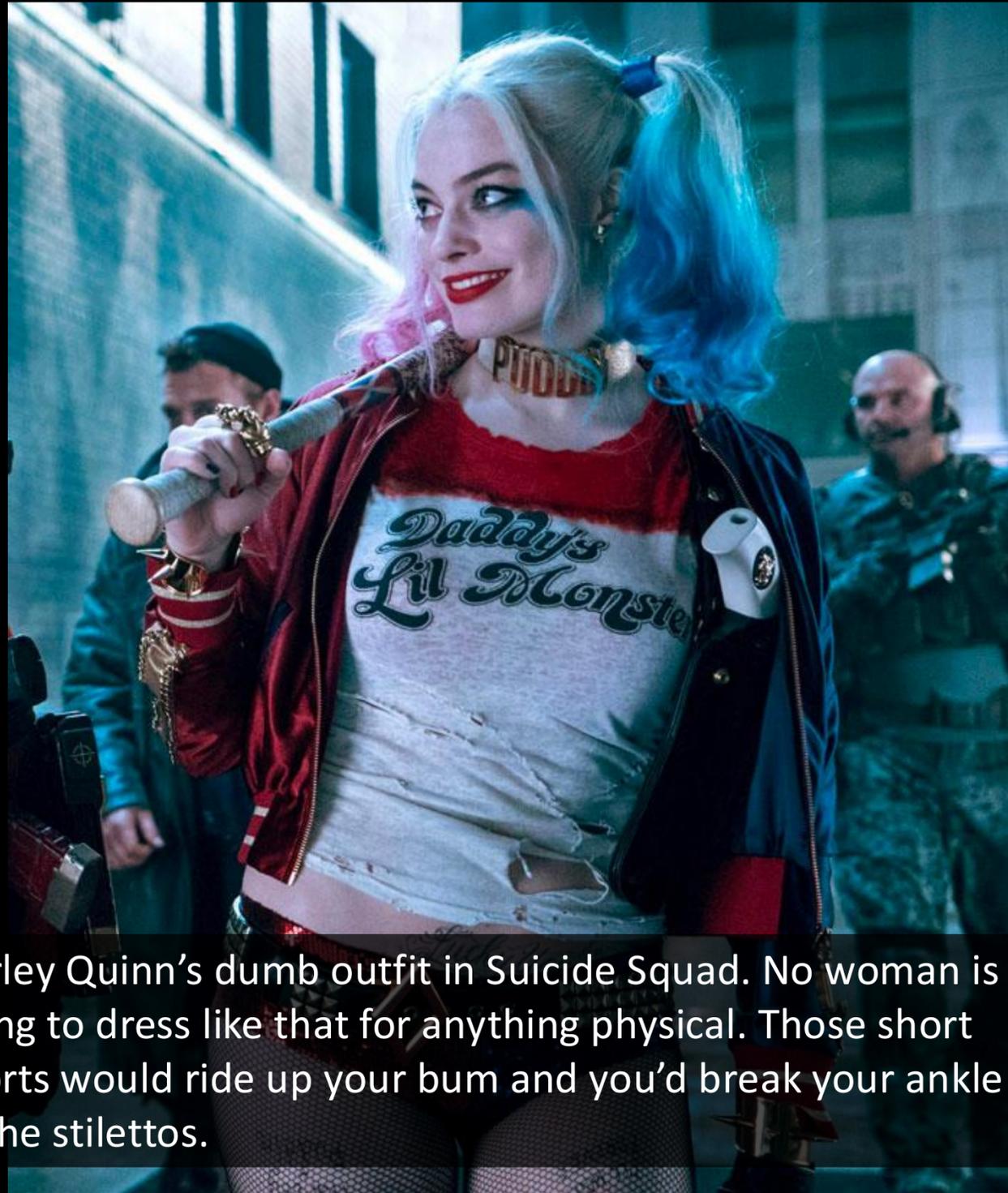
**It's not just about making them look cool.**

# Let's talk clothes!

**Clothes are an important part of storytelling, but they should be used purposefully.**

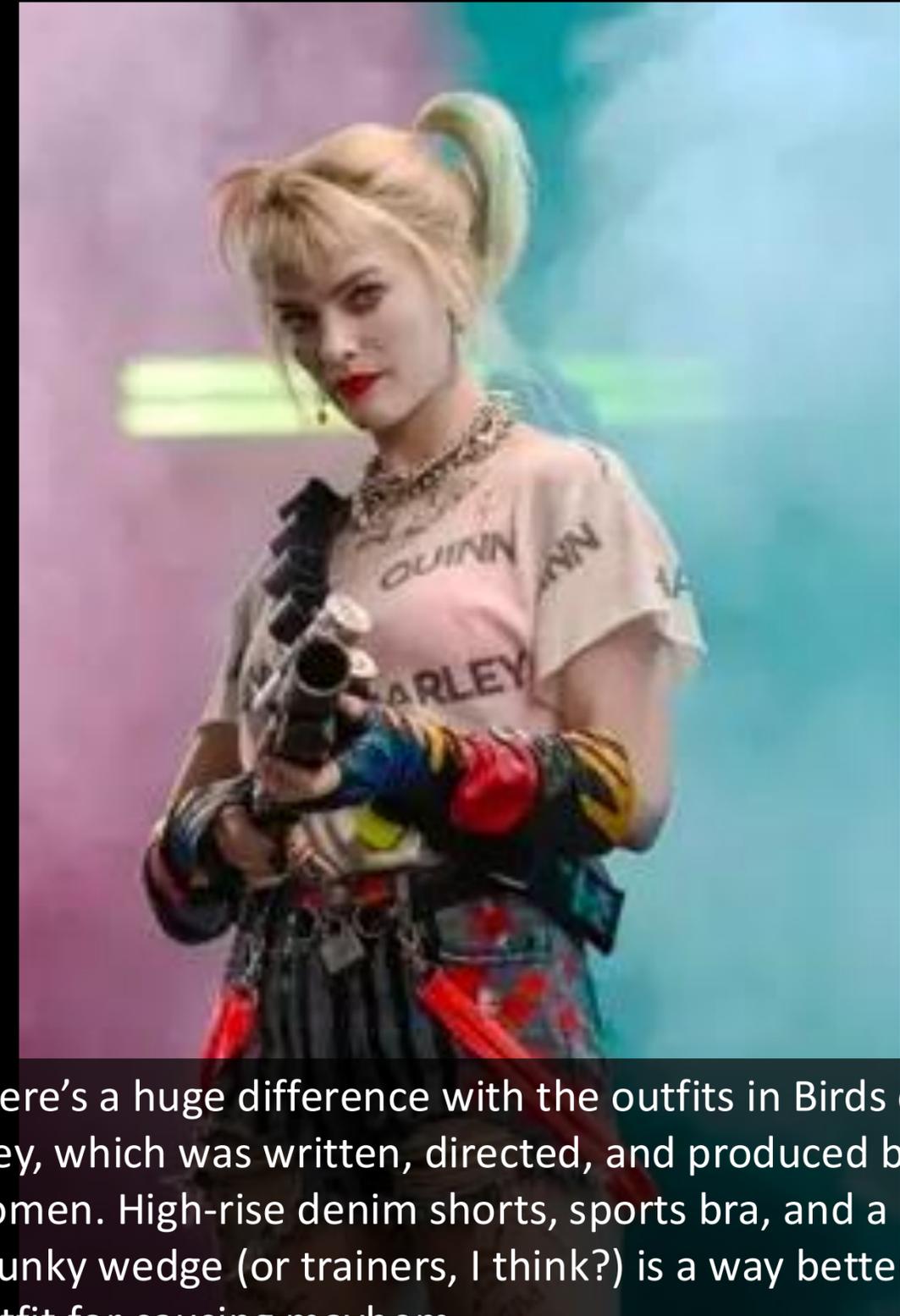
**Go from playing dress-up, to using clothing as part of your character development.**

## Suicide Squad (2016)



Harley Quinn's dumb outfit in Suicide Squad. No woman is going to dress like that for anything physical. Those short shorts would ride up your bum and you'd break your ankle in the stilettos.

## Birds of Prey (2020)



There's a huge difference with the outfits in Birds of Prey, which was written, directed, and produced by women. High-rise denim shorts, sports bra, and a chunky wedge (or trainers, I think?) is a way better outfit for causing mayhem.

**Male authors who generally write female characters well....**

**Scott Westerfield**

**Grady Hendrix**

**Nick Hornby**

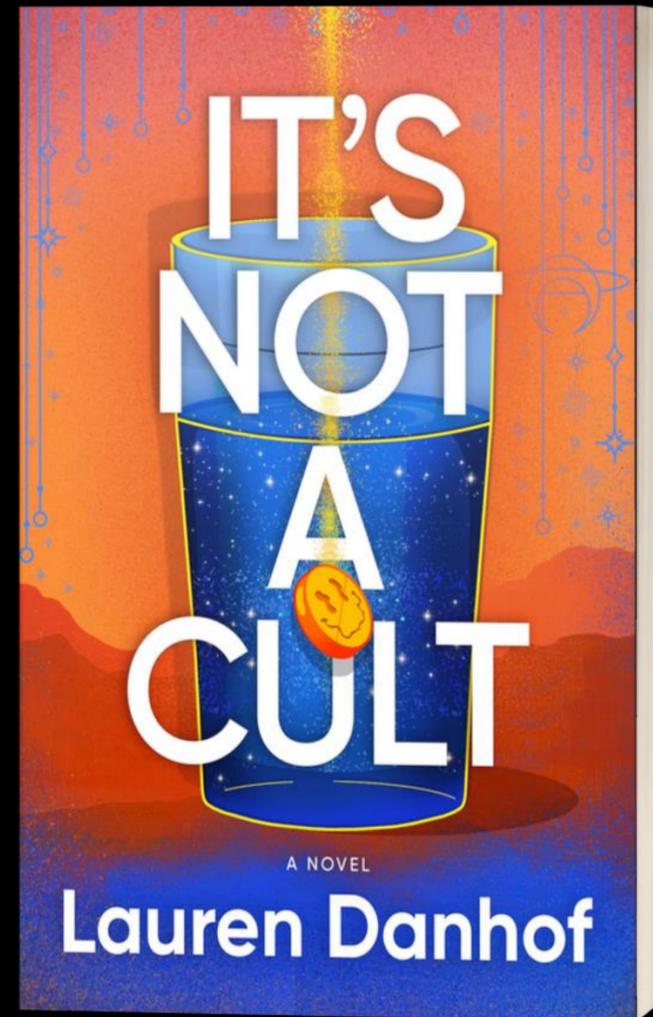
**Terry Pratchett**

**James S.A. Corey**

**Who else?**



I wrote this!



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Lauren  
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