

Notes on a Rookie

Rookie Mag and Feminism

Jordan Larson

*A new figure of authority is born and she outclasses them all.
—Tiqqun, Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the
Young-Girl*

*The editor, director, plus I'm my own boss
So posh, nails fierce with the gold gloss
Which means nobody getting over me
I got the swag and it's pumpin' out my ovaries.
—Kreayshawn, "Gucci Gucci"*

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Rookie Mag was launched on September 1, 2011, with a letter from its then-15-year-old editor, Tavi Gevinson. The project, as she laid it out, was simple: Rookie was to be a website for teen girls, but not a guide on how to *be* a teen girl, not *Teen Vogue*, and not really something by Jane Pratt, either. Influenced by *Sassy*, Pratt's '90s-era magazine that redefined the possibilities for writing aimed at young girls, Gevinson has attempted to create a new kind of feminism—and feminist—in Rookie. Called “the future of journalism” by Lady Gaga, Gevinson had already accrued plenty of fame and cultural clout by the time she decided to found her own publication. She began blogging about fashion at the age of 11, and in two years her blog *The Style Rookie* was receiving up to 50,000 visitors a day. Gevinson began attracting the attention of other fashion bloggers and designers, attending Fashion Weeks across the globe, and forging friendships with celebrities like Winona Ryder and Sofia Coppola. She caught the eye of

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cultural arbiters including the likes of *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times Magazine*, both of which profiled her in 2012.



There's a
lemon in
the locker.

What allows an idea like this to succeed—one in which assumptions about teenage girls' frivolity are surely at the forefront—is the vast amount of work and planning put into it. *Rookie* has been going hard for over a year, publishing three times a day, assigning a new theme for every month, and publishing the first *Rookie Yearbook* last fall. Gevinson is still in high school, though she spends her hours after class working full-time as the website's editor. Beneath her is a staff of 72 writers, editors, photographers, and design-

ers, some of whom are far older than their employer.

Rookie greets contemporary feminism with plenty of conundrums as it resists a facile grasp of its implications. The magazine comes from a place of privilege, its existence an anomaly wrought by the flash popularity of its precocious, white, middle-class founder. It's ostensibly feminist, but *Rookie* shies away from many difficult topics. For example, there's no discussion of the intersection of race and class in women's oppression (not a particularly new or radical concept), and it lacks any other more brazen take on women's health or politics. On the other hand, the magazine has clearly connected with girls across the country, bypassing the more disparate mainstream media to give them a sense of hope and community. *Rookie* does not

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publish workout or dieting routines, ‘embarrassing’ stories about boys knowing you’re on your period (oh no!), or tips on how to blow his mind in bed. It does contain articles on first encounters with the male gaze, plenty of tips on writing, and a discussion on reconciling an enjoyment of pop music with its entrenched misogyny.

Gevinson has not only brought herself into an arena of ideas, writing, and publicity to which few people her age are privy; she has also pulled up an entire legion of young people with her. *Rookie* establishes a venue for her own writing as well as other girls’, and through it Gevinson has shown an interest in both writing for her peers and in having her peers write themselves.

In her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous claimed, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.” Cixous’s theory of *l’écriture féminine* called for a new form of writing in order to evade the phallogentrism of traditional, male-dominated language. Cixous saw female-oriented language as cyclical, evading the stifling, linear nature of its predecessor:

I mean it when I speak of male writing. I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.

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Cixous identifies language as the site of sexual difference and the possibility for change, seeing the very act of writing as a tool for women to create themselves in flesh and word. For Cixous, the act of writing is both a way to unite body and mind and a means to create a self. Gevinson, in creating a space for herself and others, has been able to use her unorthodox entrance into the hierarchical world of fashion to lend credence to her authority over a particular realm of teenage girlhood. Her fame has helped legitimize her projects, while her attention to the intense vulnerability of teenage femininity has let others embrace it as well.

The articles in *Rookie* push a new variety of expertise. In addition to the many reimagined magazine tropes—interviews, tutorials, and reviews—the diary form is central to much of *Rookie*'s success. While many articles maintain a confessional tone and first-person perspective, the website also publishes a weekly “dear diary” feature in which staffers write about their personal lives. While clearly embodying a particular teen-girl stereotype and aesthetic, *Rookie*'s embrace of the diaristic form has overtly political and empowering implications. Author Kate Zambreno writes of the diary: “This is often the mode that allows her to come to writing—perhaps this is why it's so widely derided as not literary or seen as raw material. Yet the diary is part of the girl's process—a way to do the work. And of course now we write our diaries in public, for all to see.” Zambreno's 2012 book *Heroines* mixed literary criticism and memoir, drawing largely from her blog *Frances Farmer is My Sister*. For Zambreno, the move to the Internet allows an intensely private form to become simultaneously public, the two extremes merging in online writing.

While Zambreno embodies an *écriture féminine* in more shadowy corners of the Internet and the small-press world, *Rookie* has emerged into the mainstream, headed straight for the American consciousness. As Cixous warns, “[Women] shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem.” By preening itself for this audience, some of the chaotic vomiting and destruction found in texts by Zambreno and her colleagues must be forgone in *Rookie*. But what of the change it can elicit from the inside? *Rookie* has already shown that it can reach a wide audience, legitimizing its subjects and its form of writing by making them appear part of normative society.

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To quote Zambreno, “Maybe the girl seeks revenge by wedging herself into the larger cultural conversation.”

Black feminists of the '70s and '80s also found liberation in transgressing genre. In so doing they identified a crucial tension: Liberation from genre allows for a liberation of self. As bell hooks notes in her 1997 memoir *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*, “Women of color involved in feminist movement popularized memoirs that appropriated their style from pastiche and collage.” Among these are Audre Lorde’s 1982 ‘biomythobiography’ *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, which challenged the tradition of maintaining absolute truth in autobiography, and hooks’s earlier 1996 memoir *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, in which she employs both first- and third-person narration. While writers such as Zambreno, Sheila Heti (author of *How Should a Person Be?*), and others are currently enjoying a wave of fame for their elision of fiction and nonfiction, the origins of these experiments can be found in the works of more obscure women.

Similarly, there are other girls grasping for the heart of contemporary culture, albeit in much different (and less noted) ways than *Rookie*. Among those is *Rude Girl Mag*, a WordPress created by Bre Moore for women of color, partially in response to the homogeneity of *Rookie* and its exclusion of non-white perspectives. Geared toward women ages 18–25, the website is in many ways a *Rookie* corollary. Its tagline: “‘Cause we’re tired of being left out.”

Moore writes on the *Rude Girl Mag* Tumblr that many of *Rookie*’s articles “don’t consider how a [woman of color] reading the magazine would feel,” and push a default white perspective. Moore points out *Rookie*’s coverage of *Dora the Explorer*, Francesca Lia Block’s novel *Weetzie Bat*, and rapper Kreayshawn, “the queen of black culture appropriation,” as particularly problematic.

In a January 8 post on the *Rude Girl Mag* WordPress, Moore announced that she would be writing a letter to *Rookie* with input from *Rude Girl Mag* readers. The letter, she said, was borne out of several factors: the editors’ belief that *Rookie* “fails at intersectionality”; numerous messages they had received from readers about *Rookie*; and a January 3 *Rookie* article about the Harlem Renaissance.

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The article in question, “Secret Style Icon: Ladies of the Harlem Renaissance,” focuses on the styles of Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Fredi Washington, and Billie Holiday, praising them for embracing the beauty of black culture. The article gives a gloss on how to imitate the individual women’s styles, their accomplishments, and their contributions to black culture. Yet more complicated details are elided. The article is silent on Hurston’s incredibly impoverished last years of life, and on the subject of Larsen’s autobiographical novel *Passing* (in which the mixed-race protagonist passes as a white woman, marrying an unaware, racist white man). Instead we are treated to descriptions of cloche hats and cocktail dresses.

Though *Rookie* has featured articles on queer sex, a first-person account of living as a trans man, and an “open-ended conversation”-cum-article on cultural appropriation, publishing the occasional piece to consider these issues does little to alleviate the magazine’s heavily enforced normative perspective.

As bell hooks writes in her 1984 book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

Like [Betty] Friedan before them, white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases, although there has been a greater awareness of biases in recent years.... [I]t is only by analyzing racism and its function in capitalist society that a thorough understanding of class relationships can emerge.

Though written in 1984, hooks’s diagnosis is as relevant as ever. In a 2011 interview with *New York Magazine*, Gevinson speaks about universality in the lives of teenage girls, skirting details of class and race:

To me, what I’m writing for the site and how I’m overseeing it, a lot of it is really almost selfish because it’s really just what I like or what I think maybe doesn’t get said

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enough. And people are like, 'But is Tavi the average American girl or not?' But there are some things that are just universal amongst teenage girls, and I don't mean, like, slumber parties. I mean something like when you first start noticing other people noticing your body—that is a weird experience and is part of every culture somehow. I also don't think the average American teenage girl really exists, I just think that there are shared qualities and experiences.

While Gevinson aptly notes that no “average American teenage girl” exists, she does little to acknowledge the ways in which lived experiences differ, even within the limited “universalities” of women's lives such as the male gaze.

Gevinson has assumed her take on teenage girlhood to be at least somewhat universal. But *Rookie's* style is reflective of her own personal style—that of eclectic vintage designs and floral patterns, paeans to *Freaks and Geeks* and Joan Didion, and obscure playlists. While being driven by a single recognizable figure and her style has helped *Rookie* gain attention and reach readers, it has also cloaked the website in its own uniformity. *Rookie* has effectively generated a consistent and thorough brand. In doing so, it has found a consistent and self-generating consumer base in its target demographic.



Welcome to
the desert of
the Real.

Much of *Rookie's* style, that of floral prints and found images, brings to mind the ubiquitous Urban Outfitters. The two seem to attract the same demographic: young, upper-middle class, highly educated, and mostly white kids who are into haute-couture, found materials, and the ‘alternative.’ This affinity has not gone unnoticed: Last summer *Rookie* partnered with Urban Outfitters for the first-ever *Rookie* Road Trip. Also sponsored by The Ardorous, an art website

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curated by *Rookie* photographer Petra Collins, the Road Trip stopped in 16 cities around the country, hosting parties for *Rookie* readers to convene, discuss, and praise.

I want puce
gloves!



Soon after, *Rookie* was plastered all over Urban Outfitters's website, with a "Rookie Road Trip Essentials" list of UO products pop-up, as well as an interview with Gevinson published in November (accompanied by a demure link to "Shop Tavi's Wish List"). *Rookie* merited 12 mentions on the UO blog between June and November of last year, and the *Rookie Yearbook* featured a full-page color ad for Urban Outfitters—the volume's only advertisement.

Noting the trajectory of Gevinson's career—from fashion blogger to feminist writer—*Rookie* has employed a particular style of fashion and aesthetics in creating a commonality among its readers. The publication has aligned with an aesthetic to imply an interest, or intended interest, in specific cultural texts, objects, and figures. *Rookie* has continued the trend, propagated in large part by Urban Outfitters, of associating cultural taste with taste in clothing. In so doing it has continued a strand of feminism entrenched in capitalism, finding liberation in purchasing power. This willing adherence to established capitalist strongholds shows a weakness in *Rookie*'s program, an unthinking embrace of the elements which have landed us here in the first place.

Despite *Rookie*'s dependence on capitalist structures to perpetuate and expand itself, is its overall goal worth it? Is the website's partnership with Urban Outfitters indicative of its attempts to revise the system from the inside, or merely a sign that *Rookie* is only a new way to train the next generation of consumers entrenched in the dogma of cultural capital?

In the *New York Magazine* interview, Gevinson says, "I think it's important to know that as a teenager, especially a teenage girl, so many people want your money, and that's also often dependent on telling you that you need to improve yourself with all these products. It's good to have that awareness — there's some of that to *Rookie*, but re-

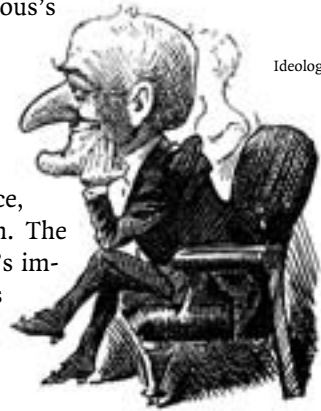
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ally more in spirit than straight-up preaching media literacy.” However, maybe “straight-up preaching media literacy,” among other topics, is needed in *Rookie*. As a potential feminist resource for many young girls, to what extent is *Rookie* doing its readers a disservice by dancing around and hinting at points of women’s oppression? Rather than regarding itself as obliquely feminist, perhaps *Rookie* should embrace the word and the examinations that come with it.

Gevinson’s position is one of privilege, in which a 15-year-old white girl living in Oak Park was able to legitimize a feminist teenage magazine venture because of the fame she attained by blogging about her vintage finds and posting videos of herself singing to Taylor Swift. While Gevinson has acknowledged the vast help she has received from powerful adults and her own exemplary experience as a preteen fashion prodigy, she understates the case: *Rookie Mag* is solely the product of these circumstances. Gevinson’s story is certainly one of success, and her intense work ethic and brilliance should be praised. But what does Gevinson’s situation and success mean for future generations of women writers and editors, and what model, if any, can be gleaned from her path? In Cixous’s words, “Anticipation is imperative.”

While *Rookie* is certainly a step forward in many respects, its practices are far from perfect. However, it should be remembered that revolutions often begin without nuance, theory, or definition, but merely by action. The first step in a movement is just that. *Rookie*’s imperfections should act as a call to others to fill the gaps and amend the mistakes Gevinson has made.

Rookie does have the power—at least in theory—of being revolutionary. Teenage girls are constantly prattled on about, but there are only so many venues for their voices outside of Facebook, diaries, and ‘teen magazines.’ In the most obvious sense, *Rookie* provides teenage girls with something they don’t get elsewhere: smart writing on interesting subjects and a creation engineered by their peers. However, as hooks noted, feminism will



Ideologue.

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never succeed without an awareness and acknowledgement of race and class. If *Rookie* can't do these things, what can it do?

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