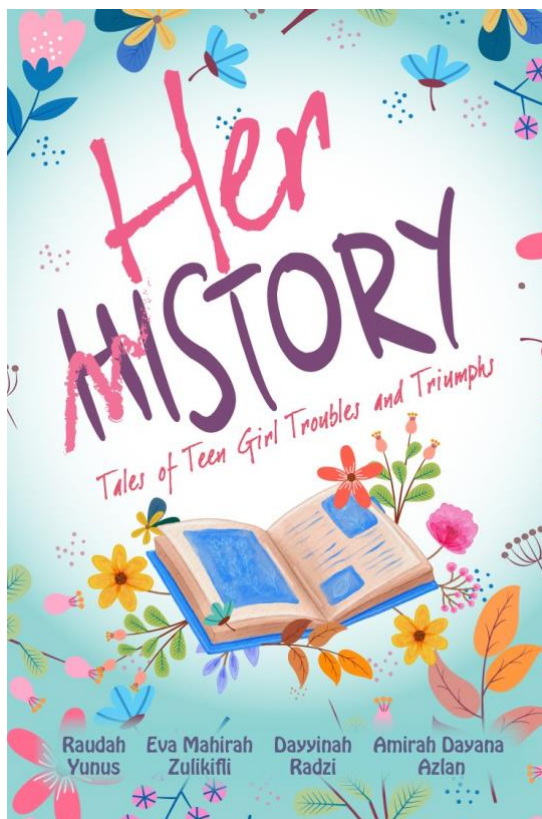


Yunus, Raudah et al. *HerSTORY: Tales of Teen Girl Troubles and Triumphs*. Kuala Lumpur: MPH Publishing, 2020. 90 pp. ISBN 967-415-548-1.



In her book, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019), Caroline Criado Perez argues that “most of recorded human history is one big data gap.... [T]he lives of men have been taken to represent those of humans overall” (xi). This deeply entrenched and pervasive representation of the experiences of all humankind in the male default (as ‘history’) has led to an effort to promote the term ‘herstory’ as a counter-narrative. This anthology of twelve short stories under review draws inspiration from this counter-narrative to create a space to highlight the experiences of teenage girls in Malaysia, whose stories are often perceived as trivial, misrepresented or are rarely spoken about openly.

In Eva Mahirah’s story titled “Of Cats and Pads,” the narrator explains her feelings and difficulties whenever she has her monthly cycle. The story, which is told from the point-of-view of a fourteen-year-old girl, not only highlights the

challenges girls face during the menstrual cycle, but it also helps to foreground the continued tacit taboo about menstruation, especially in Malaysia. Given the recent spotlight on period poverty in the country, this story is timely. Despite being a process that is natural to the female body, menstruation is still shrouded in much embarrassment and, in some cases, superstition. Within the frame of the narrator's story dealing with her own discomfort with menstrual blood, she is reminded of the often-solitary experience that comes with it; and with that in mind, she helps a fellow student who goes through her first monthly sickness. This story helps highlight the isolation one can experience when dealing with the physical, emotional and psychological complexities of menstruation and how these two girls establish a friendship from this taboo experience.

Stories in the anthology also deal with themes of education and ambition – two things that are important subject matters concerning young girls today. In Amirah Azlan's "The Road Less Travelled," the narrator is agonised by thoughts of performing poorly in her SPM results and the failure of not being able to emulate her sister's success. This anxiety is made worse by the pressure her family puts on her to succeed. However, she soon realises that her happiness and solace can be found not in her exam results, but in her love for art. This story places emphasis on the fact that there is no single definition and path to success and that being different is something positive even when conventional wisdom dictates otherwise. It also reveals the toxic and destructive nature of the Malaysian obsession that regards obtaining many 'As' as the sole indicator of students' educational excellence.

Raudah Yunus' "The Vendor" continues this focus on education by narrating a young girl's conversation with a street vendor about school and education. This story reveals the narrator's own simplistic view of the world and of her own privilege. At the beginning of the story, Tasha sees the vendor as someone who lacks education and that the latter's current predicament is born from this deficiency. As she contemplates on the street vendor's predicament, her thoughts betray a sense of superiority she feels towards the other. This perspective points to the common neoliberal misconception that people who are not successful in life are the architects of their own failure and this short story helps to counter this widely-accepted yet flawed logic.

Dayyinah Radzi's "The Bright Sun" further highlights the anthology's focus on education when the narrator, Lakshana, had to quit school because her family could not afford having her enrolled. Lakshana's unhappiness of not being able to go to school is further compounded by the fact that her younger siblings who are still in school do not pay much attention to their own education. It is only with the financial help of an aunt who went to the United States, that Lakshana's family is able to help her return to school.

A number of other stories, namely Dayyinah Radzi's "First" and Raudah Yunus' "Two Faces" foreground the need to be more careful and better informed

when it comes to the dangers of social media and digital communication technology. In a world where social media and technology are a big part of youth culture, both stories help communicate how something that is quite commonplace in our lives can also bring us bodily, physiological and mental harm.

In “First,” Soraya’s obsession with her smartphone and social media leads her to form a friendship with a stranger online. However, this newfound friendship turns out to be sinister – a complete antithesis of how it is projected online. With the help of her friends, Soraya escapes a highly dangerous situation. “Two Faces” deals with the projection and deception that come with social media presence. The protagonist of the story is enamoured and envious of the lifestyle of a popular girl in school who often posts pictures and updates about her life to her online following. It is later revealed that everything that is posted online is carefully curated by the girl for online followers, and that to hide the emptiness and sadness that plagues her life. These two stories underscore the importance of engaging with social media and technology in a responsible way and to always keep in mind that not everything one sees or interacts with online is as it is portrayed to be real.

However, despite dealing with diverse themes, the stories are only written by four writers. From a publishing perspective, this may be a missed opportunity as the anthology might have benefitted from various contributions by more authors. Another gap lies in the fact that the anthology does not include stories written by teenage girls themselves. One might argue that, despite not being written by teenagers, these stories present very relevant issues. However, while this is true of the stories, it would have been an added bonus to create a space to promote young teenage writers who can contribute their thoughts on these issues. It would have also been helpful if a preface or introduction was added to explain the process of planning and writing the stories in the anthology. When it comes to the quality of writing, for the most part, the stories are well-developed and are written in a clear and engaging style.

Despite these concerns, *HerSTORY* is a short but satisfying read and will be of great interest to teenage girls who are experiencing similar issues. Reminiscent of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, which is popular for its inspiring and motivating tales, readers may find that these stories echo their own challenges and concerns. Through these twelve stories, female readers will understand that they are not alone in their struggles and that their worries and anxieties are all valid concerns in a fast-paced and unrelenting world.

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Work Cited

Perez, Caroline Criado. *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. Vintage, 2019.