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The Feminist Practices to Fight Sexual Violence: The Case of Marin in  
Bushnell and Cotugno's *Rules for Being a Girl*

<sup>1</sup>Jennifer Ivane Simen, <sup>2</sup>Angelika Riyandari, and <sup>3</sup>Heny Hartono

<sup>1,2,3</sup>English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, Soegijapranata Catholic University, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup>ivanejennifer02@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>a.riyandari@unika.ac.id, <sup>3</sup>heny@unika.ac.id

# The Feminist Practices to Fight Sexual Violence: The Case of Marin in Bushnell and Cotugno's *Rules for Being a Girl*

<sup>1</sup>Jennifer Ivane Simen, <sup>2</sup>Angelika Riyandari, and <sup>3</sup>Heny Hartono

<sup>1</sup>ivanejennifer02@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>a.riyandari@unika.ac.id, <sup>3</sup>heny@unika.ac.id

<sup>1,2,3</sup>English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, Soegijapranata Catholic University, Indonesia

**Abstract:** This article explores the feminist practices of fighting against sexual violence conducted by Marin, the main character in Bushnell and Cotugno's novel, *Rules for Being a Girl*. The writers used Hall's (2015), Mulugeta's (2017), and Hagag & Hamed's (2012) theories to conduct the analysis and interpretation of the perpetrator's sexual violence and Marin's actions to fight against sexual violence. The results show that Marin's teacher, Mr. Bex, committed sexual violence in the form of touching Marin's cheek, kissing her lips, and intending to touch Marin's chest. To fight against the sexual violence, Marin reports the case to school administrators, writes in the school newspaper, and starts a feminist book club. Marin's attempts are similar to the practices done by the feminists to confront sexual violence. Her attempts intend to inspire sexual violence victims to speak up and put a fight. As a result, Marin's fellow students give their testimony and have Mr. Bex kicked out of school. Through her actions and courage, Marin successfully represents herself as a feminist.

**Key words:** sexual violence, fight, feminist, student, women

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini meneliti praktik feminis dalam melawan kekerasan seksual yang dilakukan oleh Marin, tokoh utama dalam novel Bushnell dan Cotugno, *Rules for Being a Girl*. Penulis menggunakan teori Hall (2015), Mulugeta (2017), dan Hagag & Hamed (2012) untuk melakukan analisa dan interpretasi terhadap kekerasan seksual yang dilakukan pelaku dan tindakan Marin dalam melawan kekerasan seksual. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa guru Marin, Mr. Bex, melakukan kekerasan seksual berupa menyentuh pipi, mencium bibir, dan berniat menyentuh dada Marin. Sebagai bentuk perlawanan, Marin melaporkan kasus tersebut kepada pengelola sekolah, menulis di koran sekolah, dan memulai klub buku feminis. Upaya Marin serupa dengan praktik yang dilakukan kaum feminis untuk menghadapi kekerasan seksual. Upayanya bertujuan untuk menginspirasi korban kekerasan seksual untuk bersuara dan melakukan perlawanan. Alhasil, teman-teman Marin memberikan kesaksian mereka dan membuat Mr. Bex dikeluarkan dari sekolah. Melalui tindakan dan keberaniannya, Marin berhasil menampilkan dirinya sebagai seorang feminis.

**Kata kunci:** kekerasan seksual, perjuangan, feminis, siswa, perempuan

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence happens when an individual sexually touches someone else without consent, regardless of their gender, position, or situation (Hadi, 2017). Based on the definition, anyone has the potential to be a perpetrator or victim of sexual violence. Additionally, sexual violence can happen in any setting, including the educational setting, where teachers harass their students because they know that the student may find it difficult to reject forms of sexual violence out of fear of consequences, like receiving low scores or even failing grades (Parkes et al., 2023).

Sexual violence in an educational setting, like in a school, is experienced by Marin, the main character in the novel *Rules for Being a Girl*. Marin is subjected to sexual violence by her teacher, Mr. Beckett. She was so shocked by her teacher's sexual advance that she was uncertain whether she experienced sexual violence or she just misunderstand the situation. When she finally realizes that her teacher sexually violated her, Marin feels compelled to report everything that happened to the school authorities. However, convincing the school authorities that she really experiences sexual violence is not easy. Her school headmaster, for example, initially did not believe her story and did nothing to help her. In the process, she learns that she is not the only victim, since some of the girls at the school she attends are also victims of sexual violence. What she learns in the process motivates Marin to work harder toward bringing the girls' victims to justice and proper protection.

The challenges of convincing the authorities and others around the victims of sexual violence have become the concern of feminists. Initiating movements to fight sexual violence against women, feminists encourage women to unite and bring the issue of sexual violence to the government's attention (Hall, 2015). The feminists also gather societal support through communities, and write books about the sexual violence they experience. Those feminist movements aim to increase protection and fight for justice for victims of sexual violence, especially women. As a result of this movement, cases of sexual violence are now regarded as criminal cases that can be legally processed, rather than as individual situations that can be settled peacefully.

In this article, the writers discuss the sexual violence that happened to Marin based on Mulugeta's (2017) and Hagag & Hamed's (2012) theories. Further, the writers use the theory proposed by Hall (2015) to analyze the feminist practices in Marin's fight against the sexual violence she experienced.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Sexual Violence

The term sexual violence covers various sexual actions, words, and tones carried out either intentionally or unintentionally without the consent of the person concerned (Abrahams et al., 2014). This act of violence can occur between people who know each other or strangers, which is regarded as illegal and may be dealt with lawfully. Sexual violence can refer to different kinds of acts, such as caressing, kissing, and intending to perform sexual acts on someone else. These acts usually occur suddenly and involve both the victim and perpetrator in an unexpected situation.

While both men and women can be the victims of sexual violence, women are recorded to experience a higher incidence of sexual violence due to social norms regarding gender and power (Michau et al., 2015). Women are more likely than men to suffer sexual violence that is serious, physically upsetting, and intimidating (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016). The victims of sexual violence may deal with the physical effects of sexual violence, such as bleeding or internal organ damage. They may have to cope with psychological effects like deep trauma and stress. In addition, they can suffer from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Sexual violence includes sexual assault and harassment. Sexual assault involves verbal or physical coercion (McDermott et al., 2015). Caressing, kissing, vaginal, oral, and anal penetration are considered forms of sexual assault when the victims are coerced into performing those acts. Meanwhile, the term sexual harassment describes sexual behaviors that cause harm to the targets. Particularly in the United States, sexual harassment is understood as unintentional sexual behaviors that interfere with studying or school-related activities (Joseph, 2015, p.129). In short, the use of sexual language—either private or public, and pressure to engage in sexual actions against one's will—either physical or verbal—are considered sexual assault. Meanwhile, any act that causes emotional or physical distress to a person by degrading, demeaning, or harming their body is considered sexual harassment.

With regard to sexual assault, the American administration and the press are paying attention to allegations of sexual assault. As a result, President Obama took the initiative to start the *It's on Us* project in 2014 (McDermott et al., 2015). The initiative aims to increase public awareness of sexual assault using social networking sites as well as to carry out and produce research on sexual assault prevention. On the sexual harassment, some nations began to address sexual harassment accusations in 2011. Pakistan is one such nation (Joseph, 2015). Pakistan is going to enforce rules preserving women employed by higher learning institutions across the country to take decisive action against those who engage in sexual harassment.

Research on sexual violence in educational settings has been done by scholars. One of the studies provided data driven by an assessment of the prevalence of sexual violence carried out on Aman High School students in Ethiopia (Mulugeta et al., 2017). The results of this assessment show that 41.5% of students experienced sexual violence. From the total percentage, 5.1% of sexual violence takes the form of touching sensitive body parts and 0.9% of unwanted kissing (Mulugeta et al., 2017). More specific results are displayed in the table below:

**Table 1:**  
**Form of sexual violence in Aman High School**

Variable	Category	Percentage
Experienced Sexual Violence	Yes	41.5%
Form of Sexual Violence	Touching Sensitive Body Parts	5.1%
	Unwanted Kissing	0.9%

Another study was done by Hagag & Hamed (2012). This research used 450 undergraduate students at Sohag University, Egypt. This number consisted of 217 men and 233 women aged over 18 years as the research sample. This research was conducted using a questionnaire consisting of several questions related to the acts of sexual abuse, as presented in the table below:

**Table 2:**  
**Acts of sexual abuse**

Acts of Sexual Abuse	Men (217)	Women (233)
Tried to Kiss or Hug without Consent	8.8%	32.2%
Kissed other Body Parts (Not only Face)	2.30%	12.9%
Forced the Victim to Sit on the Perpetrator's Lap	1.38%	16.3%

The results show that 8.8% of men and 32.2% of women experienced acts of sexual violence in the form of trying to kiss or hug without consent. 2.30% men and 12.9% women participant experienced kissed other body parts. Apart from that, this action can become the first step for the perpetrator to carry out further actions of sexual violence, such as forced the victim to sit on the perpetrator's lap, as experienced by 1.38% of men and 16.3% of women at Sohag University (Hagag & Hamed, 2012). Based on both researches, it can be concluded that touching body parts and kissing without consent are considered forms of sexual violence that happen in an educational setting.

### **B. Feminist Practices to Fight Against Sexual Violence**

Feminist practices to fight against sexual violence were first undertaken in the United States in the mid-1970s (Hall, 2015). Women collaborate to raise awareness about incidences of violence based on gender so that the authorities in a nation can improve the security of women who are victims of this violence. In the aftermath of this action, the government published a statement saying that gender-based violence against women is no longer regarded as an individual issue that needs to be settled privately but can be prosecuted criminally.

Furthermore, feminists also gather support from society, called grassroots communities, to improve the protection of women (Hall, 2015). The purpose of this group is to encourage women who are victims of gender-based violence to speak out about their experiences. In this sense, Canada created shelter facilities for violence prevention initiatives in the 1980s.

One more initiative that feminists have launched to overcome sexual violence is finding ways to speak out about incidences of violence against women by writing books about it (Hall, 2015). One of those books about women is *Bad Feminist*, written by Roxane Gay, a cultural critic (Gay, 2014). She argues that someone should be an imperfect feminist rather than not become a feminist at all. The complexity and dynamic nature of feminism are the causes of this. When it comes to defending women's rights, feminists are crucial.

The feminist movement in America is explored in the book *Bad Feminist* (2014). Her book expresses her belief in equal opportunity for men and women. This opportunity can take the form of equal pay for equal labor performed, independence in some professions, including health care, and reciprocal support for women's freedoms and interests in society. She also expresses that women should strive for the position of the feminists they envision if they cannot locate a well-known feminist role model (Gay, 2014). Her statement aims for women to know that they can begin feminism on their own if they are unable to discover a feminist who will stand up for them.

To summarize, feminists engage in three different practices to fight against sexual violence. First, women unite together to report gender-based violence incidences. Second, feminists create grassroots communities so the victims can obtain the encouragement they need to come forward. Third, feminists attempt to raise awareness of sexual violence women suffer through writing. The objective behind all of these initiatives is to provide the causalities with appropriate protection and justice.

## METHOD

The writers used a literary work entitled *Rules for Being a Girl* as the main source for this research. To collect the data needed in this article, the writers used qualitative methods by analyzing various events experienced by Marin in the novel. The writers used a qualitative method to examine the main character's incidents. There are no statistical data calculations involved in this procedure. This method provides greater comprehension of the discussion topic through data collection and analysis. Data collection can be done by taking notes, reading the necessary transcripts, conducting interviews, and field observations with the participants concerned. Meanwhile, several aspects need to be considered when conducting data analysis, such as studying the background of the problem philosophically, focusing on description and interpretation, and looking for relevant sources for consideration (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

The writers used the theory of the feminist practices in fighting against sexual violence (Hall, 2015) to carry out Marin's fight against sexual violence. To analyze the violence that happened to Marin, the writers used Mulugeta's (2017) and Hagag & Hamed's (2012) theories. First, the writers used Mulugeta's theory, which discusses sexual violence in the form of touching body parts and kissing without consent, to analyze the incident when Mr. Bex touched Marin's cheek and kissed her lips. Next, the writers analyzed Mr. Bex's action at the point he intends to touch Marin's chest using Hagag and & Hamed's theory, which discusses a similar case. Books and journal articles relevant to the topic discussed are used to strengthen the statements made by the writers in this article.

The literary work *Rules for Being a Girl* serves as the primary source. This novel is written by Candace Bushnell and Katie Cotugno. It is in English and was released by HarperCollins Publishers in the United States in 2020. The novel is 293 pages long and divided into 37 chapters, with the epilogue as an additional chapter. The narrative in this novel is told from Marin's perspective, from the third person point of view.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The topic of sexual violence is fascinating to talk about because it frequently affects students, particularly girls. One of the leading causes of sexual violence is the patriarchal societal structure in which men dominate women when it comes to sexuality or power (Christ, 2016). Unfortunately, many victims of sexual violence are silent because of their dread of the offender. Nonetheless, this book exposes Marin's experience with sexual violence and her feminist-like fight against it.

## A. Sexual Violence Happened to Marin

The novel shows sexual violence happening to Marin, which is perpetrated by Mr. Beckett (Mr. Bex), her teacher. Mr. Bex touches her cheek, kisses her lips, and almost touches her chest. All of Mr. Bex's actions are considered sexual violence because they are done without Marin's consent. Apart from that, Mr. Bex is an adult and a teacher with more power than Marin, a teenager and a student. Each of Mr. Bex's acts of sexual violence is shown below.

### 1. Touching Marin's Cheek

Touching Marin's cheek is one of the forms of sexual violence Mr. Bex does to Marin. In the novel it was written: "He reaches out and pushes a loose strand of hair away from my face. That's when Bex puts his free hand on my cheek" (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.56). It happens not long after she steps into Mr. Bex's flat. Marin does not expect that her teacher will treat her like that so she feels uncomfortable with the situation. However, at the time of the incident, Marin does not reject the sexual advance because it happens suddenly and unexpectedly. Marin's confusion and uncertainty can be seen in the quotation that follows next, "I don't have time to register any of it though, because that's when Bex puts his free hand on my cheek, ducks his head, and kisses me." (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.56)

Based on the sentences above, the writers can conclude that Mr. Bex's action against Marin can be categorized as sexual violence because he carries out this action without her consent. The sexual violence that happens to Marin is similar to Mulugeta's assessment of sexual violence against female students in Aman High School, Ethiopia in which one of the acts of violence often experienced by the students is touching body parts (Mulugeta et al., 2017).

### 2. Kissing Marin's Lips

Kissing Marin's lips is the second sexual violence committed by Mr. Bex against Marin. The incident occurs when Mr. Bex kisses Marin right after he brushes strands of hair from her face and touches her cheek. This action is also done abruptly, so Marin does not have time to fight back or refuse. The following is Marin's reaction right after Mr. Bex touches her cheek and kisses her lips, "My brain shorts out for a second, lights flickering during a thunderstorm. It's like his mouth is pressed to someone else's, not mine. I stand there frozen" (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.56). The incident of Mr. Bex kissing Marin's lips is similar to his action when he touches Marin's cheek. This action is categorized as sexual violence because it is carried out without Marin's permission. Marin's experience is not uncommon because, according to Mulugeta et al. (2017), sexual violence in the form of unwanted kisses is often found among female students.

### 3. Intent to Touch Marin's Chest

The act of sexual violence committed by Mr. Bex towards Marin does not stop at touching her cheeks and kissing her lips. After carrying out both actions without permission, Mr. Bex intends to touch her chest. Here is the description of Mr. Bex's action, "I feel his hand move down from my face toward my chest. Suddenly every panic response in my body comes screaming to life" (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.56).

Marin realizes Mr. Bex's bad intentions and quickly puts up a fight. She pushes and runs away from him, immediately leaving his house to go home. Marin's resistance succeeded in

preventing her becoming the victims of sexual violence that Mr. Bex intends to commit for the third time. The following is the quotation.

“Um,” I yelp, pulling away and taking an instinctive step backward. My neck feels like it’s on fire.”

“Um,” I say again, taking another step toward the doorway. “I should probably go.”

“I thunder down the narrow stairs and hoof it all the way home, even though it’s freezing—my hands jammed in my pockets and a cold wind slicing through my coat.” (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, pp. 56-57)

Mr. Bex's action messes up Marin's feelings. She is still in shock and cannot believe that her teacher, who initially only offered to take her home and return her book, will commit acts of sexual violence against her.

“After all, it’s not like some creepy perv forced himself on me in a dark, deserted alley. It’s Bex.”

“It’s Bex.”

“And he *kissed* me.”

“I’m still clutching my phone like a weapon when suddenly it buzzes in my hand, startling me so badly I drop it altogether, watching it skitter across the carpet like it’s got a mind of its own (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, pp.58-59)

From the analysis that has been done, the writers can conclude that the act of sexual violence committed by Mr. Bex towards Marin is done in stages. The gentle touch on the cheek is the first step, which is followed by kisses and the attempt to touch on the chest. Hagag & Hamed (2012) in their study on the students in Egypt mentions that the gentle touch of body parts that may lead to more harmful sexual acts is often found in the students’ responses.

## **B. Feminist Practices of Marin to Fight Against Sexual Violence**

After experiencing sexual violence at the hands of Mr. Bex, Marin resolves to fight back. As a young woman, Marin makes multiple attempts to confront sexual abuse in her school. Interestingly, her attempts to end sexual violence at her school are comparable to those of feminist practices to fight against sexual violence. The feminist practices, which also aim to end gender-based violence, consist of reporting to authorities, writing about their concerns, and building grassroots communities (Hall, 2015). In Marin’s case, she reports to the school administrator, writes essays for the school newspaper, and starts a feminist book club.

### **1. Reporting to School Administrator**

After Mr. Bex sexually violates her, Marin goes to meet Mr. DioGuardi, the school headmaster, for help. Marin’s option to report to the school administrator, her headmaster, bears similarities to the feminist practice to fight against sexual violence that Hall (2015) mentioned, which is reporting to the authorities. By disclosing Mr. Bex’s unwanted sexual advance toward her, Marin expects to enable the school to take severe measures against him and prevent others from experiencing the same problem. However, like many other sexual violence victims, Marin’s report is questioned.



Marin initially schedules a meeting with Mr. DioGuardi to discuss the circumstances when Mr. Bex brings her to his house under the pretext of returning her novel and then unexpectedly kisses her.

“Marin, what can I do for you?”

“I muster a smile, cheerful, and nonthreatening. It’s something I’ve been thinking about lately, I guess.”

“Now. What’s on your mind?”

“It’s about Mr. Beckett,” I admit.

“Oh? What about him?”

“He kissed me.” (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, pp.158-159)

However, the school headmaster responds, stating that he cannot immediately take action against Mr. Bex. He says, “The disciplinary committee found no conclusive evidence of wrongdoing, so he’ll be returning to his classes for the remainder of the year” (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.176).

Another reaction from Mr. DioGuardi to Marin’s testimony indicates that he does not fully believe her statement and thinks it is a misunderstanding.

“Look,” he says, “it is possible you misinterpreted what was happening? With Mr. Beckett, I mean? He’s one of our younger faculty members, and I see so many girls hanging around his classroom. It would be perfectly understandable if you somehow misunderstood-” (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, pp. 176-177)

The headmaster’s reactions to Marin’s report are common reactions toward victims’ reports of sexual violence. According to Holland and Cortina (2017), when victims of sexual violence speak out about what they experience, others often do not immediately believe them, so they choose to remain silent.

## 2. Writing Essays in the School Newspaper

Marin's next attempt to fight against sexual violence is to write a couple of essays in the school newspaper to get people's attention about Mr. Bex. Marin's writing essays are once again likened to the feminist practices of writing about their concerns as a way to call attention to instances of sexual violence (Hall, 2015). *Rules for Being a Girl* is the title of Marin’s first essay. She highlights in this essay that women should speak up about violence and be whatever they want to be. She writes,

“Time went on, and GIRLS CAN DO ANYTHING! So speak up! A boy is bothering you at school? Stand up for yourself! A boy is bothering you at school? He’s just trying to get your attention.”

“You can do anything! You can do everything! You can be whatever you want to be!” (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, pp.80-81)

Marin's essay receives various reactions from many people. One of them is from Chloe, her best friend. After learning about Marin's incident, Chloe tells her that Mr. Bex also makes sexual advances to her.

"It started in October, she tells me he took her to his apartment, in the Victorian house with the built-in book-shelves on either side of the fireplace. He wanted to lend her a book. He told her she had an old soul." (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.267)

Their shared experiences prompt the two of them to write an essay together entitled *Letter from the Editors: The Whole Truth*, "We write this letter today in the hope that any other student who has had a similar encounter will feel safe and supported should they choose to come forward" (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.273).

Along with exposing Mr. Bex's crime, Marin and Chloe want to use their essay as a support system to encourage other female students who go through similar experiences to come forward and provide their testimony.

"Mr. Beckett has been removed from the faculty."

For a second I just blink at him dumbly. That is... not what I was expecting him to say.

"Really?"

"Other students have already come forward. More of a problem with Mr. Beckett than we realized." (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.283)

The two essays successfully give other female students the confidence to share about the sexual violence Mr. Bex inflicts on them.

### 3. Starting a Feminist Book Club

Marin's endeavor, which shares similarities with feminist practices to fight against sexual violence, is to start a feminist book club. By starting the book club, Marin creates a community similar to the grassroots community of feminists to help women who are victims of gender-based violence (Hall, 2015). Basically, the communities cooperate to raise awareness of violence against women, so that appropriate protection can be given by the government (Hall, 2015).

Marin starts the book club with the realization that it is difficult to expose the sexual abuse that Mr. Bex has perpetrated. Thus, for her confession to be accepted as solid proof and for the school to punish Mr. Bex, Marin needs the backing of those close to her. Marin attempts to make one last effort by starting a feminist book club. Through this club, Marin hopes to unite like-minded individuals who will stand by her in her efforts to uncover Mr. Bex's sexual violence cases. Marin's hope comes true when she gets to know a young guy named Gray Kendall who tells her that he favors her taking on Mr. Bex. Gray's comment shows his solidarity for Marin.

"I thought it was ballsy how you fought with Mr. Beckett though. So, I came to support. Or like—" He frowns. "I guess ballsy isn't the right word, huh?"

“*Brave* is what I meant.”

“It’s cool,” Gray says. “I get it.” (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.104)

Gray’s participation and the feminist book club members’ contribution support Marin in her conflicts with Mr. Bex. They persuade and encourage Marin to come forward with incidents of sexual advances made by Mr. Bex. The proof can be seen in Marin’s statement to Chloe, “I wasn’t by myself. I promise her thinking of my parents and the book club” (Bushnell & Cotugno, 2020, p.269). The book club proves the effectiveness of establishing a community for the victims of sexual violence. By working in groups, the victims can support each other and make their voices heard.

## CONCLUSION

The novel *Rules for Being a Girl* explores sexual violence that happens in educational settings such as schools. The novel shows Mr. Bex, Marin’s teacher, perpetrating sexual violence against Marin. Mr. Bex commits three forms of sexual violence: touching Marin’s cheek, kissing Marin’s lips, and intending to touch Marin’s chest. For that reason, Marin is determined to speak up. As Marin tries to speak up, she discovers that a few girls at her school have also been through the same situation.

In her attempts to fight against sexual violence, Marin engages in feminist practices. The initiatives include reporting to school administrators, writing essays in the school newspaper, and starting a feminist book club. She attempts to address sexual violence like that of feminist practices to confront gender-based violence, which is done by reporting to the authorities, gathering support from the so-called grassroots community, and writing books (Hall, 2015).

Marin’s attempts to fight the sexual violence experienced by the students meet with many challenges. However, her actions inspire fellow students to speak up until the school recognizes the issue as an important one that needs to be addressed immediately by removing Mr. Bex from the school. Mr. Bex’s discharge from the school can reduce the likelihood that similar incidents will continue to occur. In this sense, the offender faces consequences, and the victims are protected. For this reason, it can be said that Marin, as a high school student, has successfully represented herself as a feminist through her various attempts.

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## APPENDICES:

### *Rules for Being a Girl* summary

Marin has always been good at navigating these unspoken guidelines. Her future seems bright—and her young, charismatic English teacher, Mr. Beckett is always quick to admire her writing and talk books with her. But when “Bex” takes things too far and comes on to Marin, she’s shocked and horrified. Was it somehow her fault? When Marin works up the courage to tell the school administration what happened, no one believes her. And now, Bex has an ax to grind. But Marin isn’t about to back down. She uses the school newspaper to fight back, and she starts a feminist book club at school. And she finds allies—and even romance—in the most unexpected people, like Gray Kendall, who she’d always dismissed as just another lacrosse bro. As things heat up at school and in her personal life, Marin must figure out how to take back the power and write her own rules.