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### Rookie Mag: Complicating the Teenage Girl's Image

In 2011, then 15-year-old Tavi Gevinson founded *Rookie Mag* as a resource for young women to find tailored content about feminism, style, and the trials of growing up. Content ranges from photo journals and comics, to poetry, diaries, and op-eds. *Rookie* has developed a deep relationship with its readers, often hiring staff writers who are teenage girls themselves, and publishing reader-submitted original content. In a traditional media landscape that often sees teenage girls as simple, frivolous, and dramatic, *Rookie* uplifts voices that complicate that image. Their content covers an array of experiences, but they all demand to be thought of in a nuanced way, and respected in the world at large. *Rookie* sees the viewpoint of adolescent girls as unique and often underestimated, and thus aims to be a platform for exploring their untapped inner dealings and ways of processing the world.

*Rookie* writers use personal anecdotes to traverse the shifting tide of identity, and the emotional complexities that bubble up when “finding yourself.” In a piece reflecting on her use of diaries throughout her life, Alia Wilhelm writes, “May 10, 2017: I am in the throes of a breakup, and I find myself at a crossroads” (Wilhelm). The writing style is intensely personal, rooted in the present, and almost feels like a diary entry itself. Not only is this an eye-catching opener, it immediately pulls the reader into her emotional journey. We are inclined to trust her because she has already revealed a vulnerability. She continues to reflect, “The second I feel something, I analyze it, rationalize it, twist it around into words that make sense, write it down in my diary, create art about it so I can process it.” (Wilhelm). The close relationship with her audience that Wilhelm develops in

the opening sentences finds its payoff in moments like these, where she picks apart her habits, and forces us to realize their complex emotional significance. The piece's specificity also emboldens that connection to audience, so when readers see a reflection of an experience they've had, it makes it all the more special. Readers can find a place to relate that feels proprietary to them, finding universal parts of the human condition through a deeply personal reflection. This tactic is especially effective when speaking about growing up, a time when many feel that no one understands their experience, even if it's a universal feeling. Wilhelm also presents her love hate relationship with over-documenting while acknowledging that this article follows that very pattern of dealing with emotions. She isn't afraid to lean into her flaws, painting an almost hypocritical picture of herself. In *Rookie's* eyes, this hypocrisy is essential in understanding the adolescent point-of-view. In Stephanie Kuehnert's personal narrative of coming to terms with her "Smart Girl" label, she offers, "Trying to come up with an answer [to "who are you supposed to be?"] just made me sob harder. I didn't know. I'd never known. Weren't Smart Girls supposed to know???" (Kuehnert). As her journey of identity struggle comes to a head, the structure becomes more fragmented and informal. The sentences are short and simple, mimicking the rushed pace of an anxiety attack. Also, her use of the triple question mark not only emphasizes her crisis, but extends a hand to her audience, a generation that often presents their deepest conflicts in "text language." These tactics both aim to put the writer and audience at eye level with each other, using their language to put them in her own emotional boots. These approaches not only validate girls' own experiences, they also pay off when readers other than young women encounter this piece and find the sentiments stirring. Though the site is directed to a specific audience, these articles can also serve as a tool for others to use to complicate their view of another social group. This type of emotional examination is essential to a *Rookie* piece, a publication that insists that teenage girls' intricacy be understood.

*Rookie* aims to be a breeding ground for personal reflection, often exploring stories that share the ultimate goal of making oneself better suited for the world. Later in Wilhelm's reflection on journals, she concludes, "I used to think that these were ways of dealing with the pain, of letting it travel from the inside to the outside, that this was the essence of living and growing. Lately I've begun to think that I was wrong, and that writing actually contributed to the fact that I've lived my life in my head, not in my heart" (Wilhelm). Wilhelm's purpose in this article is to explore her shift in perception about a previously unquestioned ritual. In an almost formulaic way, she lays out her past beliefs, and substitutes them with a better-informed outlook. This willingness to grow, pivot, and change mindsets is especially relevant to adolescents, but remains universal for any human who wants to reflect, and make their lives more meaningful. Moments like this are essential to *Rookie's* identity, one that embraces the malleability of its readership. In Brianne Allen's reflection on encounters with racist classmates after the 2016 election, they reflect that "[The experience] has been paramount to my understanding of how any discrimination or bigoted behavior can be combatted in the school system—and that sometimes, it just can't be" (Allen). The whole article details Allen's battle with their school over students' use of racial slurs, and the battle ends with this takeaway. Phrases like "my understanding" underscore the personal growth mindset that *Rookie* writers often inhabit. This article also highlights another *Rookie* goal of making the teenage voice heard in the global conversation about social justice. After the 2016 election especially, they see it as valuable to hear the voices of the generation that will actually growing up during that administration. Allen's reflection takes a specific, personal instance and turns it into a way to frame the experience of racial injustice. Self-learned lessons like these are often intertwined in *Rookie* articles, encapsulating their mission to be a resource for navigating "growing up."

In order to validate their audience's power, and heighten their connection to the publication, some *Rookie* articles step through directly to their audience, calling them to action. Allen offers

something different, and perhaps more than Wilhelm and Kuehnert's pure self-reflection. They do not ask how to make themselves better suited for the world, but rather how to make the world better suited for them. After detailing their own personal experience, Allen steps back and writes, "As Trump takes office, what we can ask of ourselves as young people is to pay attention, to call our reps when the situation demands it, to donate what we can, to care unapologetically, and to support each other without limit or shame" (Allen). This direct rallying of the teenage population speaks to *Rookie*'s goal of uplifting a group that isn't thought to have much political influence in the world. The specification of the audience, "ourselves as young people" may feel like an alienation of other readership, but is necessary to the effectiveness of this tactic. Because the audience isn't often listened to in the political landscape, the specificity of this call to action makes it more meaningful. After reading Allen's personal experience with racism, this rallying cry forces us to examine how the world we live affects particular population. Still, non-teenage girls can still read this and feel impelled to action, through the ardency of the language. The other two articles attend to universality through personal narratives, while Allen accomplishes this by "breaking the fourth wall" between writer and audience. This tactic reveals *Rookie*'s character as a magazine. It is produced for and by a certain population, giving them the tools to recognize their own social significance, thus revealing to the world that they should be taken seriously.

Tavi Gevinson and the *Rookie* team bring forward stories that don't often find a home in traditional media. Stories about what it actually feels like to grow up, and what it means to be in the process of forming an identity and a personhood in 2017. The relationship they have cultivated with their readership allows them to constantly evolve as their audience does, creating an uncommon conversation between youth and the media they are consuming. Although their readership is niche, the essence of the human condition shines through all the pieces, so anyone who cares about self-reflection and finding their place in the world can have a meaningful reading experience.

## Works Cited

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