

## Body Awakening through Athletics: A Gender Analysis of Corporealities in *Breathe, Annie, Breathe*

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In the context of Young Adult Sports Fiction, Miranda Kenneally's *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* (2014) addresses some crucial problematics that her protagonist, Annie, experiences through her body changes as she enters the world of athletics and campus life. Structured as a coming-of-age novel, *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* depicts Annie's progressive acknowledgement of her body as she trains for a marathon so as to honor her recently deceased boyfriend. First characterized as a rather passive young woman with no awareness of her physical and emotional potential, Annie starts to become a mature adult with a burgeoning sense of self, able to understand her body, academic goals and sexual desires, ultimately leading her to recover her affectivity beyond her first love. As her training progresses, Annie focuses increasingly on her growing endurance and prowess rather than her weight loss. Thus, from a gender perspective, Kenneally's novel demystifies the weight-loss process as an intrinsically feminine one, aligning it with wellbeing rather than beauty, in contrast to previous young adult novels. This points to an evolution in the Young Adult Sports Fiction genre which should be addressed in order to evaluate the positive impact it may have on young female readers' canons of corporeal beauty.

Keywords: Young Adult Sports Fiction; contemporary North American fiction; female body; sexuality; empowerment; eating disorders

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### Atletismo y despertar corpóreo: análisis en perspectiva de género de la corporalidad en *Breathe, Annie, Breathe*

En el campo de la literatura juvenil deportiva, *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* (2014), de la autora estadounidense Miranda Kenneally, aborda la transición a la universidad de su protagonista,

Annie, quien experimenta importantes cambios vitales y corporales al comenzar la vida en el campus e introducirse en el atletismo. Siguiendo la estructura de una novela de iniciación, *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* se centra en el reconocimiento del cuerpo a través de una maratón para la que la protagonista se entrena con la intención de honrar a su pareja, recientemente fallecida. Inicialmente caracterizada como una joven pasiva y sin conciencia sobre su potencial físico y afectivo, Annie va evolucionando hacia la madurez adulta, al tiempo que descubre su cuerpo y deseos sexuales y centra sus aspiraciones académicas. Este proceso, al final, la llevará a recuperar un sentido de afectividad más allá de su primer amor. A medida que avanza en sus entrenamientos, Annie no concede importancia a su pérdida de peso y se enorgullece, por el contrario, de la fuerza y resistencia conseguidas. En este sentido, desde una perspectiva de género la obra de Kenneally desmitifica la feminidad de la pérdida de peso al equiparar el cambio físico con el bienestar, más que con la belleza, al contrario de lo que ocurría con novelas juveniles anteriores. Ello indica una evolución en la novela juvenil deportiva que requiere de atención académica con el fin de evaluar el impacto positivo que puede tener sobre los cánones de belleza corpórea de las lectoras jóvenes.

Palabras clave: novela deportiva juvenil; novela norteamericana contemporánea; cuerpo femenino; sexualidad; empoderamiento; desórdenes alimenticios

## I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG ADULT SPORTS FICTION IN NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE

Young Adult Sports Fiction (henceforth YASF) is a subgenre within Young Adult (henceforth YA) literature whose characters, be it the protagonist or the majority of the characters, live in the world of sport. In the United States, this subgenre enjoys great popularity. According to Chris Crowe (2001, 131), by 2001 it had become the third most read subgenre overall. *BookPage* assistant editor Lily McLemore confirmed that this trend persisted well into 2015; indeed, she even claimed that YASF, especially in combination with romance, has undergone a phenomenon of “over publication” (McLemore 2016).

The history of YASF is well documented by Crowe, who explains how the basic narrative schema of the genre was established in the late nineteenth century with the appearance of short pulp sports novels, facetiously called “dime novels” (129). Their plot outline operated as follows: “a white boy [...] with the help of a kindly mentor figure (an oldish white man) is able to rise up from mediocrity in his chosen sport (usually baseball but certainly one of the ‘Big Three’) to achieve success on the field or court, culminating in a home run, touchdown, or basket that wins the championship” (Beggs 2005, 1). The publication of weekly nonfiction sports columns by American writer and broadcaster John Roberts Tunis in *The New Yorker* between 1925 and 1932 popularized the sports story and was followed by the arrival of novels in the genre, also written by Tunis from the 1930s. Over the next few decades, Clair Bee, Thomas Dygard, Matt Christopher and Dean Hughes, among others, treaded on Tunis’s heels; they published rather predictable sporting stories that did not vary much from the formula of those prototype pulp novels that had appeared at the turn of the nineteenth century (Beggs 2005, 1).

In the 1970s, the genre started becoming increasingly complex, particularly as regards gender, owing mainly to the work of Rozanne Knudson, who achieved enormous popularity with the portrayal of Zan, a pseudonym of herself as a fictional female athlete in a series of four sport novels, *Zanballer*, *Zanbanger*, *Zanboomer* and *Zan’s Marathon*, published between 1972 and 1984. The date of the first part of the tetralogy is no coincidence, since this is the year when United States legislation changed the world of female sport with the incorporation of Title IX in the Education Amendments Act of 1972. The Title dictates that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (US Government Publishing Office 1972). The prohibition of sex discrimination in any kind of education activity increased female participation in college sports substantially:

Before Title IX, few opportunities existed for female athletes. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which was created in 1906 to format and enforce rules in men’s

football but had become the ruling body of college athletics, offered no athletic scholarships for women and held no championships for women's teams. Furthermore, facilities, supplies and funding were lacking. As a result, in 1972 there were just 30,000 women participating in NCAA sports, as opposed to 170,000 men. (History.com Editors 2009)

The enactment of Title IX led to an increase in the number of secondary school girls doing sport from 295,000 in 1972 to more than 2.6 million in 2009. In college, the number grew from 30,000 in 1972 to more than 150,000 in 2009 (History.com Editors 2009), a figure that has continued to rise since then. Girls' participation in football, for example, increased by 36,591 players between 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. By 2016, there were over 3.3 million girls registered in high-school sports programs (National Federation of State High School Associations 2016). The wider implications of Title IX and, more generally, of female incorporation in sports were essentially related to the economic and job markets. For one thing, it meant that more girls could have access to federal financial help through sports, which in the United States is a primary way to pursue further education programs. Moreover, being able to engage in sports subjects allowed young girls to escape the traditional sewing and homemaking school subjects which had long anchored them to the American housewife model. All in all, owing to the force and visibility of second-wave feminism, the 1970s was an important decade for women's advancement in classically male spheres, sport certainly being one of them.

Increased female participation in sports, however, was accompanied by major problems. Body image became increasingly acknowledged as an issue from the mid-1970s—by academia, in gender studies (for a review, see Howson 2005) and by society at large—coinciding with a huge rise in the number of women following diets and subjecting themselves to cosmetic surgery (Wolf [1991] 2015, 11). As Naomi Wolf starkly states, “the more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us” (10), a fact that is reinforced by YA fiction in general, as an analysis of the genre by Beth Younger shows. Younger found that after 1975 there was “an increasing awareness of body-image issues” and the YA novels she discussed “reflect[ed] that growing awareness” (2009, 1).<sup>1</sup> She specifically claimed that “YA literature reflects [...] the contemporary ultrathin standard of beauty” (3). The social mores of those years, she continued, evolved in terms of the meaning of beauty and sexuality for women. Her work, an analysis of the intersection between body image and sexuality in YA fiction since 1975, sheds light on the strong links that exist between these two corporeal spheres. The topics she investigates, including “weight, beauty, dieting and ‘lookism’ (the idea that a person is judged solely by looks),” are issues that “can be found in every subset of YA literature” (Younger 2009, xvi).

<sup>1</sup> Younger's 2009 extensive study deals with YA fiction from 1975 to 2005, thus expanding on her 2003 article, which covers until 1999.

The literary works written and published in the first two decades of the period Younger focuses on—from the 1970s to the mid-1990s—reflect a persistent reality about their characters: those “who do not ‘fit’ the hyper-thin European ideal [of the female body] are marginalized. In a revealing intersection of sexuality and body image, heavy characters are sexually promiscuous, passive and act as if they were powerless, while in marked contrast thin characters act responsibly and appear to be powerful” (Younger 2009, 4). In other words, “true” feminine beauty is epitomized in YA fiction by thin characters who, in turn, derive their “sexual assertion” (2009, 9) and sense of autonomy from their socially accepted bodies. Younger’s analyses of these novels reveal that female athletes’ bodies were also called into question for not demonstrating an “appropriate” femininity. Furthermore, their great emphasis on heteronormativity and compliance with feminine pursuits, focusing on attaining beauty, signal a fear of the potential association of female athletes with lesbianism and masculine bodies.<sup>2</sup>

If representation of female athletes in fiction, according to Younger, increased over the years mirroring the gains attained in women’s sport owing to Title IX, a realistic depiction of them had not ensued.<sup>3</sup> Eating disorders, rampant among women and abundant within the female athlete population too, were often unacknowledged and were even wrongly represented in sports literature. This is emphasized by Mary Kane and Kimberly D. Pearce’s claim that readers of YASF were given “just the opposite impression” since female characters’ views about “gaining weight [were] hardly a concern” (2002, 81). Female athletes were depicted as voracious eaters with no concerns about their image: “for example, the gymnasts often met at a local hangout and routinely ordered ice cream cones and banana splits” (Kane and Pearce 2002, 81). It is not until the mid-1990s that North American YASF authors began portraying characters and situations that were closer to the new social realities regarding gender equality, feminism, female body image and, by extension, sexuality. From this point onwards, YASF novels progressively include corporeal disorders experienced by the female athlete protagonists and thinness is no longer the recurrent default position from which to attain sexual confidence.

In this context, Miranda Kenneally’s work is of great interest as she is currently one of the most popular North American YASF writers and her books are crowded with girls who have contemporary, so-called female problems that they address through sports. In general terms, the depiction of female corporeality Kenneally offers focuses on the wellbeing

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<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive study of the representation of female athletes on the covers of the two most bought US sports magazines—*Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine*—from 1987/1998 to 2009 found an insistence on accentuating their femininity and commitment to heterosexual gender norms, including passivity in sports (Martin and McDonald 2012, 81, 88).

<sup>3</sup> In contrast with Younger, Grant Smith notes the existence of only nine novels in the 1970s, twenty-three in the 1980s and thirty-five until 1998 (1998). Similarly, Teri Rueth-Brandner reveals that in 1991, North American YASF works with male protagonists were still six times more common than works about female athletes (1991, 89).

of the protagonists within the context of their shared love for sport.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, her production and that of coetaneous YASF writers remains unacknowledged within the academia. The scarcity of analyses of YASF has been the case for decades, particularly with regard to works depicting female protagonists—in part because, as already mentioned, they still represent a minority within the genre. In 1985, only one article addressed this topic, Patricia Griffin’s “R. R. Knudson’s Sport Fiction: A Feminist Critique.” From a gender perspective, Griffin examined the representation of adolescent sports women in Knudson’s YASF novels and concluded that they were portrayed as social oddities. At the end of the 1990s, Mary Kane’s “Fictional Denials of Female Empowerment: A Feminist Analysis of Young Adult Sports Fiction” (1998) stands out, her major contribution being the incorporation of a feminist perspective on the subgenre. She pointed out that previous analyses had focused on the gendering of sports within print and broadcast journalism and, moreover, on adult figures. They had tended to ignore sports fiction and, more specifically, young adult sports fiction. In her work, she went on to show that YASF novels “characterized female protagonists as going against their ‘true nature’” and concluded that, up to that point, YASF with female protagonists represented “a fictional denial of sport as a site of resistance and empowerment for athletic females” (1998, 231). In a very recent review, Wendy J. Glenn analyzed a set of young adult novels with female characters practicing sports in male teams published between 2005 and 2017. Glenn showed how “they [the female characters] struggle to navigate the culture of power (i.e., the male world of sport)” and concluded that “the institutional structures of sport reinforce traditionally masculine norms” in these works (2019: i).

The virtual nonexistence of reviews of Kenneally’s novels is somewhat surprising, given her great popularity. In what follows, I put forward the first literary analysis of her fiction from a gender perspective. I focus particularly on her 2014 novel *Breathe, Annie, Breathe*, where the intersection between body image, sexuality and wellbeing (both physical and emotional) is depicted in a positive light that is well worth investigating from this angle.

## 2. THE REPRESENTATION OF EATING DISORDERS, SPORTS AND GENDER IN KENNEALLY’S WORK

That eating disorders are pervasive among women is a well-researched phenomenon within medical literature (see, for example, Bordo 1993). The situation is particularly worrying among athletes. As is the case with the general population, female athletes tend to experience harmful corporeal disorders more often than their male counterparts (Beals 2004, 45; Dosit 2008, xvi). These include both disordered eating practices

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of the analysis, the concept of “wellbeing” is preferred over the somewhat slippery notion of “health.” The latter is exploited by contemporary fitness trends (Shildrick and Price 1998, 10), while socially acclaimed commitment to health may contribute to socializing practitioners into extreme or orthorectic approaches to exercising (Bratman and Knight 2004, 9).

(e.g., bulimia) and those directly linked to sports (e.g., bigorexia), yet the latter have hitherto been reported as being exclusive to males. Thus, Katherine Beals, following Arnold Andersen (1994), states that “males are more apt to use excessive exercise as a means of weight-control, whereas *females typically use more passive methods*, such as severe energy restriction, vomiting and laxative abuse” (2004, 63; italics added). The section in italics points to the prevalent association between women, or rather femininity, and passivity, which has permeated Western thought since Aristotle, as noted by Simone de Beauvoir in her classic study *The Second Sex* ([1949] 2012, 37).

Correspondingly, the hegemonic masculinity prevalent among athletes, underpinned by the “overwhelming sociocultural belief [...] that ‘real men don’t diet’” (Beals 2004, 63), leads them to mockingly reject passive weight-control methods as part of anorexia, “the female’s disease.” This attitude is so widespread that Beals devotes a whole section to explaining the etiology behind anorexia’s gender gap in athletes’ eating disorders. Female athletes, she explains, are more pressured to be thin and are more readily judged by their body appearance, including weight and shape (Beals 2004, 56). It is therefore understandable that women have historically been associated with doing sport for aesthetic reasons, that is to say, in order to attain a more beautiful body (Tsaturyan 2010, iii). As Pierre Bourdieu points out, for females, “who are more imperatively required to submit to the norms defining what the body ought to be, not only in its perceptible configuration but also in its motion, its gait, etc.,” the “health-giving functions” of sport “are always more or less strongly associated with what might be called aesthetic functions” (1991, 372). The importance of the physiological benefits of sport, therefore, is quickly overridden for women by the pursuit of beauty, a pattern that underpins the higher prevalence of disordered eating habits among women, which, if taken to extremes, provoke serious organic problems. They may even prevent the adequate performance of the sports activity itself.

Current positive body image movements, such as the eat-to-grow movement among Instagram fitness practitioners, might point to a recent societal mutation wherein women have started doing exercise and sports in order to gain strength and a sufficiently energized body, while, however, still aiming to stay thin.<sup>5</sup> To put it another way, although women still work to achieve a slim body, they may also be engaging in sports activities for wellbeing-based reasons. If this trend continues to evolve and both goals are maintained in the female imaginary, the change might be signaling a significant transformation of the experience of corporeality for women in Western society, one that would no doubt be beneficial to women’s health in future. Nonetheless,

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<sup>5</sup> The eat-to-grow movement has over 1.3 million posts on Instagram alone and appears well balanced as regards gender. The trend is indicative of the progressive acceptance of muscularity in women. In *Venus with Biceps: A Pictorial History of Muscular Women*, David Chapman notes that women, “including those in the emerging female bodybuilder community, have had to fight hard to reclaim the image of female muscularity as their own” (2011, i). See also Elizabeth Wessinger (2015) for an updated historical review of the volatility of female corporeal trends.

as Wolf claims, the compulsive kind of exercising that may arise from these practices still derives from the beauty myth, which “is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power” ([1991] 2015, 13). Thus, it remains unsafe to state that this latest trend is in fact totally favorable for the female body. Truly positive female corporeal images must result from women’s embracing their own bodies fully, rather than emanate from some specific imperative at any given moment in time.

With this caveat in mind, Kenneally’s novel *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* does display a salutary evolution of the female corporeal imaginary through its representation of the protagonist’s wellbeing-related rather than aesthetic reasons for engaging in athletics. Annie becomes involved in the world of running in order to fulfill the dream that Kyle, her recently deceased partner, could not himself realize. From a gender lens, it could be readily argued that Annie’s reasons for taking up this sport are not, at least at the outset, truly empowering. However, as the plot progresses, the reader discovers that the protagonist is really running the race for the sake of her own health, that is, to heal her tortured mind and afflicted body, in constant sorrow following her life-changing loss.<sup>6</sup> By discovering her new wants and desires and by means of a first-person, internally focalized narrative, Annie gradually develops her voice, which feels increasingly cognizant of her world as the story unfolds. As Caroline Knapp puts it (2004, 46-53), the question posed addresses young female identity: what are the protagonist’s “hungers” for adult life? She needs to discover them and running allows her to do so by gaining control of her surrounding context: “High school is over. I take a sip of my drink. The more I think about it, what I love most about the running and exercising is the control. I have complete control over me, my body, my future. Which is something I haven’t felt since he died. And I want to keep that feeling” (Kenneally 2014, 55).<sup>7</sup> When questioned by a fan about her source of inspiration for the novel, Kenneally supported this complementary body/identity view: “I thought that coming to terms with a death would be a good plot to complement the marathon training, because both are very tough things to work through” (2015). In addition, developing a sense of identity through sport helps Annie to lose her fears about her own physicality. In the author’s words, she is “a very normal girl” who has always hated running, yet proves to young female readers that “they can learn to run long distances too” (2015).

As discussed above, the much commoner goal for a woman to engage in any kind of sport, particularly if it is unconnected to training for a competition, is losing weight. The protagonist herself acknowledges this when she reflects that “some people on my team are running because it’s a lifelong dream, some want to lose weight and others like me haven’t told anyone why they’re doing this” (4). Nevertheless, even what might

<sup>6</sup> In her recently released autobiography, English model and actress Kelly Brook makes a similar case with respect to dancing, which served as therapy for enduring her father’s cancer (2014, 21).

<sup>7</sup> Susie Orbach relates female identity formation with control through the idea that for a woman “the need to control her body [...] is a symbol of emotional needs” (2005, xii). Although specifically referring to anorexia in the original, the link is likewise relevant here.

initially seem to be an association of running with weight loss on the part of one of Annie's running partners, Liza, is later explained in terms of wellbeing. Liza claims: "I needed to get back in shape and I wanted a fun way to meet people, so here I am" (79). Liza's reasons for wanting to get in shape are made clear much later: "I wasn't healthy. I hadn't been to the doctor in years and I was living off coffee and takeout [...] and it didn't make me happy" (219). Liza's emphasis on her decision to commit to marathon training in order to attain a personal sense of wellbeing and happiness definitely transcends a concern for her physical shape. As she adds, running a marathon is about "do[ing] something I've always wanted to do" (220).

Furthermore, losing excessive weight is marked as dangerous in the story, because it distances the protagonist from an energized body and from the appropriate frame of build to perform effectively in the marathon. Her trainer, Matt, urges Annie to "start adding more peanut butter and eggs to your diet. You're getting too skinny and you need to eat more as we start doing longer and longer runs" (82). Instead of emphasizing weight loss, her coach puts his effort into her gaining endurance and strength. In one of the training sessions, Matt announces that she is going to do "some speed bursts. They'll make you stronger" (81). Suicide sprints, in turn, are "to make [her] heart stronger" (148). At the time of her first race, run as part of her training schedule, Annie is already very proud of the physical prowess she has attained: "a year ago, I couldn't run half a mile. And I've just finished my first 5K. I laugh, grinning up at the sun" (178). The most telling thought she has about athletics in this sense is when she understands the influence exercise exerts on her sense of wellness. When talking about her future plans and the courses she intends to take, she reflects on the importance of sports and concludes, "I like feeling healthy" (136).

The second route the novel takes in order to signal the importance of wellbeing in the world of sport is its positive depiction of the female protagonist's relationship with food. There is never any hint that Annie is worried about food making her fat. Throughout the story, we are frequently told about her habit of nibbling: "I reach over into Nick's bowl and steal a potato chip" (164), "I steal cherries from the bar and pop them in my mouth" (171), "He [Jeremiah, the protagonist's new romantic attachment] opens a bag of Swedish fish he brought and offers me one. I choose an orange fish" (234). Although sometimes described as an instance of stealing, Annie shows playfulness and no guilt or shame about nibbling.<sup>8</sup> Greedily eating big quantities of food is positively portrayed as well, which is essential to a gender perspective since women's voracious habits with food have been historically condemned by being associated with promiscuous sexuality (Culbert and Klump 2005, 361) and masculine behaviors (Vartanian et al. 2007, 265). Annie, however, "rip[s] huge chunks off [a watermelon] with [her] teeth, wiping the juice from [her] lips with the back of [her] hand" and the only comment she gets is a funny one from Jeremiah about not eating the seeds or else "you'll grow a watermelon

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<sup>8</sup> Orbach (2005) explores the frequent negative affective component of women's relationship with food.

baby!” (187). On one of her first days at university, she loads her plate with food and Colton, one of her best friends, congratulates her for it: “Colton fist-bumps me. ‘Now that is what I’m talking about. Three barbecue sandwiches *and* a hot dog?’ ‘I’m starving,’ I say, taking a big bite of the hot dog” (224; italics in the original). These passages thus exemplify that Annie is both capable of eating small quantities of food, as when she nibbles, which is “considered feminine” (Knapp 2004, 43), but enjoys eating larger amounts too.

The kind of food Annie consumes is also worth mentioning, since she frequently eats large quantities of carbohydrates. Carbs, as they are often referred to, are a frequently feared food type among dieters, though they are also known as “athlete’s food” because they are an important source of energy for sports performance (Dosil 2008, 6). That Annie takes carbo-loading seriously as an eating habit—“I wave at Joe as I pass Joe’s All-You-Can-Eat-Pasta Shack where I like to carbo-load on Fridays at lunch before my Saturday long runs” (159)—indicates that she agrees to follow a specialized diet to ensure good sports performance. If she were worried about putting on weight, she would be avoiding both carbs and hyper-sugary training products—gel packs, Gatorade and bananas—and other calorific foods, which she in fact consumes regularly. Actually, Annie is depicted as a girl with a sweet tooth—she loves cookies, Blizzard shakes, Jolly Ranchers sweets—and as an eater of junk food—she often has pizza or hot dogs, which are often represented as key components of a masculinized diet (Lipschitz 2009, 1). Nevertheless, she also nourishes her body with salad and fruit, such as the already mentioned watermelon and cherries, quite frequently claimed to be more feminine foodstuffs (Lipschitz 2009, 1). Overall, this suggests that Annie simply follows her body’s needs and is not engaged in any sort of disordered eating behavior. What is more, her food intake is portrayed as a social occasion rather than a private activity. This is counterindicative of the existence of any eating disorders, where sufferers typically avoid eating at social occasions (Abraham 2015, 107), although the opposite pattern of gorging oneself publicly only to compensate for it afterwards, as in bulimia, is also possible (Bordo 1993, 128). On the contrary, Annie has lunch with her mother and brother or when hanging out with friends, to mention but a couple of examples.

Finally, it is important to mention that after her first training sessions, Annie develops stomach problems, not being able to hold down food and vomiting frequently. Significantly, her worries at this point are mostly about the effects this may have on her ability to finish the remaining training sessions or the marathon itself. Her vomiting is not portrayed as a sign of bulimia at all: “My older brother is cooking a grilled cheese sandwich [...]. He flips his sandwich. It sizzles in the frying pan and makes my stomach rumble. I’m starving, but I don’t think I can hold any food down. Running screws with my stomach—I can’t tell if I need to eat or use the bathroom” (22). In sum, through two strictly physiological aspects of wellbeing—living in a stronger body and properly nourishing it—Kenneally’s novel can be seen as favoring a sensible corporeal

philosophy, which may be defined as “engaging in self-care behaviors” in order “to function well” (Wood-Barcalow et al. 2010, 112), while also preserving oneself from society’s pressures about being overly skinny and having disordered eating habits (Wood-Barcalow et al. 2010, 110-12).

Annie’s commitment to athletics is simultaneously linked to more symbolic growth in terms of wellness. As the story progresses, the protagonist matures, particularly as regards sexuality but also with respect to her emotions and her adult life choices. The use of a bildungsroman pattern focusing on the transition year between secondary school and university and the use of the marathon plot device are the formal elements through which the novel traces this growth. In the only review found of the novel, Amy Atkinson explains that the marathon plot device works in *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* as “moving both the reader and Annie through her training and her grief at a pace that feels authentic to the experience of deep loss coinciding with emerging adulthood and all its accompanying discoveries and excitement” (2014, i). Emotionally, readers know from the beginning that marathon training is Annie’s mechanism for ending her mourning for Kyle, where she is stuck at the outset of the novel. Annie’s mother addresses her in the following terms: “Never talking about him isn’t healthy sweetie. You need to let it out” (84). There is an important parallel established at the beginning of her training between healing the mind and focusing on the body, which neatly explains the novel’s title—“*Stop thinking about him. Stop already. Breathe in, breathe out*” (6; italics in the original) is swiftly followed by “Kyle’s grin flashes in my mind. A quarter mile more. One foot after the other. Breathe, Annie, breathe” (8). Here, Annie’s effort to concentrate on breathing and moving her feet, two corporeal actions, is portrayed as relieving her from thinking of her dead boyfriend. She thus eventually attains a view of her body that is neither separate from her state of mind, nor subsumed by it, granting transcendence to her own sense of corporeality, as Elizabeth Grosz contends (1994, 4).

On its part, the information provided about the protagonist’s sexuality progressively shifts from focusing on her passivity and chastity with Kyle to emphasizing her agentic bodily desire for Jeremiah. Annie’s sexual awareness grows as she acknowledges her body through running—“during my first session with [Matt] I discovered muscles I didn’t know I had” (92)—and, consequently, her corporeal needs. Comparing a passage from the beginning of the story, when Kyle was still alive—“Month after month, mile after mile, I was there with an energy bar, a smile and a kiss [...]. ‘Can I have a kiss? To get me through the last five miles?’ ‘You’re all sweaty and gross!’ He [Kyle] pulled me to this chest. ‘You don’t care.’ And he was right” (8-9)—to a couple from towards the end—“Jere takes my hand [...]. His dark jeans, knit cap and snug gray tee make my mouth go dry” (259) and “then his lips tell me not to think anymore, to just do what I want to do, and I whisper okay” (265)—clearly illustrates the change. Taking into account that Annie experienced appetite loss right after Kyle’s death, the references to Annie’s mouth and Jeremiah’s lips point to Annie’s renewed appetite in relation to both

her nourishment and her sexual needs, which now appear to be more mature than her chaste attachment to Kyle. The references, in short, signal the protagonist's recovery of both her physiological and her emotional stability—she is now able to eat and to feel affection again.

Introduction into university life is the other field portrayed in the novel to illustrate Annie's symbolic growth. The emotional disorientation Annie experiences the day she arrives at university is made abundantly clear: "Laughter and music fill the hallways. I suddenly feel panicky, like I don't know who I am or what I'm supposed to do. Can you lose your identity in a place that you don't understand?" (215). This passage suggests feelings similar to those brought about by her physiological dizziness when she starts training—"Two fucking laps? That's all I could do? [...]. On wobbly legs, I hobbled toward my car" (10; italics in the original). While teenage culture, particularly the magazines published explicitly for the adolescent market, "uniformly preach [...] dieting and weight control" as the solution "to the crises of adolescence" (Knapp 2004, 27), Annie's crises are resolved through the nexus formed by her sporting life and her final degree choice of physical therapy instead of nursing. In fact, it is her acceptance of her body and her love for sport as it brings wellbeing to her life that make Annie want to extend positive corporeal behaviors to others: "I liked helping Jeremiah when he hurt his foot, and I like feeling healthy and being on a schedule. It could be cool to help somebody else the way Matt has helped me. I've sort of been thinking about physical therapy or nursing" (136). This is essential for the advancement of positive body awakening in the girls and young women who form the readership of Kenneally's novels. The study conducted by Nichole Wood-Barcalow, Tracy Tylka and Casey Augustus-Hovarth emphasizes the importance of girls learning and teaching "body appreciation" to "others in their community, culture, and social network" (2010, 112) and the following statements by two of Kenneally's readers, reported in *Teen Vogue*, seem to confirm this:

"Having girls play traditionally masculine sports in books *just makes it more normal*," Claire Westerlund, 18, tells *Teen Vogue*. "If you're in seventh or eighth grade and you're kind of like trying to decide 'what should I do in high school' or 'what should I start to get involved in,' I think it's really important to see that." [...]. That resonated with Willa, who has dealt with *pressure many girls face*: feeling like they have to be good at everything [...]. When Willa read Miranda's June 2017 release *Coming Up for Air*, a story following a swimmer with Olympic aspirations, she happened to be struggling with whether or not she wanted to stick with the sport. The book kept her in the pool. [...]. "There wasn't, at least in my experience, someone really focusing on me just as being a female athlete" she says. "For me to see a book about a girl who struggles with her athleticism and to come out on top, and see her being really successful at that, gave me a lot of inspiration." (Felicien 2017; italics added)

### 3. CONCLUSION

In the 1990s, Linda Forrest stressed the need for young female audiences to find themselves represented in sports fiction so as to help them fight gender stereotyping at such an essential point in their lives (1993, 38). As has been contended throughout this article, a negative, essentialist trend had hitherto been prevalent in YA fiction. The female body was homogenized in terms of what it ought to look like for it to become a site of putative empowerment. Skinniness was equated with beauty and, therefore, confidence and autonomy, while YASF, in particular, not only avoided representing the bodily problems derived from this pattern, but on occasion misrepresented them by glossing over the eating disorders their female athlete characters often suffered from. Deriving from the influence of feminism and scholarly works like Forrest's, from the mid-1990s onwards North American YASF finally began fictionalizing the gender-specific, raw truth of female athletes'—and, by extension, women's—disordered corporealities and incorporating the reality of eating disorders in their plots. Nonetheless, it seems that academic recognition of these works from a gender perspective has stalled, since popularly acclaimed contemporary YASF works, like Kenneally's *Breathe, Annie, Breathe*, remain unacknowledged.

It has been my intention, therefore, to reclaim the positive influence her work can exert on young female audiences in the United States, as regards both their interest in the sporting world and its wellbeing benefits, and the development of a more positive outlook on their body. Such a transformation, as the protagonist of *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* shows, can be initiated through an acknowledgment of one's own wants, which for teenagers is sometimes a difficult step to take. Young women especially, as is the case with Annie, are “unfamiliar with their own needs” and their corporeal sense of self, which may lead them to look for shelter in narrowly defined views of it, like anorexia (Orbach 2004, 23). Engaging sensibly in sports is this novel's answer when it comes to young adult female identity and corporeal formation, as it provides the protagonist with the opportunity to learn to breathe, a metaphor, as the title suggests, for learning to know one's body and vital desires. Marathon running becomes Annie's new *appetite*. Definitely, she becomes literally hungrier for food in the novel, but only as the logical result of her training and physical effort. This contributes to recovering a meaning of “eating” that Knapp deems lost, as food has forfeited “its basic associations with nourishment” (2004, 28). What for one young woman may be the solution to an identity crisis, as sport is for Annie, may not fulfill the same function for another. Nevertheless, one asset of literature, and especially of YA novels, is that the experiences of the protagonists do not claim to represent those of every teenager, but they do have the capacity to make many adolescent readers feel a sense of identification.

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