

EXPLORATION OF “LEGEND OF KORRA”: OVERCOMING ADVERSITY IN YA TELEVISION

by Ben Worth

The Legend of Korra is an animated television series set in a fictional world comprised of four nations in which some people can manipulate or “bend” their native element (water, earth, fire, air). Only one person, the “Avatar”, can bend all four elements. Following a cycle of reincarnation, each generation a new Avatar is born and trained to master all of the elements and act as an advisor and mediator to the four nations. The Avatar’s key responsibility is to maintain balance in the world. The series follows Avatar Korra, as she struggles to master all of the skills required of the Avatar while facing political and spiritual unrest in a modernizing world. What makes this series so fantastic is the emotional development of the characters, especially Korra. Each of the characters are affected by the challenges they face throughout the series and those effects are carried forward into how they approach new difficulties as the series progresses.

At the beginning of the series, Korra is a brash, enthusiastic young woman eager to leave home and take on the responsibilities and challenges of her role as the Avatar. Korra displays courage, initiative, and determination. But despite all of the power she wields as the Avatar, she encounters multiple failures. To see Korra fail repeatedly at the hands of her enemies is frustrating. Each conflict resolves with the villains’ defeat, but not without Korra suffering physical and emotional trauma. Why would the show’s creators focus on a weak female character? They haven’t – they’ve created a show with very human characters, characters who make mistakes, fail, question themselves and struggle with their decisions. “Strong,” “weak,” these labels are often applied to fictional characters, but they’re not especially helpful when describing real people, or characters of sufficient emotional complexity.

The Legend of Korra is populated with several “strong” female characters, both aligned with and against Korra. P’Li and Ming-Hua both demonstrate great strength in the agency they display and their fearsome bending proficiency, but they are also violent terrorists. Kuvira demonstrates iron determination and leadership in uniting the fractured Earth Empire, but she perverts her noble intentions by becoming a fascist dictator. Each of these characters are examples of strong female characters, but perhaps not the role models one might envision when using the term. Korra is a positive character because she faces adversity, fails, and learns from her experiences. At times it is hard to watch, but seeing Korra learn from her failures and succeed is all the more rewarding because we saw her struggle. Her accomplishments have weight.

Whether someone is strong – which no one is at all times – shouldn’t be the main factor in whether or not they’re significant. Positive, important fictional characters, just like real people, have weaknesses: they make mistakes, they fail, they make dumb decisions when they should know better, but they keep trying to be better. Korra isn’t a great character because she’s strong and always wins. That would make for a really boring TV show. Korra is relatable because like her, we each have moments in life where we struggle and feel pain. Sometimes we face so much adversity that we want to give up. Korra is a great character because in her failures she learns humility, and compassion for herself and others that wouldn’t be possible without facing adversity. We can take comfort in the knowledge that like Korra, we too can face life’s challenges, struggle, grow, and overcome even the most insurmountable obstacles.