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Sexism in Children's Literature

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SEXISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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SEXISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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SEXISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet
Eating of curds and whey;
There came a spider,
And sat down beside her,
And frightened Miss Muffet away. (9)

The Little Miss Muffet syndrome, which depicts females as helpless, easily frightened, and dreadfully dull occurs repeatedly in children's literature.

Male stereotypes are also projected. Are males permitted the whole range of emotions that human beings should have in their repertoire? Must he always be strong and tall? Can he make mistakes and experience failure, yet still be accepted?

Sex-role identification begins in the earliest months of life and is essentially completed by the time a child is five. In their early years children form ideas about worth, future roles, and expectations placed upon them. Sex-role socialization is one of the most important learning experiences for the young child. At the time of kindergarten entrance, he or she is able to make sex-role distinctions and express sex-role preferences.

By age four children realize that the primary feminine role is housekeeping, while the primary masculine role is wage earning. Children are conditioned to accept society's definition of the role value of each of the sexes and to assume the "typical" personality characteristics of their respective sex. With regard to personality differences, children learn that boys are active and achieving while girls are passive and emotional.

Authors and illustrators often project unacceptable

sex roles for children to identify with. Untrue or unclear roles are often depicted, stereotypes are formed, and thus a child expects people to act in a particular manner.

A sexist believes in, and lives the philosophy of sexism, i.e., that the sexes be stereotyped and socialized into "masculine" and "feminine" behaviors and roles, and believes that this is natural. Sexists also believe and live the doctrine that one sex should dominate the other; sexism denies individuality, civil liberties and civil rights.

Early sources of sexist messages children receive are from books and elementary school readers. These stories abound in stereotypes. A typical girl is a frilly thing with a smile on her pretty little face and a passive attitude toward life.

Ingenuity, creativity, bravery, perseverance, achievement, adventurousness, curiosity, sportsmanship, generativity, autonomy, and self respect, are considered positive and desirable traits and are the prominent theme of a majority of children's stories.⁽¹⁰⁾ These traits are not considered merely socially useful but necessary for survival as well. Those who possess such traits can be said to have power over themselves, their surroundings, and their circumstances. Males monopolize these traits and leading roles in stories.

Male protagonists meet situations with intelligence. Problems are met with originality, daring and thoughtfulness. Boys use their wits, they make things, and "create" to handle the situation they are in.

Girls are absent from most tales using cleverness, creativity, and resourcefulness. Girls using ingenuity are rare. Occasionally young ladies may make a fortuitous discovery, but usually nothing results as a product of their cleverness.

Boys overcome all sorts of obstacles through

perseverance, industry, and initiative. The boy who clings to his bug collection over his family's objections, which they withdraw as soon as he is honored for the discovery of a rare specimen, is a prime example of perseverance.

Persistent girls are a rarity. One tennis playing young lady in a reader story overcomes pain, hunger, depression and a dirty tennis dress to win her match. (The dress maintains the feminine stereotype.) Another girl who had the initiative to vote for herself in a class election is scorned and badly defeated for her bad manners.

Even handicapped males show more autonomy, initiative and perseverance in overcoming obstacles than normal, healthy females who listlessly droop through the pages of children's literature.

An excess of boys exhibit strength, bravery, and heroism. This is no surprise, as these traits are traditionally male prerogatives. Boys rescue adults, girls and other boys from stampedes, fires, drownings, and storms and save planes and spaceships.

Girls are not entirely absent from tales of bravery. From time to time, females carry warnings by horseback, or go to the aid of a wrecked ship. More often than not, however, girls are shown saving small children or animals or acting as sidekicks to crafty young men. Girls often obtain a vicarious success within the old "woman behind the man" theme.

Generativity is something that one elects to express as a representative of the culture, whereas routine helpfulness is service work with servant connotations. Both boys and girls perform routine drudge work but with very different basic assumptions.

Girls are expected to be helpful but boys often acquire moral points for their helpfulness. When girls attempt to be helpful, it is usually through imitation

of a stereotyped motherly role. They take care of younger children and often scold them for something trivial.

Boys elect to be generative, not only toward animals, plants and younger children but also toward adults. Girls tend to feed growing things rather than experimenting with them or guiding them.

A popular story line in children's readers concerns growing up. A child who masters an adult skill or fills a grown-up's shoes is usually a boy and the shoes belong to a man.

When a girl masters a grown-up skill it is, more often than not, a domestic one. Girls are commended when they handle a situation as completely and competently as a boy.

Literature conveys to boys that acquiring wealth is a highly desirable goal for them.

Girls are also persuaded that they should become wealthy. Poor girls are advised to marry well. Marrying a rich man of high position has been considered a desirable goal for young ladies for centuries. In fantasy tales, they are willing to be given away to rich men, even if they are strangers. There is practically no mention of the fact that girls need to learn how to earn a living or that they would enjoy doing so.

Females are allowed to compete approximately one half as much as the boys, but when it comes to winning, the ball game goes to the boys. If girls happen to win in competition, it is due to the boy's excellent teaching.

Males have multiple adventures, discovering the world they live in. Adventures for girls are severely limited in quantity and confined in area.

When pretending, boys "play like" they are cowboys, astronauts, firemen, or some other daring adventurers. Girls play house. For every girl in literature who

dreams of becoming a tightrope walker, there are scads of complacent females who never stray from their own backyards.

Boys are advised to be autonomous, separate individuals, to reason, plan and execute activities which promote their independence. Girls need not apply for personhood. Stories about girls acting independently are indeed rare.

Tomboy stories are a struggle for identity. One reader story tells of a girl who has a knack for baseball, helps win the game, and makes a deal for the boys to do the dishes so that she can practice. In the female world dishes come first.

The female exhibits passivity, docility, and dependent behavior. Little girls endlessly play with dolls, cry over dolls, give tea parties and look on helplessly or admiringly while boys take action. Soft, delicate, fluffy kittens are usually female. Old people who are mean and ugly are female. Wise old people are male.

Neither sex in children's stories displays much emotion. Emotions belong to the lesser sex, boys, on the other hand, display almost none. Boys fight back fears and tears, while girls succumb without a struggle to irrational terror and foolish weeping. Girls express fear more often than boys.

Vanity is encouraged in girls. Girls are portrayed as having a great need to be beautiful. Girls are drawn as smaller than their male peers, contrary to real life. Boys are shown as apathetic toward their physical appearance.

In reader stories, girls are constantly being sold on nursing over doctoring, stenography over business administration, and motherhood over all alternatives. Women are portrayed as having inside jobs, while men often have outside jobs.

Folktales tend to treat women better than do books with contemporary settings. Possibly this is because folktales are based on themes of vindication of the underdog, wish fulfillment, and desires of the unconscious. Contemporary books are written to please or sell.

Wives are smarter than their husbands, and folktale women oft times make fools of the powerful.

Women in folktales were not merely consuming or sexual objects justified only by motherhood, as today's world all too often defines them.

Folktales were part of a preindustrial culture where women may not have had equality, but did play vital roles. Women were producers who functioned in agriculture and home industries like spinning and weaving, and who worked side by side with their men.

Picture books play an important part in early sex-role socialization because they are a means for the presentation of societal values to the young child. Through books children learn of the world outside of their immediate surroundings. They learn what other boys and girls do, say and how they react to particular situations. Children learn what is right and wrong and what is expected of children their age. Role models are provided to show what the children can and should be like when they grow up. Children's books reflect cultural values and persuade children to accept said values. Proper roles encourage the reader to conform to acceptable standards of behavior.

Virginia Woolf says that women in literature are shown only in their relation to men -- this is true in the picture book world.

Friendship between boys in picture books is much touted; friendship between boys and girls is frequent; friendship between girls gets less attention, although it is common in life.

A boy in a group of girls is often considered

effeminate but a girl who achieves acceptance in a group of boys has obviously raised herself.

Women in picture books are very passive and their activities are severely limited. They rarely drive automobiles nor are they often portrayed as holding down jobs other than the traditional roles of women.

Little girls are shown as passive, though occasionally manipulative. They walk, read or dream. They seldom ride bicycles; if they do they are often sitting behind a boy as in Dr. Seuss' One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish.

In the Stewig-Higgs analysis(1972), 154 picture books were surveyed. The work of 78 authors was represented. The books were randomly selected from a collection of 957 picture books available in a university education department library.

The total collection was considered representative of typical elementary school and children's division libraries. The books were chosen by a professional librarian on the basis of recommendations in widely used bibliographic tools.

The researchers prepared the following table in summary of their research:

SUMMARY

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 1. Books including no people or animals..... | 4% |
| 2. Books including animals, no people..... | 17½% |
| 3. Books including men, no women..... | 13% |
| | TOTAL = 34½% |
| Of the remaining 65½% which did include women: | |
| 4. Books with women in homemaking related roles..... | 84% |
| 5. Books with women in professional roles..... | 17% (13) |

The Stewig-Higgs research concluded that women do indeed play a subordinate, home related role.

Women were portrayed one of two ways:

--Primarily as a housewife and mother and within this general category as doing essentially dull and uninteresting tasks

or

--as semi-professionals engaged in occupations typically considered⁽¹³⁾ appropriate for females.

Mommies at Work by Eve Merriam breaks the picture book tradition and shows women outside of the usual domestic role. Mommies build bridges, split atoms, direct television shows, some are dancers, teachers, writers and lawyers. All this is quite admirable, the end, however, is highly apologetic. The cop-out is that the author finds it necessary to say that Mommies like best of all being Mommies and coming home to their children. It doesn't seem important to say that Daddy loves his children more than his work. Couldn't Mommy matter of factly like working and children?

The marked absence of the female in children's literature applies even more strongly in books about blacks.

Analogies between racism and sexism date back before the nineteenth century: both Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine compare black slavery to female slavery. In the United States the women's rights movements grew out of the abolitionist movement.

Black men received their rights long before black or white women. The same is true with the picture book. Blacks have achieved integration with whites and representation for themselves without a corresponding integration for the female, black or white.

Following the success of Jerrold Beim's

Swimming Hole, about black and white boys swimming together, there was a rash of books about blacks and whites and blacks alone.

Ezra Jack Keats has written and illustrated several picture books about small black boys. Keats' A Letter to Amy brings in a girl but is not particularly flattering. Peter is bringing a letter to Amy to invite her to his birthday party (the only girl). He bumps into her accidentally and she flees in tears. The boys say "Ugh! A girl at the party!" but she comes anyway. One little girl can make it in a group of boys, but she'd better know her place.

Animals in picture books are predominantly of the masculine gender. Elephants, lions, bears, and tigers are usually males. In reality the female lion does the work, in the picture book world she doesn't exist. Some books show isolated females in the company of a majority of males.

There are some books about females. Cows and hens are obviously female. Rosie's Walk by Pat Hutchins is about a hen who walks unknowingly through all kinds of danger. This merely reinforces the stereotype that nothing ever happens to girls.

Female animals tend to have derogatory names. Sylvia the sloth, Petunia the goose, and Frances the badger are admittedly not very flattering.

In "Noah's Ark stories" the Bible dictates equal representation of the sexes. Not so in picture books. Random House's Pop Up Noah has more male animals than female animals on the cover and Mrs. Noah is nowhere to be seen. In the three leading children's versions of Noah, the wives of Ham, Shem and Japheth are absent.

Richard Scarry's Best Word Book Ever is a big illustrated dictionary containing the "typically Scarry" humanized animals demonstrating meanings and activities.

In the Best Word Book Ever there are more males than

females, and the boys get to do everything. The toy section had thirteen male animals with exciting toys such as tricycles, blocks, toy soldiers, scooters and electric trains. The two females were playing with a doll and a tea set. In the Scarry orchestra there are two females out of 28 and the girls are at the piano and the harp. The only page with a female protagonist had her in the kitchen. On the page titled "Things We Do," males dig, build, break, push, pull, eat and do 14 other exciting things. The only thing the two females do is watch and sit.

Females comprise 51% of the United States population, yet only 20 to 30 percent of picture books have women in them. There are five times as many males as females in picture book titles and four times as many boys, men or male animals pictured as were females.⁽¹⁾

Women in picture books are not depicted in the rich variety of professional roles in which they are engaged today. A wider presentation of female roles in children's literature would result in children, particularly girls, having a more realistic picture of career opportunities now open to women. Positive attitudes would be more prevalent if picture books were more reflective of the nature of our current society.

The Caldecott Award winning picture books, are without a doubt the most renowned of all picture books. Caldecott winners are representative of the best we have in children's literature. Once a book receives this award it is ordered by practically every children's librarian in the country. These books are influential in the development of children's sexual identities, hence, their content of sexual roles is crucial.

The following statistics from a 1972 study best express the sexism characteristically portrayed in the Caldecott award winners.

The statistics for titles of the Caldecott winners from the inception of the award in 1938 show eight titles with male names, three with female names, one with both a male and a female name together, and 22 titles without names of either sex. This resulted in an 8:3 male/female ratio. The statistics for titles of recent Caldecott winners and runners up (since 1967) show eight titles with male names, one with a female name, one with both together, and 14 titles without the names of either sex. This resulted in an 8:1 male/female ratio. (14)

The statistics for central characters in Caldecott winners since 1938 show 14 males, 10 females, 6 males and females together, and 4 central characters without a sex. This results in a 7:5 male/female ratio. It is important to note that the situation is becoming worse, not better. During the last five years the ratio of male to female central characters has increased. The statistics for central characters in Caldecott winners and runner-ups during the last five years show a 7:2 male/female ratio in contrast to an 11:9 male/female ratio for the years prior to 1967. (14)

The illustrations of the Caldecott Award winners are generally essential to the story. In a picture book many things are said via the illustrations. Thus, sexism may be conveyed through pictures.

A Tree is Nice, written by Janice Udry and illustrated by Marc Simont, is a prime example of sexism through illustrations. Boys are high in the tree, girls are watching. There are boys fishing, boys rolling in leaves and a boy holding a rake while a big girl leading a small boy walks by.

A double page spread in the book has a huge tree in the center. There are seven boys and three girls pictured. One of the girls is helping a little boy in the tree while the other two are on low limbs close to the main trunk. The boys are adventuring, one hanging from a rope -- the other five climbing way out or high up. There are 19 boys pictured in

A Tree is Nice, as compared to eight girls.

The illustrations of Caldecott winners and runners up since 1967 included 166 male people, 22 female people, and 57 pictures of both males and females together. The animal illustrations included 95 of male animals, one of a female animal and 12 of both male and female animals together. Together this resulted in a total male/female ratio of 11:1. There were also 14 illustrations of characters without a sex. (14)

The following books are the only Caldecott Award winners that are considered for and/or about girls:

The Egg Tree	1951
The Most Wonderful Doll in the World	1951
One Morning in Maine	1953
Madeline's Rescue	1954
Play With Me	1956
One is One	1957
Time of Wonder	1958
Umbrella	1959
Nine Days to Christmas	1960
Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine	1967 (11)

If Caldecott books are representative, there has been a steady decrease of picture books about girls. Nine of the ten "girl" books were written during the fifties. The only book about a girl written in the sixties was Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine by Evaline Ness. The boy's name possibly was used to attract boys to the book.

Newbery Award winning books are popular with children in the upper elementary grades. Unfortunately, Newbery books often transmit sexist viewpoints.

The statistics for the titles of Newbery winners since the inception of the award in 1922 show 20 titles with male names, six titles with female names, none with both, and 23 titles without the names of either sex. This resulted in a 10:3 male/female ratio.

The statistics for central characters in the Newbery winners since 1922 show 31 males, 11 females, 4 males and females together and 3 central characters without a sex. This results in a 3:1 male/female ratio. (14)

Up a Road Slowly by Irene Hunt, The Wheel on the School, and Miracles on Maple Hill are all Newbery Award winners. They also all discriminate against the female.

Irene Hunt says in her book, Up a Road Slowly, "Accept the fact that this is a man's world and learn to play the game gracefully." This theme seems to be underlying in far too much of our juvenile literature.

There are several Newbery books that present girls in a positive way. The Witch of Blackbird Pond, A Wrinkle in Time, and Island of the Blue Dolphins all portray their female protagonists as independent, courageous, and intelligent.

Caddie Woodlawn by Carol Brink contains ambivalent attitudes toward sex roles. Caddie is a young pioneer girl who runs free with her brothers and is quite content with the stigma of being a tomboy. Throughout the book her mother insists on her being a "lady" but Caddie resists. As the book concludes, Caddie's father pleads for femininity: "It's a strange thing, but somehow we expect more of girls than of boys. It is the sisters and wives and mothers, you know, Caddie, who keep the world sweet and beautiful. . . ." and she dutifully and obediently joins the "sweet and beautiful" women of the world sitting high on their pedestals -- and the reader feels cheated.

Much is said of the prevalence and consequently the injustice of sexist literature. However, many times the reasons behind sexism are not explored.

Some feminists infer that authors, artists, and

publishers have conspired against women. This seems unlikely.

Publishers prefer books about boys for economic reasons. Girls will read books about boys but boys won't read books about girls. It is evident that books about boys will sell better. There is little chance that publishers are plotting against women because women control the purchasing of children's books by a large numerical majority.

The English language is partially responsible for sexism in literature. Having no neuter pronoun in the singular form makes it necessary to refer to any animate object as either he or she. Many books, particularly those about animals, are dominated by males because the author is compelled to choose between masculine and feminine pronouns. Masculine pronouns are easier and authors have been taught that masculine can stand for either men or women. It is no surprise that there are more male characters than female characters in children's literature.

Children interpret language literally. When they hear terms like chairman, postman, brotherly love, mankind, and fellowmen, they think of men, not the entire human race.

The launching of the first space vehicle, a Sputnik, by the Russians in 1957 indirectly made a great change in the type of literature housed in elementary school libraries. The people of the United States became fearful that the Soviet Union would surpass them not only in the space race but in other fields as well. Consequently, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1961. This act provided federal funds for the acquisition of library books dealing with science. Science had always been thought of as masculine; writers could not be expected to produce new and interesting science books and break down centuries-old

sex barriers.

When it was discovered that boys did not learn to read as fast or as well as little girls, someone alledged that boys wouldn't learn because textbooks were dull and full of feminine values. This claim was widely publicized and books were written to help boys learn. Almost everything was made masculine to attract boys. Many of the books were delightfully creative and both sexes enjoyed them but they were very male oriented.

It is ironic that girls have lost out two ways. Boys are dominant in non-fiction because they are thought more able. They are dominant in beginning-to-read books because they are thought to be less able in language arts.

During the sixties inflation and spiraling production costs made publishers seek out new ways to cut expenses. They looked to the world's folktales where there was no need to pay an author's royalty or double copyright. Folktales took place many years ago when nearly every activity required brute strength. It was by necessity that men were doers and women were the on-lookers.

If a girl accepts the placid roles that characterize children's literature, she runs the risk of becoming an anachronism. Any girl who has a fair amount of energy, intelligence, and ambition is likely to identify with the male; this could obviously lead to problems and frustration.

Many women have to -- or prefer to -- earn a living in our society. Why not encourage girls to find satisfaction in a job or profession? We must lay aside the suspicion that work outside the home for a woman is primarily proof of her inability to love a man, or to land a lucrative one. Girls should be given all the possible options given to boys for future life choices.

In spite of all the talk about careers and professions, the role of homemaker and/or mother should not be ignored

or diminished. The homemaker often fills a needed, vital, satisfying niche in society. This important role should not be denied women, neither should it be forced upon them.

More children's literature is needed today, which will present models showing realistic ways in which all people can function successfully as individuals. Boys and men should be allowed freedom to cry or to fear without being termed "sissy"; women and girls should be allowed to be assertive yet feminine.

By age eight, almost one hundred percent agreement is found among children of both sexes as to which sex does a particular job, what kind of person a girl or boy should be, and what role limitations and expectations are.

Literature influences sex role socialization. This may be done deliberately by the author and/or illustrator or may be done accidentally. Whatever the cause, we must become more aware of blatant sexism in children's literature.

Maybe someday our children will become liberated and the Little Miss Muffet syndrome will fade away. Maybe Miss Muffet will assert herself. Maybe. . . .

Assertive Ms Muffet
Stood near a tuffet
Eating a burger and fries;
Along came a spider,
And stood there beside her,
She hit him, he curled up and died.

J. A. Kaufman

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