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A Study on How the Male and Female Are Portrayed in Children's Literature

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Abstract

To the majority of Americans, women's liberation is a common term among most circles. Just recently another group is capturing the headlines and will be gaining more support with this publicity. This group has coined the name "Feminists on children's Media." Their attacks are becoming greater as more parents, librarians, and concerned citizens become actively involved in the way women and men are stereotyped in both juvenile literature and school textbooks. Previously, critics had concentrated on the intermediate level of reading, while now, more are becoming interested in picture books and beginning readers.

A STUDY ON HOW THE MALE AND FEMALE ARE
PORTRAYED IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Department of Library Science
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Diane Jean Reed

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

To the majority of Americans, women's liberation is a common term among most circles. Just recently another group is capturing the headlines and will be gaining more support with this publicity. This group has coined the name "Feminists on Children's Media." Their attacks are becoming greater as more parents, librarians, and concerned citizens become actively involved in the way women and men are stereotyped in both juvenile literature and school textbooks. Previously, critics had concentrated on the intermediate level of reading, while now, more are becoming interested in picture books and beginning readers.

Many leaders in this field feel at such an impressionable age one must be aware of the sex roles being described to small children. Because of the interest and concern being expressed, this research paper will attempt to present and support more evidence to the idea that sex roles are stereotyped. The research was concentrated around the following questions: When women make up 41% of the work force, why are they only depicted as homemakers and consequently show men as the wage earner

having the primary responsibilities outside the home?¹
What roles do books suggest to children being exposed?
Last, what influences if any, do these books have on children?

The books researched in this paper were randomly selected from the Newberry and Caldecott 1970 and 1971 award winners along with some "Notable Children's Books of 1970" selected by the Book Evaluation Committee of the Children's Services Division, ALA. Because of the reputations of these books, the probability they would be selected by librarians is great. This paper will then be reviewing those books that have the most probable chance of influencing the most children.

¹Margo Trumpeter and Linda D. Crowe, "Sexism in Picture Books," Illinois Libraries, September, 1971, p. 499.

Chapter 2

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

Before examining these books, several generalizations have been found to exist in books examined by other concerned citizens. These generalizations will provide an understanding and a comparison to the books examined in this paper.

The first stereotype can be found in what boys read they should possess. It seems boys are portrayed as children who make things, learn play active games, romp with dogs, get dirty, and help father. The traits attributed to the male species are written as one who is mischievous, venturesome, independent, and inventive. Boys are taught to express themselves and are praised for their ideas and achievements and are given career choices. In other words, boys are the doers. Unfortunately, boys are also taught they must be tough, brave, and give support to the weak woman. As stated in Ms., "There's no place for the tender, uncompetitive boy in juvenile books."²

Boys dominate the scene not only in their actions but by the simple fact they dominate in numbers. For instance, "Feminists on Children's Media" took 15 of the

²Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "Down with Sexist Upbringing," Ms., Spring, 1972, p. 25.

most widely used series of elementary readers and found of the 144 readers, there were 881 or 72 % boy-centered stories compared with 344 girl stories. The group carried this even further and found 282 stories centered on the adult male against 127 adult females. The study also found 131 biographies of famous men but only 23 of women.³

A study similar to this one, researched that of 33 books selected from the Caldecott Medal award winners from 1950 to 1970, a significant majority (23 out of 33) were centered around male characters, either adults, boys, or animals. Trumpeter and Crowe found only seven books that starred female characters and three dealt with groups of children.⁴

Alleen Nilsen has also analyzed winners and runner-ups of the Caldecott Award during the last 20 years. Of 80 books analyzed, titles included the names of males three times as often as females. Unfortunately, she found the presence of females decreasing in the last 20 years.⁵

If one wanted to look at the Newberry Medal winners and "Notable Children's books of 1969", one could find that of the 49 winners, boys outnumbered girls by three to one

³Feminists on Children's Literature, "A Feminists Looks at Children's books," School Library Journal, January, 1971, p. 19.

⁴Margo Trumpeter and Linda D. Crowe, op. cit., p. 499.

⁵Mary Ritchie Key, "The Role of Male and Female in Children's Books-Dispelling All Doubts," Wilson Library Bulletin, October, 1971, p. 172.

and the ALA list by two to one.⁶

This thesis reinforced the onesided ratio. Of the 18 books examined, nine centered on boys, four on girls and four on a combination of the two. Male dominance continues to breed.

The main desire of this paper evolves around the stereotyping of the female character in books. Females are not only slighted by their image but also by their importance. In contrast to what boys do, girls seem to be portrayed as passive, helpless, easily frightened and dull people. Girls can not get dirty, fight, fall down, be creative or have ideas. They are praised for their looks, they have limited choices of a career, they play with dolls and have tea parties, help their mothers, and play with soft fluffy kittens. One forgets that girls have an equal amount of energy as the opposite sex and yet, are expected to sit, be quiet, and please everyone. When girls are given a choice in selecting a career, they are directed to being a nurse, teacher, receptionist, telephone operator, and most important, a housewife. Isn't it ironic that some women do become lawyers, doctors, engineers, and other professional occupations.

Besides restricting the females to a certain role, some very derogatory comments are inflicted on the minds

⁶Feminists on Children's Literature, op. cit., p. 19.

of children about girls. For instance, "girls are always late, give up easily, do not excel in school, and need a lot of help solving problems and getting things done."⁷ In other words, females are being taught at an early age "this is a man's world and to learn how to play the game gracefully."⁸

Perhaps the most revolting idea expressed in literature is the girl who does not conform to the female role and is labelled a tomboy but ends up in the traditional role finding mother was right and dresses can be pretty. Parents have been brainwashed too well and have become too fearful their girl who enjoys sports and likes science will become "masculine." This works the other way for the boy who likes to cook, knit, etc. and will become "feminine."

If one still does not feel females are stereotyped, a study by Key from the Robert's English Series for junior high students should change one's mind. Women were shown doing the following:

1. Counting votes for males who were nominated for an office.
2. Finding their beauty is shortlived.
3. Accompanying men on hunting trips.
4. Sitting with fans in their hands.
5. Putting cream on their faces and lying in bed.
6. Poisoning their husbands.
7. Being eaten by alligators.
8. Rearing children.⁹

⁷Letty Cottin Pogrebin, op. cit., p. 26.

⁸Feminists on Children's Literature, op. cit., p. 21.

⁹Mary Ritchie Key, op. cit., p. 172.

Along with this, Diane Stavn analyzed novels popular with boys. Here, girlfriends and mothers were "unpleasant characters, one-dimensional, bitchy, and idealized. Girls accompanying teenage boys were inadequately fleshed out, tinny, paper thin made of angel stuff, and quiet.¹⁰ After finishing twelve years of education reading books depicting males and females as the above, there is no wonder males and females have difficulty in communicating and participating in activities as equals.

The image of parents is also being stereotyped in juvenile literature. I have mentioned the image of the mother, but fathers also continue their role from a child. They must support the family and protect the mother.

It seems even animals are also depicted as having predetermined sex roles. Those characterized as female included the cat, cow, goat, horse, and pig while males are typed as a fox, frog, dog, or mouse. Even female animals can not get away from the costume of a typical woman-- a dress and apron. If one doubts the overwhelming majority of male animal stories, one only has to look at those by Dr. Seuss or Maurice Sendak.

¹⁰Mary Ritchie Key, op. cit., p. 172.

Chapter 3

FINDINGS OF BOOKS EXAMINED

This thesis has tried to give a complete and objective overview of each selection. The following generalizations, however, are those assimilated by the author of this paper and not the opinions of any individual's work.

GENERALIZATIONS OF THE BOOKS

The first one, A Story A Story by Gail E. Haley depicted some very prominent roles. Even African stories center around the male who can outwit others to succeed. The "Sky God" was naturally a male. The only female character was a mysterious fairy who was "never seen by any man." The ferocious characters were males-- the leopard and hornet. Of course, the hero could have been no other than a male hunter of the tribe.

Another book dominated by the image of man was If All the Seas Were One Sea by Janina Domanska. It seemed very fitting that something as big and powerful as the sea had to be characterized along with a man. She used the term man throughout the rhyme as:

and if all the men were one man,
what a great man that would be
and if the great man took the great ax

and cut down the great tree....

Knee-Knock Rise by natalie babbitt also centered around the male sex. The boy here was the kind who had to be brave, afraid of nothing. Of course, this was the response man had to portray in the book, especially after being dared by a female. The typical family image was also brought out. For instance, when a family went to a fair, "men stood around rumbling and smoking with pleasure and mothers ran after children."

Another male centered story featured two black boys in The Planet of Junior Brown by virginia Hamilton. Junior's mother was vividly described as being rather domineering, a worry wart, along with being sickly and putting his father down. Junior's role was somewhat unique in that he was portrayed as a fat, ugly person who is usually restricted to girls. Even though he was portrayed this way, the end of the story showed him as someone, with many problems, who should be pitied.

This male-centered story again portrayed the ingenious minds of males. In the Night Kitchen by Maurice Sendak showed a small boy determining why we have cake in the morning. Even though the bakers (male, of course) ran out of milk, Mickey was able to knead dough into an airplane and found milk. He became once again the hero because of his ability to think upon distress.

In The Witch's Brat where males dominated, several derogatory implications were made of females. About the

only mention of women was in reference to Lovel's grandmother who fitted the category of being a mysterious woman where people labelled her a witch (another character saved just for women). Even though Lovel inherits his grandmother's powers, he does not assume the name witch and the book centered on the positive results of his powers.

Another implication assumed to be typical of worrying, stupid women concerned the idea expressed that women feel one will be more likely to cut oneself with a sharp knife than a dull one. The book implied all women had this misconception.

The male became the hero again in this dramatic book, The Angry Moon by William Sleator. Two Indian children, boy and girl, were shown as close friends, although the boy seemed to dominate as the wiser person. For instance, when the girl made a derogatory remark about the moon, the boy told her she should not have made the moon angry and immediately the girl was taken away by the moon. The boy's ingenious mind gave him the idea to shoot arrows in the sky to make a ladder to rescue the girl. Like all boys, his bravery was amazing and his dedication to the girl overwhelming. Even though rains beated on him and winds shook the ladder, he went higher and higher. Guided by a grandmother in the sky who was illustrated as though a witch-doctor, he found the girl. She was portrayed as the scared wailing female. To round out the roles, the moon put on the face of an ugly man. This portrayal did not say much for the male image.

One Fine Day by Nonny Hogrogian falls under male animal stories. In this particular story, a fox reinforced the idea of being sly, cunning and thus, he assumed the role of a male. The roles for females were described with the terms as "an old woman, a fair sweet maiden and a chicken as a hen."

Another animal book depicting males was one about frogs, Frog and Toad Are Friends by Arnold Lobel. This book was not strong in character or content. It was just a story of two friends and their experiences with little implications.

In contrast was the book, whose Mouse Are You? by Robert Kraus. This book was especially written for boys when one sees the mouse racing in a sports car along side his father or saving his mother from the cat and his father from the trap and bringing his sister safely home. Each member of the family was stereotyped not only in words but also in the illustrations. For instance, the mouse's mother's love was illustrated by her bringing him lots of cheese and food while the father's love was shown by driving sports cars. They were pictured as the wild racers with racing goggles and scarves around their neck. Last, the sister showed her love by painting colors on the wall--a nice quiet activity for a girl. This picture book, read by early childhood children, fits very nicely into the big brother image, the loving domestic mother, the car fan father, and the placid sister image.

In the books where girls were the main characters, their roles were usually so stereotyped, it might have been just as well if they had not been given the center of attention. For instance, The Other People by Janet McNeill centered her story around a 13-year-old girl but failed to ignore the social aspects inflicted upon females. That is, Kate was shown as interested in parties and all the fuss and preparation a girl goes through to look pretty. She was amazed how nice she looked with her hair fixed and a new dress on. The girls' thoughts came out as though they were trying to play "hard to get" to make them look more glamorous. However, the book was not a total loss since Kate possessed an adventuresome nature and liked to explore, although she had to be coaxed by a male to explore an old house because of fright.

In the headless Cupid by Zelpha Keatley Snyder, women were again made out to be strange people. The main character, Amanda, was presented as being wrapped up in the supernatural. The illustrations also depicted her as strange--looped braids on top of her hair, metal ornament on her forehead, and long dresses was her costume. She did take the lead in trying to solve the mystery of the cupid, but when things really got spooky she had to rely on her step-brother to give her courage to go on.

Although this book, The Summer of the Swans, by Betsy Byars, tried to hide its implications of what a young girl supposedly is interested in by centering the

action on another character, the sex role still dominated. This book brought out the typical tomboy plot. Sara, a 14-year-old, was very upset about her appearance, especially her big feet. Of course, she had a very pretty older sister who tried to console her and advise her on Sara's social life. Even the frantic search for her lost brother worked perfect into the plot, since she ended up being asked out by a former enemy who suddenly turned into a friend.

The Tombs of Atuan by Ursula K. LeGuin centered around a girl who did possess a mind of her own. However, there were some instances that conformed to the usual role-playing. Even a reincarnated priestess was not excluded from womanly chores. At the palace, girls "learned how to spin, weave... how to plant and harvest and prepare the food they ate." Due to the structured life led by priestess, the book gave the girls two alternatives; priestess or marriage. The stereotyping was also beautifully exhibited toward the end:

The little girls with their pale faces and furtive ways, the restless novices, the priestesses whose looks were stern and cool but whose lives were all a secret triangle of jealousies and small ambitions and wasted passions.

These are traits commonly kept just for women. The book could not end any other way than the shining knight who saves again. The reincarnated priestess was led safely away from the evils of the god by no other than a male who protected her and found a home where she would be safe and able to visit at his wish.

Although this book, Annie and the Old One by

Miska Miles, did not show Indian women in an unpleasant manner, it did center around the duties delegated to women. It presented the idea there is a time when all Indian girls must learn how to weave along with cooking. In contrast, the father was seen making jewelry and hunting. However, it did show respect for the elder grandmother who was considered a very wise old woman.

Even the Russians have followed the United States in their error of role-playing. Vasilisa the Beautiful translated by Thomas P. Whitney is a counterpart to the book Cinderella. Of course, Vasilisa personified the desirable womanly virtues of beauty, purity, and goodness. This was especially brought out in contrast to her jealous, cruel stepmother and stepsisters who exemplified all female failings. Naturally, children see that by being sweet and passive, prince charming will sweep you away to his castle where you will live "happily ever after."

The last two books examined were the perfect examples of the generalizations exemplified for each sex. Tell Me a Mitzi by Lore Segal incarnated the roles of mothers and sisters and was supported by the illustrations. The inside covers portrayed Mitzi strolling and feeding her baby brother, playing with her dolls, and a mother rabbit holding a baby bottle. As one continued in the script, she was seen sitting at a park bench, reading a book while watching her brother and around her, boys were

playing with balloons. Both Mitzi and her mother went through the routines of child care: feeding, changing the diaper, and dressing. The mother was even given second importance by having the baby's first reaction be "dada" when the mother came in to pick him up. When the family came down with a cold, the mother again took second fiddler. She had to become the concerned nurse. When both the father and mother had a cold, the father went to bed, while the mother waited on the family until she became so sick the grandmother had to take over. The typical family portrayal was very evident.

Even though The Little Girl and Her Mother by Beatrice Schenk De Regniers was not on any outstanding list, it was chosen perhaps as an outstanding example of the exploitation of the female role. The book did a perfect job of orientating a young girl to what she should act like. The book showed what mothers do and how little girls naturally follow their mothers. In fact, the book began with the statement, "Everything the mother does the little girl wants to do. Everything." The crucial question is what does the mother do-- everything one thinks mothers do: she swept the floor, fed the cat (not the dog), kissed daddy good-bye, drank coffee, and put on lipstick. It ended by giving a little girl this future; "she'll be a mother someday and will be able to do all those things like her mother and she'll even have a little girl." The book reinforced that girls will be mothers with little girls who

will do "mother things."

INFLUENCE OF BOOKS ON CHILDREN

On the whole, the books just presented support the previous generalizations of studies on the sex roles as depicted in juvenile books. The serious matter concerning this stereotyping is what do children learn from these books? Trumpeter and Crowe feel boys learn they should be:

resourceful, adventurous, independent, active and better than girls in every way. They learn that as men they will be fathers and carry on some activity outside the home. A girl sees she is expected to watch the boys perform, take care of younger children, depend on men for advice and protection, and compete with other girls for the attention of boys.¹¹

In this statement, one is assuming children do learn from books. Some feel the perpetuation of sex roles in literature is bound to influence a young child at a time when socializing patterns are forming. Leah Heyn feels the role in child growth played by children's books is an influence in "terms of the development of the senses, the idea of reinforcement, of knowledge expansion, and the liberation from the child's born-into environment."¹²

¹¹Margo Trumpeter and Linda D. Crowe, op. cit., p.502.

¹²Mary Ritchie Key, op. cit., p. 167.

Chapter 4

Summary

In a society which should reflect the ideas and values of people within it, authors, publishers, illustrators, etc. are going to have to step back and reevaluate their contributions to society. The role women want and are playing is changing; thus, change in the realm of literature must occur. This applies not only to women but men, also. The publishing world must be willing to evaluate itself critically to give a totally fresh, unbiased portrayal of males, females, blacks, and whites. If the publishing world does not take it upon itself, others will and are doing so at the present time. The argument "no girl was ever ruined by a book" is over. Many feel "maybe not by one book, but a cumulative library of negative, stultifying stories, books, and poems can go a long way toward the ruination of the female spirit."¹³

What concerned men and women are desiring are books that will let their sons and daughters choose, to have the freedom to develop as persons, not roleplayers. They want stories that offer alternative lifestyles and where men and women have concerns and diverse identities.

We need books that show mothers who prefer to stay

¹³Letty Cottin Pogrebin, op. cit., p. 20.

home and keep house and mothers who enjoy working outside the home. "Girls need to be given the equal chance to become intelligent, active, and alive."¹⁴ Every individual should be encouraged to develop to his or her full potential.

¹⁴Zena Sutherlan, "make No Mystique About It," Saturday Review, march 20, 1971, p. 30.

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APPENDIX

The following are those books the researcher selected to evaluate:

CALDECOTT AWARD WINNER 1971:

Haley, Gail E. A Story A Story. New York: Atheneum, 1970.

HONORS 1971:

Label, Arnold. Frog and Toad Are Friends. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

Sendak, Maurice. In the Night Kitchen. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

Sleator, William. The Angry Moon. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970.

CALDECOTT AWARD WINNER 1972:

Hogrogian, Nonny. One Fine Day. New York: Macmillan Company, 1971.

HONOR 1972:

Domanska, Janina. If All the Seas Were One Sea. New York: Macmillan Company, 1971.

NEWBERRY AWARD WINNER 1971:

Byars, Betsy. The Summer of the Swans. New York: Viking Press, 1970.

HONORS 1971:

Babbitt, Natalie. Knee-Knock Rise. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.

NEWBERRY AWARD HONORS 1972:

Hamilton, Virginia. The Planet of Junior Brown. New York: Macmillan Company, 1971.

Le Guin, Ursula K. The Tombs of Atuan. New York: Atheneum, 1971.

Miles, Miska. Annie and the Old One. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971.

Snyder, Zelpha Keatley. The Headless Cupid. New York: Atheneum, 1971.

NOTABLE CHILDREN'S BOOKS, 1970 ALA:

Kraus, Robert. Whose Mouse Are You? New York: Macmillan Company, 1970.

McNeill, Janet. The Other People. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970.

Segal, Lore. Tell Me A Mitzi. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.

Sutcliff, Rosemary. The Witch's Brat. New York: Henry Z. Walck, Inc., 1970.

Whitney, Thomas P. Vasilisa the Beautiful. New York: Macmillan Company, 1970.

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Regniers, Beatrice Sheak De. The Little Girl and Her Mother. New York: Vanguard Press, Inc., 1963.