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Tillie Olsen's Reading List III Women: A List out of Which to Read

Tillie Olsen

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NINTH GRADER CALLS MATH BOOK 'SEXIST'

[The following story is reprinted by permission from the *Superintendent's Bulletin*, Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools.]

An enterprising ninth grader [Ms. Ann MacArthur] at Montgomery Hills Junior High has analyzed her algebra book and denounced it as "sexist." In a lengthy memo to her principal, Nathan P. Pearson, she recommends that the book [*Modern Algebra: Structure and Method, Book I* by Mary Dolciani, Simon L. Berman, Julius Frelich, Albert E. Mider (Houghton-Mifflin, 1962)] be replaced before it causes any more "mind pollution." Her premise is based on a detailed analysis of the word problems in her ninth grade algebra book, which she maintains promote a sexist indoctrination.

Some of her findings:

On pages 58 to 60, problems dealing with money all have men or boys as subjects. The only problems with women as subjects deal with weight or hair color.

On pages 94 to 95, males are always challenging or earning, while the only problem mentioning a female has her being twice as old as Bob.

The male subjects have such roles as merchant or football player; the female roles are always housewife or club member.

On page 132 a woman is mentioned in only one problem, where she is losing a game to a man.

Only one problem on pages 180 to 182 deals with a woman as a subject—Mrs. Asbury.

"It gets more discriminating and discouraging as you go along," the student points out. "Throughout the entire book not one set of word problems has more females as subjects than males. The only roles suitable for females in the book are like Amy on page 54 who is making a blouse and Emma on page 55 who is being X years old."

She points out that when money is the subject of a word problem, men get to deal with large sums for investment purposes, or to make major purchases, while women seem to deal only with small sums necessary to buy a pound of butter or a dozen eggs.

She also insists that men do more interesting things in the algebra book. When men are mentioned in problems, she says, they are painting a barn, or building a road, or setting up a train. "There are two cyclists and one canoeist whose names aren't mentioned," she says, "but we still have to find out *his* speed, not *hers*." On the other hand, females in the math problems always seem to be in the home, or figuring out "improbable and unpractical age problems" such as Janet being $\frac{4}{5}$ as old as Phil, or the daughter who is half as old as her brother.

"I have always heard that boys are better at math and science but girls are better at English and languages, and have wondered why and how this could be true," the student concluded in her memo. "Now I think that I know." She blames the books.

What does Principal Pearson intend to do about it? Well, he's sent copies of the student's memo to the Human Relations Department, to the math supervisor in Curriculum and Instruction, and to the director of instruction in his area. "I think they can probably come up with a better book," he says. "She's got a good point."

Editor's Note: Responding to a recent question about how she came to do this study, Ms. MacArthur said, "I've always

been a women's libber, and I thought the book was horrible. Also, I always read *MS.* magazine, and maybe that influenced me." Ms. MacArthur, who had never read a similar study, said that she hadn't expected anything to happen as a result of her inquiry. "I didn't think people would take me seriously," she added. "But they are now putting the book up for review and the math supervisor is going to do some additional research and discuss the findings with the publisher."

"There is zero activity going on in my junior high school with regard to the women's movement," she concluded, "but maybe it will be different when I go on to high school in the fall."

TILLIE OLSEN'S READING LIST III WOMEN: A LIST OUT OF WHICH TO READ

MOST WOMEN'S LIVES (continued)

MOTHERING AND WIFEHOOD: Mothering (as distinguished from Motherhood) and Wifehood are rarely a major or even minor part of literature, although women have always been defined by them, and they are the major part of most women's lives. Women's courses do not know, or do not understand, the necessity of including the relatively few works that tell something of what mothering and/or wifehood mean.

I. These titles repeated from the two previous listings are essential reading, preferably as a cluster.

Arnow, Harriet, *The Dollmaker* (pb).

Brown, Harriet, *Grandmother Brown, Her First Hundred Years* (biog., op).

Richardson, H.H., *Ultima Thule* (op).

Stead, Christina, *The Man Who Loved Children* (pb).

Woolf, Virginia, *To The Lighthouse* (pb).

Wright, Sarah, *This Child's Gonna Live* (pb).

Stories:

Cather, Willa, "Wagner Matinee" in *Troll Garden*.

Gaines, Ernest, "The Sky Is Gray" in *Bloodline* (pb).

Mansfield, Katherine, "Six Years After" in *The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield*.

II. Colette, *My Mother's House* (pb) and other glimpses of Sido in *Earthly Paradise* (pb).

Fisher, Dorothy Canfield, *Fables for Parents*, especially "The Forgotten Mother" (op).

Lessing, Doris, The section, "Free Women II," in *The Golden Notebook* (pb).

Paley, Grace, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (op but soon to be reprinted in pb).

Schreiner, Olive, *From Man to Man* (op).

Struther, Jan, "Three Stockings" in *Mrs. Miniver* (op).

III. Add to the Agee, Gorky, Lawrence, O'Casey (*Juno and the Paycock, Plough and the Stars*), Wright, titles in "Some Women in Works by Men" in Reading List II, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (pb); that Jewish mother should be contrasted with Phillip Roth's Sophie in *Portnoy's Complaint* (pb).

IV. The conflict, mother/writer, is written of in Storm Jameson's autobiography, *Journey to the North*, and in letters in *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Annie Fields, ed. (op).

All works are fiction unless otherwise indicated. Paperbounds are pb. Out of print titles (op) are usually available in libraries.