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From a Feminist Curriculum Writer

Barbara E. Lightner

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FROM A FEMINIST CURRICULUM WRITER

I am currently working as an assistant in developing a reading program for Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company. As might be expected, I am encountering some difficulty in getting the publisher to represent girls and women in the materials to be selected for the program. I hope you can give me some suggestions, support, pressure—whatever.

Briefly the situation is this. The publisher is responsible for choosing selections to go into 4th-6th grade reader anthologies. Their art department has minority quotas (20 percent black, 10 percent Spanish-descended, etc.) but none for girls and women. Although the project editor seems to be aware of the need for representation in this area, there are other considerations that allow her to put off or minimize finding selections that are intelligently representative (i.e., non-sexist). Since, further, the two men I am working with here (two professors hired by Merrill to develop the program) are more-or-less unsympathetic to the problems of sexism in reading programs, I can exert no pressure through them. One of the professors, in fact, is pushing the inclusion of boy-relevant materials in order to get boy performance up to girl performance at the elementary level. There is little care to consider the long-run socialization process by which boys come to outperform girls.

The problem is somewhat complicated by the fact that there are other considerations which must be taken into account—for example, the materials must fit into certain broad themes and exemplify certain structures (time sequence, process, cause and effect, etc.) Most important to the publisher is that the materials test out at a readability level one grade lower than the grade for which they will be used (the program is for "low track" kids). In spite of these considerations, however, it is my contention that sufficient materials can be found to create a non-sexist reading program.

But the people at the publisher are slow at finding materials of any kind and there are deadlines to be met. So it is that everyone can plead that the right kinds of material cannot be found in the necessary amount of time. What

It strikes me that it is worthwhile to move against the problem before it occurs rather than panning the books after they come out. However, this presents some problems. First, the selection of materials is complete only for one small section of the 4th grade and although sexism is indeed evident here, it might be minimized later (there are promises). Second, the publisher has hired a black woman as consultant and her input may change things somewhat. Still, I am not altogether sure that waiting for the future would be the best thing. A tokenism mentality seems to pervade the program.

No doubt you have suggestions on how to deal with such problems. Should you wish to write the publisher in this respect, the address is: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1300 Alum Creek Drive, Columbus Ohio 43216. The publishing company is a subsidiary of Bell and Howell which, I believe, has final say in matters concerning the reading program.

I realize that as a press you are involved in marketing children's reading material. I hope you do not find a conflict that would prevent our working together. Whichever way, would you please let me know? For by one means

or another I should like to let Merrill (and other publishers) know that women are interested in a significant way in the elementary school materials they turn out.

Barbara E. Lightner

BOOK REVIEW

Female Studies VI: Closer to the Ground, Women's Classes, Criticism, Programs—1972, ed. by Nancy Hoffman, Cynthia Secor, Adrian Tinsley. The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, New York. \$2.50 plus .50 postage.

Of the twenty-one articles in *Female Studies VI*, twenty are "close to the ground." They deal not with polemics justifying women's studies nor revelations of male images of women but with women at work with literature about women: teaching it in the classroom, writing criticism about specific authors, establishing a communal learning experience. Section II, "Women's Studies in the Classroom," is presented in detail through specific experiences at a prestigious undergraduate college, a community college, a state college, and a law school. Some of the writers are political radicals, others are traditional academics; some are self-taught students. They all share a sense of excitement; their common discovery is that they find "personal meaning in the work at hand." The course content necessitates a nonhierarchical sharing of experience which changes the people involved.

Section IV, "Working Together: the Women's Studies Program at Portland State University," makes it clear that such change is profound for all concerned, but that it is not brought about without cost. The pain of self-discovery is described by students and teachers; the tensions among the group and occasional failures are honestly analyzed. The insight into the lives of previously inarticulate women is truly moving; we come indeed "closer to the ground," closer to the reality of daily life, of human courage and wit and agony.

Section III, "Feminist Criticism," discusses women authors who have tried to present the reality of female—and human—experience: from Christine de Pisan in medieval France to Charlotte Bronte, Gertrude Stein, Doris Lessing, and Joan Didion. The editors discuss the need for an interdisciplinary approach to feminist criticism, and two authors treat the problem of how to use a sexist language and a male literary style to present women's lives and thoughts.

These three sections justify the editors' claim that this is essentially a volume about the *practice* of female studies in 1972. Readers of all ideological persuasions will find this material cogent and useful. But some readers may be uncomfortable about the framework for these practical essays. In Section I, "The Radical Perspective on Women's Studies," the editors make it clear that they see women's studies as revolutionary both within academe and within society. Ginny Foster's essay, "Women as Liberators," is a profound rationale for the editors' view. Her essay, apart from this volume, might seem merely ideological; that it is experiential as well as theoretical is affirmed by the twenty essays which follow it. Women's studies *have* changed people's lives; they will continue to do so. *Female Studies VI* makes it apparent that anyone teaching women's studies should expect not just a new perspective about literature but a new way of looking at the world.

Mary Anne Ferguson