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Picture Books with Female Heroes

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During the past several years, articles have been appearing in the women's magazines and in educational journals which have told of the meager or negative portrayal of females to be found in books for the youngest children. During 1973 and 1974, in preparation for a workshop concerning female roles in literature, I searched libraries for books which feature females. In addition, I contacted 21 major publishers and asked for such books. Twelve publishers kindly allowed me to examine all the books they considered to be appropriate—that is, books which would have female protagonists. After my visits to countless libraries and bookstores and the arrival of the publishers' books, it turned out that I had fewer than 100 books to choose from. Some of the publishers had sent books from the mid-sixties and called them recent. Others had sent books in which females had auxiliary roles or shared lead roles with males. Some even sent books in which the females were animals or machines!

Thus, it seems, publishers are still very hesitant to publish books with females as main characters, probably basing their resistance upon the studies which have shown that boys are unwilling to read so-called "girls" books, while girls are quite willing to read the so-called "boys" books.

An analysis of the high-quality books about females printed in the past several years reveals that they fall into several basic categories: some highlight lives of adventure and activity, some allow girls to have fantasy lives of vivid accomplishment, while others reflect changing patterns of social life, as in books which depict working mothers or children of divorce. Finally, some books merely celebrate everyday life, but the females are strong characters who have desires and life within them.

The findings of this study were reported to the participants of the First Annual Leland B. Jacobs Children's Literature Conference and the 1974 International Reading Association National Conference. The researcher is an assistant professor of education at Brooklyn College.

Alexander, Martha. Sabrina. Dial, 1971. Sabrina struggles to accept her unusual name, then finds that the other children admire it.

Ardizzone, Edward. Diana and her Rhinoceros. Walck, 1964. Surely this is not a traditional pet!


Blos, Joan, and Betty Miles. Just Think! Knopf, n.d. Mothers work in the very varied occupations of reality.

Bonsall, Crosby. And I Mean It, Stanley. Harper and Row, 1974. A girl creates something ingenious from the junk she has found.


Kellogg, Steven. Won't Somebody Play With Me? Dial, 1972. When a young girl thinks that her friends are unwilling to play with her, she fantasizes exotic revenge.

Kindred, Wendy. Lucky Wilma. Dial, 1974. Wilma meets her father every Saturday and they go places. One day, when there is no place to go, they look closely at one another and have the best adventure of all.


Lasker, Joe. Mothers Can Do Anything. Whitman, 1972. Dentist, astronaut, judge, ditchdigger, plumber, etc.
Levy, Elizabeth. *Nice Little Girls.* Illustrated by Mordicai Gerstein. Delacorte, 1974. The teacher tries to squelch Jackie's interest in woodworking, being an audio-visual monitor and other school activities often relegated only to boys. She soon has the school in an uproar, while showing her rebellion.

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*Something Queer Is Going On.* Illustrated by Mordicai Gerstein. Delacorte, 1973. Gwen and Jill search for the person who has stolen their dog. Their ideas are respected. The intricate illustrations will delight.

Lexau, Joan. *Emily and the Klunky Baby and the Next-Door Dog.* Illustrated by Martha Alexander. Dial, 1972. A young girl feels neglected by her busy mother in a fatherless home. She runs away, gets lost and returns to a more aware parent.


Merriam, Eve. *Boys and Girls, Girls and Boys.* Illustrated by Harriet Sherman. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972. The author parallels boys and girls, showing that they have the same desires, dreams and affections.


Phipson, Joan. *Polly's Tiger.* Illustrated by Erik Blegvad. Dutton, 1974. Ostracized at her new school, Polly invents a tiger to protect her from attack. When an occasion arises in which she herself shows great courage, she no longer needs the tiger.


Wiesner, William. *Turnabout.* Seabury, 1972. The farmer does not complain about how much harder his work is after he takes a day at his wife's tasks.


Wolde, Gunilla. *Tommy Goes to the Doctor.* Houghton Mifflin, 1972. The doctor isn't the main character in this British import, but the doctor is female.


*Joanne E. Bernstein,* Brooklyn College

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**WILL THE REAL MARGARET FULLER PLEASE STAND UP?**

We are embarrassed to admit that we incorrectly identified the woman in the picture above left as Margaret Fuller on page 20 of the Summer/Fall 1975 issue of the Women’s Studies Newsletter. We apologize and include a picture of the real Margaret Fuller above right. However, we still do not know who the mystery woman is. Any reader who can discover her identity will receive a one-year subscription to the Newsletter absolutely free. On your mark, get set, go!