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Jeanne Bracken
Sharon Wigutoff

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Sugar and Spice: That's What Children's Books Are Still Made Of

Jeanne Bracken and Sharon Wigutoff

In April 1977, at a conference on children's literature at Columbia University, an editor from a commercial publishing house responded to feminist criticism of a book. The editor stated that children's books should be free of "issues" and should not be expected to respond to every "trend" that comes along, such as the women's movement. To reduce the decade-long struggle of the women's movement to the status of a gimmick or a fad was more than merely insulting; it was a comment that ridiculed the committed efforts of feminists to create a literature—and ultimately a society—where children can find role models free of debilitating sex-role stereotyping. Beyond that, the editor's attitude addressed a question that The Feminist Press has been studying for the past year: Has the women's movement had an effect on recent children's literature?

Since its inception in 1970, The Feminist Press has offered alternatives to the sexist literature produced in abundance by commercial publishers. Such popular Feminist Press titles as Firegirl and My Mother the Mail Carrier (in a Spanish/English edition) have demonstrated to publishers, teachers, and librarians the kinds of stories that should be available to young people. This work of The Press has been complemented by other alternative feminist publishers, all seeking to expand options and provoke change.

After six years of effort, however, The Feminist Press' Board voted to suspend further acquisition or production of children's books, in order to study the influence of feminist publishing—and the women's movement in general—on juvenile publishers.

The research team consisted of Jeanne Bracken and Sharon Wigutoff, Children's Book Editors, and Cynthia Strange, a student intern from Dartmouth College. Initially, we were rather optimistic about the growing awareness of changing social patterns on the part of commercial publishers. We frequently receive review copies of new nonsexist trade books and had been impressed by attempts to deal with such sensitive topics as working mothers, separation and divorce, handicaps, and death. We believed that publishers were exhibiting a receptivity to issues that had previously been avoided as "too sticky."

What we did not realize until our study was under way was that the percentage of these books was still so small as to reduce their existence to tokenism. In the latest catalog of Parents' Magazine Press, Fall 1977, there are twelve books listed under the heading, "Role-Free Books for Boys and Girls." The catalog, which includes the company's backlist, features hundreds of titles. The message, thus, is quite clear: The work of The Feminist Press and its sister institutions is far from completed; it is, in fact, a "trend" that still has to prove its staying power.

We began our study with a list of basic questions:

1. Are more new books being published with nonsexist themes?
2. Are we, as feminists, satisfied with the way these themes have been treated?
3. Are certain less threatening themes being dealt with now, and other, more controversial, themes still being avoided?
4. Are major publishers actively seeking to attract and publish more nonsexist manuscripts?
5. Are librarians receptive to these new books, and do they promote them?
6. Does it still make sense for The Feminist Press to publish children's books?

Guided by this outline, we divided our procedure into two major steps: a) reading and evaluation of picture books, and b) interviews with publishers and librarians.

Our first function was to define the limits of the project. We agreed to confine the survey to picture books published in the last five years, using School Library Journal as our primary source. Since there are thousands of new picture books published each year, we had to decide how to select those books which were "nonsexist," and thus directly related to our study. A two-page criteria sheet with accompanying guidelines was developed, outlining the possible plot situations which would qualify a book for our research. These fell into several categories: 1) girls as active, self-actualizing protagonists; 2) boys expressing a wide range of emotions; 3) boys and girls relating in noncompetitive friendships; 4) children relating to adults; and 5) a large category including various patterns of living and unusual themes. This last section was subdivided into single parenthood; extended family; multiracial family; adoption; handicaps; death; and nontraditional careers.

A separate criteria sheet was employed for each book read by the reviewers. In addition to noting primary and secondary themes, the researchers separately evaluated text and illustrations for sexism and racism. Consideration was given to secondary as well as primary characterizations, and finally, the selection was given an overall rating for literary and artistic quality.

Certain definite conclusions can be drawn from the information gathered on these criteria sheets. Of the almost 175 books studied, the majority fell into the first plot category, "girl in self-actualizing situation." It has become increasingly popular to depict an active, adventurous female protagonist. A major problem, however, is that she is frequently placed in the context of a stereotyped environment where she exists as a "freak" who must constantly prove herself, and who is often
Feminist Press Children's Books: Past, Present, and Future

The first book published by The Feminist Press—in 1971—was a nonsexist children's book, *The Dragon and the Doctor*. Since then, we've published eight more: *Firegirl, Nothing But a Dog, Coleen the Question Girl, I'm Like Me, Storypack, ABC Workbook, A Train for Jane,* and *My Mother the Mail Carrier*. All nine are still in print and selling well.

In 1976 we began the process, described in the accompanying article, of re-evaluating our children's book program. We wanted to explore whether there was a need for The Feminist Press to continue to publish children's books and, if so, what kinds of children's books they should be. A children's book committee was formed, augmented by a student intern from Dartmouth College, Cynthia Strange. We called a moratorium on accepting children's book manuscripts and began a study, the results of which are described on this page.

Three projects have emerged as a result of this process, all of which will become future publications of The Feminist Press. *The Lilith Summer* by Hadley Irwin, to be published in 1978, will be our first new book. It's an unusual and sensitive story for slightly older readers—9 to 12—about the complex relationship between a twelve-year-old girl and a seventy-seven-year-old woman, both striving for independence. The second book is a collection of *Fairy/Folk Tales*, culled and edited by Ethel Phelps of The Feminist Press. These are traditional stories from various cultures, chosen for their portrayals of witty and resourceful women. And finally, Jeanne Bracken and Sharon Wigutoff of The Feminist Press' children's book committee are compiling the results of the study they describe in this article. The product will be a critically annotated list of over fifty recent picture books, valuable for parents, teachers, and librarians.

Those that do exist are generally well done, like *Bird and Michael*, both by Leisel Moak Skorpen, but the need for more of these stories is clear.

Only a small number of books filled the remaining plot possibilities. Our category on alternative families was particularly disappointing. The world of children's books remains unquestionably a white, suburban, middle class, nuclear family environment. Of the relatively few books that offered alternatives or dealt with "problems," most were didactic message books that work best when read by an adult to a child. Most rare is a book that skillfully integrates a special situation into the context of a good, readable story. It is our strong conviction that children need to read about single-parent households, multiracial adoptions, and communal living arrangements, especially since such circumstances are becoming more visible in the society around them.

There were 35 publishers represented in our study of 175 books with nonsexist themes. Over a five-year period, this averages out to one book per publisher per year. We arranged to meet with editors of some of the more prolific houses to find out why this number was so disturbingly low.

Most of the editors we spoke with seemed sensitive about the issue of sexism and optimistic about the prognosis for change. However, those publishers that market most of their books directly to consumers through bookstores seem less willing to experiment with innovative manuscripts. Their policies are clearly related to the commercial profits of sexist books by successful authors, rather than to any sensitivity to issues. The clearest example of this is the Richard Scarry series published by Random House. On the other hand, publishers who sell primarily to libraries and schools are more progressive and will take risks with controversial subject matter. We were particularly impressed with the number and quality of books issued by Harper and Row and Dial Press.

Individual awareness was an important factor in an editor's attempts to eliminate sexism. Frequently, some editors will suggest minor cosmetic changes such as putting girls in trousers, adding more girls to a picture, or taking the apron off Mommy.

Without exception, editors said that manuscripts cannot be solicited on a specific theme or results are contrived.
lacking both creativity and inspiration. Over and over again, we were told that literary quality is the primary consideration in choosing a manuscript. A book that sacrifices this quality in order to promote a message, editors said, is defeated by its own pedantry and heavy-handedness. The ideal situation for all publishers is a book that unselfconsciously integrates positive values and readability. Editors from more progressive houses claimed that the paucity of new books on controversial subjects was related to the difficulty of finding manuscripts that successfully achieved this integration.

The tremendous emphasis which publishers placed on librarians led us to conclude that the influence of this group is crucial. As the principal purchasers of new books on the one hand, and the primary source of recommendations to readers on the other, librarians pack a double wallop in their ability to get certain types of books published and then disseminated.

More people are borrowing books from libraries, as rising costs make purchasing prohibitive. Parents depend on children's librarians for advice on books in general, as well as for specific information about books dealing with special situations. While the public reaction to controversial issues varies from one region to another, the librarian's individual level of awareness and her/his sensitivity are crucial factors.

But what should The Feminist Press and other alternative publishers conclude from this study? Statistics showed quite clearly that feminist prodding of the commercial houses has had, thus far, only limited success. Our initial optimism about the appearance of a handful of very good books dissipated when we realized how few they were in relation to the total production of children's books.

We are further discouraged by the attitudes we have encountered at various conferences on children's literature. At Rutgers University in October 1976, for example, a conference participant queried, "When is this whole equality thing going to end? Hasn't it gone far enough?" It is our conclusion that if such a question is still being asked, then clearly we still have a lot more prodding to do. The "equality thing" cannot be permitted to end until no publisher need list a separate category for "Role-Free Books" because all books will be role-free.

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Estelle Lauter

Women Artists: A Book and Slides for Classroom Use


Although Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson are not trained art historians, they have gathered quantities of historical information based on extensive research into a lively narrative that is a fine tribute to their training in comparative literature, and to the feminist spirit of collective research. Besides treating each of the 22 artists covered in Eleanor Tufts' *Our Hidden Heritage*, the authors provide similar commentary on 40 additional European and American artists, a chapter on the medieval period, sections on twentieth-century surrealists and feminists, and a chapter on women artists in China by Lorri Hagman. They treat all but 22 of the artists included in the exhibit catalogue by Harris and Nochlin may be necessary. If this information is not available from the authors for a second edition, perhaps some enterprising art historian could prepare a supplement.

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