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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.

loved *in spite of*, rather than because of her individuality. In *Molly Mullet* (1975) by Patricia Coombs, a father says to his daughter, "Why couldn't I have had a son instead of a measly daughter like you?" Molly then goes on to prove that, *even though she is a girl*, she can still be a brave hero.

It was the rare book that showed "liberated" adult women coexisting with the nonconformist young girl. The message here is that you may sometimes manage to get away with unorthodox behavior as a child, but be prepared to give up that freedom when you grow up.

Not all books with central female characters were unconditionally nonsexist. For example, *The Maggie B.* (1975) by Irene Haas starts out with a girl wishing for her own ship, to be alone and free on the ocean. However, she takes her baby brother along for company and spends most of her voyage in an apron, feeding and caring for him.

While active girls are sometimes getting their due, there are still fewer books that deal with sensitive, tenderhearted boys.

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,