Radical Feminism

edited by Anne Koedt • Ellen Levine • Anita Rapone

An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
A Feminist Look at Children's Books

by the Feminists on Children’s Media

Feminists on Children’s Media is a collective formed in the summer of 1970 by women concerned about the stereotyped female image prevalent in children’s literature. Their program of slides, tapes and readings on sexism in children’s books has been shown to a variety of audiences, and their bibliography of non-sexist children’s books, Little Miss Muffet Fights Back,* has been widely distributed.

Is the portrayal of females in children’s books sexist? That is, are girls and women assigned only traditional female roles and personalities? And when the female foot fails to fit that often too-tight shoe, is the girl or woman then seen as an unfortunate, troubled human being?

These questions were the basis of a group effort to scrutinize some of the more highly praised children’s books. In our view, a non-sexist portrayal would offer the girl reader a positive image of woman’s physical, emotional, and intellectual potential; it would encourage her to reach her own full personhood, free of traditionally imposed limitations.

In selecting books to examine, we consulted a number of influential lists. These were the Notable Books of 1969 (American Library Association), the Child Study Association’s annual recommendations for that same year, and the Newbery Award winners.


* For a copy of this bibliography send 50 cents in coin plus a stamped (16 cents) self-addressed 4 x 9½ envelope to Feminists on Children’s Media, P.O. Box 4315, Grand Central Station, New York, N.Y. 10017.
It was a shock to discover almost immediately that relatively few of the books on these lists even feature female characters, let alone what we would consider positive female characters. Of all forty-nine Newbery Award winners, books about boys outnumbered books about girls by about three to one. On that score, the years have brought little improvement. The ALA list for 1969 gave us a ratio of over two to one.

The Child Study Association list for the same year proved more difficult to analyze. It is very long, divided into innumerable categories, and many of the books can’t yet be found in the libraries. However, we made a separate check of several categories. Under the heading of “Boys and Girls” we found a male to female ratio of two to one. Under “Growing Up” the ratio was over three to one. And “Sports,” of course, like certain bars we could formerly name, was 100 percent male. The rest of the book list may not follow the pattern of this sampling, but suspicion runs high!

The thoughtful introduction to the Child Study Association list makes the following statement: The books a child reads “should not shield him from knowledge of destructive forces in the world, but rather help him to cope with them.” We agree, for the most part. But why does the sentence read “shield him” and “help him”? Sexism is such a destructive force in the world that we feel the implicit sexism in this sentence should not be overlooked.

The introduction states also that a book’s “possible emotional and intellectual impact on a young reader” must be considered. Right on! Not even a problem of gender there. The CSA continues: “... From its inception, it has been aware of the mental health aspects of reading and asks that books for children present basically honest concepts of life, positive ethical values, and honest interpersonal relationships.” We ask no more than that. The CSA has clearly been struggling to encourage greater sensitivity to racism in books for children. If only their future book selections could be made with an equally growing sensitivity to the impact of sexism! Many of the present selections fail to realize the promise of their own introduction. The list is guilty of sexism—if only through indifference.

Of course, a greater sensitivity to sexism would greatly curtail the current lists of recommended children’s books, at least for the next few years. Yet a scrupulous attitude on the part of prestigious
organizations would surely serve powerfully in raising the general feminist consciousness of the children’s book world, making forever obsolete Eve Merriam’s recent and accurate comment that “sex prejudice is the only prejudice now considered socially acceptable.” Habit dies hard.

We’d like to apologize for seeming to pick on CSA. It is just that such a praiseworthy introduction deserved attention in terms of its implications for the female image. Nor were we being picky in our examination of specific books: Checking the prevalence of so virulent a disease as sexism requires the isolation of even potential carriers.

What would we like to see in children’s books? What were our criteria? We wanted to see girl readers encouraged to develop physical confidence and strength without the need to fear any corresponding loss of “femininity.” We would have liked to see the elimination of all those tiresome references to “tomboys.” Why can’t a girl who prefers baseball to ballet simply be a girl who prefers baseball to ballet?

Many women have to—or simply prefer to—earn a living. Can’t we encourage girls to find satisfaction and fulfillment in work, and lay aside forever the suspicion that for a woman, work outside the home is primarily proof of her inability to love a man, or to land a sufficiently lucrative one? Women do study seriously, work with enjoyment—or at least pride in their competence—get promoted, and (of course) fight sexism at work and in their families in order to progress. Let’s show them as no less “feminine,” despite the assertiveness and firm sense of self required in this untraditional role.

Margaret Mead has written that “man is unsexed by failure, woman by success.” That is another brutal truth we would like to see changed. And while we’re about it, let’s not overlook the fact that boys, too, are denigrated and cramped by sexism. Our current rigid role definitions require that a boy be all that a girl should not be: unafraid, competent at “male” jobs, strong. A weeping boy is a “sissy.” Words like “sissy”—and “hero,” too—should be dissected and exposed for the inhuman demands they make on growing boys. Children’s books could help.

We object to a woman’s being defined by the man she marries, or the children she bears, or the father she once obeyed. Let’s see women who are people in their own right—dependent of such compensatory affiliations. And if a woman doesn’t want children, or
even a husband, must this be seen as peculiar? Why not encourage girls in a search for alternate life styles? Give a girl all the possible options for her future life choices that you give a boy, all his freedom to inquire and explore and achieve. Her options don’t have to be slanted toward certain currently socially imposed preferences.

There are books on superwomen. Okay. Superwomen do exist. But many more books are needed on women who simply function very well and freely wherever they choose—or are forced—to apply their abilities.

We are bitterly tired of seeing depictions of the woman as castrator. Even a well-known writer, whose portrayal of girls we frequently admire, slipped badly in some recent picture books. In one of these, the mother reproves her son for spilling the mud he is playing with—even though the scene is outdoors! In another, little sister (and we know where she learned her lesson) reproves brother for accidentally spilling paint off his easel. Little girls are as capable of making a casual mess and as freely lost in creative play as little boys. A picture book that shows this beautifully is Rain Rain Rivers by Uri Shulevitz (Farrar, 1969) which we were delighted to find on both the ALA and CSA lists. (We were as pleased to find the two previously mentioned books ignored by both lists.)

And when, as must sometimes happen if books portray real life, there is an overcontrolling or too-bossy woman, she should not be made a fool or villain. A little understanding—of her problem, her frustration at not being allowed to play an equal role in her family or her world, and her consequent misuse of energy to project her ideas and ego through the lives of others—is long overdue.

How about books showing more divorced and single-parent families? And, for heaven’s sake, every divorced or widowed mother does not solve her problems through remarriage—or even wish to do so. (Few do, you know!) Maybe she can start on the career she never had, and discover a new concept of herself. The difficulties and the loneliness are real, as are the child care problems. But let the woman find a new self-reliance in fighting her own battles, and joy in winning at least some of them.

There is also the question of language. No more automatic use of “he” to mean “child,” or “mankind” to mean “humankind.” If at first the alternatives seem forced, and they will, they won’t sound that way for long.

Despite our criticism of socially assigned roles, we don’t mean
to diminish or ignore the mother or housewife. She is often a strong, wonderfully rich human being. Her role can be vital, and sometimes she finds satisfaction in it. But let's not insist on that as her role. Men can also cope skillfully with household tasks, and not necessarily look for a woman or daughter to take them off the hook.

**Sexist Books**

The books we read—most from the lists mentioned earlier—fell, or were pushed by our merciless analysis, into several categories. One, plain and simple, was the Sexist Book, in which girls and women are exclusively assigned traditional female roles, although the material may, unhappily, be fairly true to life.

We were forcibly struck by the purposeful sexist propaganda between the covers of some of the recommended children's books. Young women who have found it an uphill struggle to identify with the popular female image will recognize it as propaganda and not simply as a natural reflection of life. Unfortunately the girl reader is not yet so experienced. Books that outline a traditional background role for women, praising their domestic accomplishments, their timidity of soul, their gentle appearance and manners, and at the same time fail to portray initiative, enterprise, physical prowess, and genuine intellect, deliver a powerful message to children of both sexes. Such books are a social poison.

Take, for a horrible example, the attitude exemplified in the following line: “Accept the fact that this is a man’s world and learn how to play the game gracefully.” Those words fell from the lips of a sympathetic male character in Irene Hunt’s 1967 Newbery winner *Up the Road Slowly* (Follett, 1966). Or take this juicy bit from the 1957 winner *Miracles on Maple Hill* by Virginia Sorenson (Harcourt, 1956):

For the millionth time she was glad she wasn’t a boy. It was all right for girls to be scared or silly or even ask dumb questions. Everybody just laughed and thought it was funny. But if anybody caught Joe asking a dumb question or even thought he was the littlest bit scared, he went red and purple and white. Daddy was even something like that, old as he was.

Does that passage describe real life? Indeed it does! But a good book for children should comment and leave the child feeling some-
thing is wrong here. This one does not. In fact, we voted it our supreme example of the most thoroughly relentless type of sexism found in children’s literature. The girl, Marly, never overcomes her hero worship of brother Joe or her comparative inferiority. And it certainly would have been relevant to explore the toll that maintaining hero status takes on Joe’s character.

Such perfect examples, of course, are not the rule. But there was a surplus of books whose thesis might seem less obvious, but whose refrain was predictably the same. A little girl in the 1955 Newbery winner *The Wheel on the School* (Harper, 1954) asks her boy playmate: “Can I go, too?” And the response is “No! Girls are no good at jumping. It’s a boy’s game.” Meindert DeJong leaves it at that—and another eager little girl reader is squelched.

Those fictional girls who join the prestigious ranks of male adventurers often do so at the expense of other members of their sex. And small wonder, the tomboy-turned-token-female is simply the other side of the coin. The message is clear: If a girl wishes to join the boys in their pranks and hell-raising, or to use her imagination and personality in leading them, she renounces all claim to supposedly feminine characteristics—tears and fears and pink hair ribbons. The line between traditionally assigned sex roles is drawn sharp and clear. The girl who crosses that line is forced to desert her sex rather than allowed to act as a spokeswoman for a broader definition.

Take *Lulu’s Back in Town* (Funk & Wagnall, 1968). The proof provided by author Laura Dean to show Lulu’s final acceptance by the boys is the clubhouse sign: “FOR BOYS ONLY. No Girls Allowed. (Except Lulu.)” This is seen by the author, who unfortunately happens to be a woman, as a satisfactory ending. But our committee was not so pleased. (Except to find that neither ALA nor CSA had listed it.)

**Cop-Outs**

The Cop-Out Book is often the most insidious. At its worst, it promises much and delivers nothing. But the better ones are the most infuriating, for often they are only a step away from being the exact kind of literature we’d like to see for girls and boys about girls. The actual cop-out may be only a crucial line, a paragraph, the last chapter. But somewhere a sexist compromise is
made, somewhere the book adjusts to the stereotyped role of woman, often for the sake of social pressure and conformity. The compromise brings with it a change, and this change is not only disturbing, but often distorts the logical development of the character herself. Suddenly her development is redirected, or, rather, stunted.

The many Cop-Out Books we found are probably a fair reflection of the social uncertainties and inner conflicts of writers, publishers, and reviewers in our sexist society.

*Caddie Woodlawn* by Carol R. Brink (Macmillan, 1935) is a Newbery winner. Not a recent one, but still extremely popular. Caddie is a young pioneer girl, allowed to run free with her brothers. She is happy and strong in her so-called tomboy role. Though her mother pressures her to become more of a “lady,” the reader feels serenely certain that Caddie will remain her own person. Alas, as the book draws to a close, Caddie’s father pleads: “It’s a strange thing, but somehow we expect more of girls than of boys. It is the sisters and wives and mothers, you know, Caddie, who keep the world sweet and beautiful....” Thus subdued, she joins the insipidly depicted girls at the weaving loom. True, the boys do ask her to teach them how to weave. Apparently they may choose to join women at their work, but no longer may Caddie choose to run free in the woods. And we are left feeling cheated. Why should it be the right choice for her obediently to join the “sweet and beautiful” women of the world on their pedestals? Why shouldn’t she continue to struggle for a life in which she might fulfill some inner potential?

The linking of a girl’s growing up to the abandoning of her “tomboy” ways is a depressingly frequent theme in these books. As a stage in growing up, tomboy behavior appears to be acceptable. But the girl must in the end conform to more socially approved behavior. In a widely used bibliography compiled by Clara Kirchner in 1966 entitled *Behavior Patterns in Children’s Books*, there is an entire section called “From Tomboy to Young Woman.” Here are two random descriptions:

*A Girl Can Dream* by Betty Cavanna (Westminster, 1948): Loretta Larkin, tops in athletic but poor in social graces and jealous of a classmate who shines socially, finds out that being “just a girl” can be fun.
Billie by Esphyr Slobodkina (Lothrop, 1959): Billie, who wore faded jeans and played boys’ games because she didn’t like being a girl, came to think differently after she took ballet lessons to limber up a sprained ankle.

These books fit into the following categories: Womanliness, Growing Up, and Popularity.

Young readers of such grievous cop-outs are forced to believe that the spunk, individuality, and physical capability so refreshingly portrayed in tomboy heroines must be surrendered when girls grow up, in order to fit the passive, supposedly more mature image of a young woman. But where is that earlier energy to be spent? Is depression in the adult woman perhaps linked to the painful suppression of so many sparks of life? In a way we could call the Cop-Out Book the “co-op” book, for it permits the tomboy reader to believe she can pass comfortably over into that other world at a safely future date. Real life is rarely like that.

A new book recommended on both the ALA and the CSA lists is Constance Green’s A Girl Called Al (Viking, 1969). The main character comes across as a nonconformist who truly enjoys her individuality, and throughout most of the book she eschews traditional female worries—how she looks, hooking boy friends, etc. Wonderful. But the ending is a neat little all-American package. Al gets thin, gets pretty, and now she will be popular. All these sudden switches hit the reader in the last few pages. Her pigtails make room for a feminine hairdo. Her closest friend explains:

Her mother took her to the place she gets her hair done and had the man wash and set Al’s hair, and now she wears it long with a ribbon around it. It is very becoming, my mother says. She is right. But I miss Al’s pigtails. I wanted her to wear it this way but now that she does I’m kind of sorry. She looks older and different, is all I know.

Again, we are led to believe that another character in our long line of individual heroines will conform to the role society has rigidly defined for her. We find it hard to buy the sudden change in Al. And we also miss the pigtails.

Sometimes it is the focus of a book that makes it a cop-out. When we read in 1959 Newbery winner, Elizabeth Speare’s The Witch of Blackbird Pond (Houghton Mifflin, 1958), we praised Kit’s independent spirit, her rejection of bigoted values, and her truly
striking courage at a time when women were burned for witchcraft. From a feminist standpoint, the book is marred only by the plot’s revolving around the standard question: “Whom shall Kit marry?” In too many books we find the male character worrying about what shall he be while the female character worries about who shall he be.

Only a few hairs are out of place in Next Door to Xanadu by Doris Orgel (Harper, 1969), also listed by ALA and CSA. The main character faces the too-often very real hatred of pre-teen boys toward girls. She meets it with strength, earning respect. The only boy-crazy girl in the book is deemphasized. But one scene allows our society’s pervasive sexism to come shining through.

At a going-away party for one of the girls, a woman parades as a fortuneteller. “She took out a bowl, put it on the table, filled it with all sorts of strange little things. Then she said ‘Who among you dares to delve into the secrets the future holds in store?’ ” Here were the fortunes of the girls: The girl who pulled out two safety pins would be “the mother of a fine pair of twins.” Chalk meant another would be a teacher. The one who picked a little sack of soil would be “a farmer’s wife.” One pulled a penny: she would be very rich. One picked a little plastic boy doll and she would meet a “fine young man.” “Great happiness” was in store for the one who got a bluebird’s feather. When one of the girls pulled out a jack, the fortuneteller chanted: “Butcher, baker, candlestick-maker; tailor, sailor, teacher, preacher; doctor, lawyer, carpenter, smith—she would have kept it up, but Helen guessed it. Betsy would marry a jack-of-all-trades.”

Not be a Jack-of-all-trades, but marry one. Not be a farmer, but be a farmer’s wife. The only vocation predicted was that of teacher. Unfortunately, fortunetellers will be like that, until we have feminist fortunetellers. That would certainly bring brighter futures.

At the risk of carping, we felt that such a fine book as A Wrinkle in Time by Madeline L’Engle (Farrar, 1962), the 1963 Newbery winner, had a hint of acceptance of woman’s second-class status. This is almost the only science fiction book in which a girl is the main character. We even find a mother who is a scientist, perhaps one of the only scientist moms in juvenile fiction. But why did father have to be a super scientist, topping mom by a degree or two?
Positive Images

Happily, if not of course, there are some books for children which show female characters in flexible, diverse roles. They allow for character development beyond the stereotype, and do not disappoint us in the end. At first we tried calling these “Non-Sexist.” But we found many books were not precisely either Sexist or Cop-Out, though somehow they did not quite fit our exacting feminist standards, usually because they did not deal with the questions they posed in a sufficiently clear, real, and affirmative way. The rare book that did succeed, even in this, is our Positive-Image Book.

Certainly, these categories overlap a bit. A Wrinkle in Time really belongs among the Positive-Image Books. We just couldn’t resist putting down papa’s degrees. Unfair, we admit, because of the especially fine, honest relationship between Calvin (the boy who is a friend, as opposed to Boy Friend) and the girl protagonist. They respect each other’s heads, and his ego does not stand in the way of her saving the day with an act of courage that rescues her little brother from it. We also applauded the image of the mother as a brilliant scientist who instills pride in her children.

Another Newbery we salute is the 1961 winner, Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O’Dell (Houghton Mifflin, 1960), one of the rare books showing a girl with strong physical skills. She kills wild dogs, constructs weapons, kills a giant tentacled sea fish, and hauls a six-man canoe by herself. The Indian girl protagonist, Karana, spends eighteen years alone on a bleak and lonely island. And there we are indeed tempted to ask why such a marvelous heroine can only be encountered alone on an island—and never in the midst of society?

While on the subject of positive images, there is a new book we hope will appear on the 1970 recommended lists. Rufus Gideon Grant by Leigh Dean (Scribners, 1970) is about a boy, but we were taken by the following reference to a woman: “There inside this magazine was this lady, climbing giant trees and playing with wild chimpanzees....” And Rufus asks: “Can a boy be a zoologist?”

If we had time we would also like to discuss such essentially positive-image books as Strawberry Girl by Lois Lenski (Lippincott, 1945), From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler
by E. L. Konigsburg (Atheneum, 1967), Vera and Bill Cleaver's *Where the Lilies Bloom* (Lippincott, 1969), and *Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren (reissued in paper by Viking, 1969). Padding our Positive-Image list a bit we might add commendable classics like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (first published in 1865), *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy M. Montgomery (Grosset & Dunlap, 1908), and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* by Kate Douglas Wiggin (Macmillan, 1903). Of course there are some positive books that escaped our notice, just as some of the negative ones may have slipped by, but we wanted to cover a fourth and extra category that seems to overlap all the others.

**Especially for Girls**

This category appears on a number of publishers' lists and on lists of recommended books. It is called "especially for girls." The reason advanced by librarians and publishers for having such a category at all is that while girls are perfectly happy to read "boys'" books, no self-respecting boy will read books about girls. In our male-dominated society, unfortunately, this is probably true. But listing a separate group of books for girls provides boys with a list of books not to read, further polarizing the sexes.

There seems only one possible justification for a separate category of books for girls: to spot and recommend those books which, according to our highest, most stringent feminist standards are not sexist. Pursuing this logic, when children's literature no longer supports sexism, there will no longer be any reason to list books "especially for girls."

The current lists of girls' books promoted by publishers show a preponderance of stories about love, dating, and romance. And there are the companion books about young girls with problems like shyness, overweight, glasses, acne, and so on, that are supposed to interfere with romance. Certainly, problems facing young girls should be dealt with in the books they read, but we resent the implication forced on young girls that romance is the only fulfilling future for them. Boys, too, are involved in romance, but their books are about other things.

The lists for girls also include career books about nurses, secretaries, ballet dancers, stewardesses. Why not more female doctors?
Bosses? Pilots? Aquanauts? Present books simply reinforce the sex roles imposed by society, and even then virtually all the careers end in a cop-out. When the girl marries she gives up the career. But must marriage and career be mutually exclusive? For their publishers, these books are justified by the market—they are meant to sell rather than edify. We happen to believe that career books that edify will also sell, and far more lastingly, as women gain in the struggle for their freedom.

But what about those lists of currently recommended books that are intended to edify? In 1969, for example, the Child Study Association listed eight books "Especially for Girls." Of these, we were disheartened to find that only one was free—or almost free—of sexism. Two more were Cop-Out Books. The rest were middling to very bad.

Let's start with the best. The Motoring Millers by Alberta Wilson Constant (Crowell, 1969) not only shows delightful girls and women behaving responsibly and delightfully and doing many things that men do, but the question of sex roles is specifically aired. In the story, the winner of an auto race turns out to be a young girl. When the wife of a college president says to her, "I want you to know that I am highly in favor of your driving in this race. Women should advance their cause in every field," the winner replies, "I didn't think about that. I just love to drive. Taught myself on our one-cylinder Trumbull when I was ten." We welcome both reactions.

Two more books on this list, A Girl Called Al and Next Door to Xanadu, have already been described above as Cop-Outs, though we did consider them both almost commendable. To those three acceptable books, we would also add Julie's Decision by Rose A. Levant (Washburn, 1969) except that we were disturbed by what seemed a paternalistic white attitude especially inappropriate in a book about a black girl.

But, after these titles, the CSA girls’ list deteriorates into sexism. It is shocking to find "recommended for girls" a book like The Two Sisters by Honor Arundel (Meredith, 1969), which not only reinforces the stereotype of girls as romantic, clothes-crazy, and spend-thrift, but whose moral says that, when all is said and done, love is a woman's proper vocation and her future ought to be subordinated to her husband's. The young heroine in The Two Sisters has just
told her father that she may abandon her university scholarship to follow her husband who has gone off to find a better job in another city. Her father says gently: "Geoff's quite right to be ambitious and you're right not to stand in his way. A man who doesn't get a chance to fulfill his ambition makes a terrible husband." It doesn't occur to either that a woman who sacrifices her potential can also end up making a terrible wife.

John Rowe Townsend's *Hell's Edge* (Lothrop, 1969) is just as bad. The motherless teenage heroine cooks all the meals and does the housework for her teacher-father, whose domestic ineptitude is paraded as one of his endearing qualities. A pair of sisters in the book are set up with mutually exclusive stereotyped female traits—and then shot down for them. One is described as a "half-wit" for being concerned with looks and clothes; the other sister, a bookworm, is denigrated for not caring about her looks or clothes. Damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

In another CSA recommendation, the boys in the family are considered more important than the girls, even though the book is supposedly for girls. (Well, it happens in real life too!) The name of that prize is *One to Grow On* by Jean Little (Little, Brown, 1969).

In *A Crown for a Queen* by Ursula Moray Williams (Meredith, 1969), the plot revolves around—get ready—a beauty contest with the boys as judges! The most memorable (and most offensive) line occurs when the heroine, Jenny, finally gets the beauty crown. As we might predict, she "never felt happier in her life." This is scarcely the positive female image we’d been looking for, even if we could all be beauty queens.

As our consciousness of "woman's place" changes, our recommendations of books for girls must change. As must books themselves. Eventually, we will have no more need for any list recommended "Especially for Girls."