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ET TU, JUDY BLUME: ARE THE BOOKS GIRLS CHOOSE TO READ, SEXIST?

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The decade of the 1970's could be characterized as period of feminine consciousness, a period of concentrated awareness of social and economic imbalances and injustices, which led to thorough examinations of educational materials. Sexism was discovered to be rampant, though perhaps not unexpected, throughout reading materials intended for young people. Many studies examined the frequency of appearance of male and female characters, which a majority focussed on sex role stereotyping.

Britton (1973) investigated sixteen reading series to determine the extent of sex role stereotyping. While the previous year Graebner (1972) had reported a small increase in female career role occupations, the results of Britton's more thorough analysis were not so encouraging. Britton found that only fourteen percent of the stories, analyzed by content and illustration, depicted females in career occupations. At the time of this analysis, women comprised forty-two percent of the labor force. An additional finding was that women were virtual captives of three career roles: mother, teacher, or nurse.

In a follow-up study, Britton and Lumpkin (1977) found little improvement in the reduction of sex-role stereotyping. This paucity of improvement existed even though new guidelines on sexism, as well as ethnicity, were enacted by most educational publishing companies. The lack of corrective action corroborated other follow-up investigations (Frasher and Walker, 1972).

Another area of frequent concern has been in the characteristics of the sexes, as depicted in children's literature. The Committee of Women on Words and Images (1975), after analyzing 2,760 basal reading selections, found that boys were characterized as adventure loving, physical, and bright. At the same time, girls were depicted as timid, passive, emotional, and often slow-witted. These findings supported other investigations (Feminists on Children's Media, 1971; Nilsen, 1971; Tibbets, 1975). Similar treatments were also found in adolescent literature (Nelson, 1975).

Some authorities suggest that the type of material girls read present inappropriate sex-role models (Taylor, 1973; Oliver, 1974) and indeed, imply that this may be harmful (Beaven, 1972; Bem and Bem, 1975). We have now experienced over ten years of research into sex role stereotyping, consciousness raising, and career role opportunities, with resultant recommendations to teachers, authors, and students. The mass media has certainly promoted awareness of feminist

issues. Therefore, as a portion of a study of the reading preferences of intermediate grade girls, the researchers decided to also examine sex role models as exemplified in girls' preferred reading material.

The Study

Data on the reading habits of 790 intermediate grade boys and girls were collected in forty-two grade five, six, and seven classrooms in a suburban district near Vancouver, British Columbia. (Snyder, 1980) Children in these classes were asked to record every book which they read during a five month Sustained Silent Reading Project (Summers, 1979). They were to indicate which three selections were their favorites and who recommended the books to them. From this population, seven classrooms at grade five, six, and seven were randomly selected yielding 100, 89, and 79 girls' recording forms respectively. The three favorites from each record form and who recommended each of these books were then compiled by grade level.

The content of the most favored books by grade level was examined. Each major and minor character was analyzed, using sections of the content analysis taxonomy devised by Saario, Jacklin and Tittle (1973). This taxonomy classifies characters by age and sex and codes each character according to their occurrence in specific environments; their occurrence as major characters; their exhibitions of distinct behaviors; their being recipients of discrete consequences; and, their instigation of consequences for others. For the purpose of this study various behaviors exhibited and received by the characters as well as the types of consequences (positive, negative, or neutral) incurred were charted.

Findings and Discussion

As might be expected, a great deal of inconsistency or lack of consensus appears in the choice of the girls' favorite books. At the grade five level, twelve separate titles comprised the top three choices. Seven titles appeared on the grade six list while ten titles appeared on the grade seven list. An interesting result, however, was the consistent selection, at all grade levels, of books authored by Judy Blume. In fact, Are You There God? It's Me Margaret (1970) was the most favored selection of grade five, six, and seven girls. Deenie (1973) was the second most popular book at grades five and seven, and tied for first at the grade six level. Six of the seven favorite books chosen by grade six girls were written by Blume.

As to who recommends books which become children's favorites, examination of the recording forms indicates that if a book is not self-selected, peers have the most influence in encouraging the reading of a particular book. Librarians and/or teachers were rarely indicated as the referring source. Although boys' preferences were not tallied for this study, the researchers noted definite sex differences in books selected by boys and girls. A mere look at the lists would tell one the sex of the reader; no boy listed any of the girls' top favorites.

Since Are You There God? It's Me Margaret was a first choice of all the intermediate girls, and appeared representative of a

popular type of realistic fiction being selected by girls, this particular book was chosen for an in-depth analysis. The book describes the life of a young girl entering puberty, and contains major characters and a majority of supporting characters who are female. Behaviors exhibited and types of consequences were charted for the following characters: Margaret; her mother; her fraternal grandmother; her best friend, Nancy Wheeler; and, Nancy's mother. No comparisons were drawn with the peripheral male characters.

Stereotypical female characterizations of emotionalism, dependence, passivity, conformity, etc., are recurring behaviors exhibited throughout the book. The majority of classifiable behaviors occurred in emotional expressions such as crying, and verbal expressions of love and hate. Examples of nurturing behavior were evident. Behaviors that could be classified as constructive or productive only appeared five per cent of the time. These behaviors were also stereotyped in that they usually consisted of such tasks as cleaning, washing clothes and washing dishes. Little aggressive behavior could be found with the exception of verbal arguments. Physical exertion was generally not evident; however, physical behaviors which were depicted were concerned with "bust development" exercising activities. Other behaviors exhibited with some frequency dealt with self-care (make-up, dressing), avoidance behaviors, and behaviors of conformity. As far as consequences were concerned, these were more positive (50%) than negative (35%). However, both consequences were usually generated from significant others rather than oneself.

The problems facing the characters are real, but more often than not, the characters are flat, with adults in stereotyped, often unflattering, roles. Are You There God? It's Me Margaret is a good example of a sensitive story about a maturing girl who is developing an awareness of self and of the impact of physiological and psychological changes; yet, she is surrounded by adults who offer little hope for girls as models of adulthood. For instance, the first view of Margaret's mother is one of her "sniffing under her armpits" (page 1). By page 4, Mother has her "bottom sticking out of a kitchen cabinet". Her mother is shown as preferring tailored things, thus denying Margaret a fluffy dressing table. Mother also paints pictures which are put down by Father as probably ending up in someone's attic. She is nurturing in behavior which is her outstanding characteristic. This is exemplified in actions such as purchasing items for Margaret, driving her places, and generally being there, seeing about dinner and being sure Margaret gets to where her friends are.

Margaret's friend, Nancy, also has a one-dimensional mother who bowls on Mondays, plays bridge on Thursdays, and apparently helps organize car pools, even for Sunday School. Nancy's mother is nosey, always washes swim suits after someone wears them, and is known only through brief conversations and comments from Nancy.

About the only women in the book with career roles were Miss Phipps, who was to be the teacher but ran off with some man; the lady who comes in to wash dishes; and, Miss Abbott, the gym teacher. All, of course, are incidental to the plot.

Margaret is depicted as preoccupied with self, with sorting

out life with typical pre-teen occupations. She is involved with a group of girls, concerned about school, what to wear for parties, becoming interested in boys, anticipating puberty, and worrying about not being like everyone else. She and Nancy tend to live a relatively affluent suburban life without much else but self as a source of concern.

Probably the most interesting female characterization is Sylvia, the fraternal grandmother who defies most stereotypes of "aged" females. She is healthy, fun, apparently financially independent, active, dresses in contemporary fashion (even changes her hair color), takes cruises, vacations in Florida, brings delicatessen, and is very fond of Margaret. She sends Margaret to summer camp, knits her sweaters, and is the reason, Margaret thinks, for the family's move to the suburbs, as Margaret's Mother considers Grandma too much of an influence. Grandma's independence is such that she indulges in several modes of transportation to arrive unannounced at the new home—and does it alone.

Conclusions

Analysis of top choices of books selected by girls in grades five, six and seven, revealed a lack of unanimity, but consistently chosen at all three levels were books by Judy Blume. The number one selection in all three grades, Are You There God? It's Me Margaret, was analyzed for exhibitions of stereotyped behavior. The female characters tend to represent much of what awareness groups have been trying to counteract during the past decade of fairly heavy research into sex role stereotyping.

Since the girls in grades five, six and seven all indicated the Blume books had either been self-selected or were recommended by a friend, a fair assumption is that some teachers, parents, or librarians might not be aware of the flat female roles depicted and the unflattering portrayals of women, especially mothers. Therefore, instances of specific behaviors were cited as evidence that girls are subjecting themselves to role models of little redeeming value.

Copyrighted in 1970 and in its twenty-sixth printing in October, 1979, Are You There God? It's Me Margaret is avidly read by intermediate girls across the continent. These girls have been maturing in a decade of wide-spread consciousness raising, so we might ask the question: If girls' choices for reading are replete with sterile characterizations, has the emphasis to overcome stereotyping had sufficient impact? Or, are the enticements of "realistic fiction" such that girls read with little awareness of the unflattering characterizations in their preoccupation with the more self-directed significance in the subject matter?

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