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Once Upon A Time: Exposing Sexism in Children's Literature

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Once Upon A Time: Exposing Sexism in Children's Literature

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By
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Interdisciplinary Arts for Children & Women and Gender Studies Major

The College at Brockport
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Once Upon a Time: Exposing Sexism in Children's Literature

Abstract

What about a book sparks a child's understanding of the world around them? It is the characters' actions and dialogue, certainly, which children imitate and interact with one another. In American society, children's literature often portrays images of girls and boys happily conforming to the gender binary. Why and how did children's literature become so focused on keeping children in line with their assigned sex and gender? This research looks at the way American society views sex and gender, how these views have been and are implemented on children through literature, and what we should do to stop such strict performance expectations. Through examination of the 1970's children's book, *I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl!* by Whitney Darrow Jr., the way in which gender roles are continuously portrayed in children's literature is assessed and proven to be an ineffective way to socialize both girls and boys successfully.

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I also owe thanks to The College at Brockport's Honors College, Women and Gender Studies Program, and Interdisciplinary Arts for Children Program, which have provided me with the opportunities and resources that have made this research possible.

I am forever grateful to my family and friends, who survived my countless rants about feminism, gender binaries, and everything else that is fucked up in this world. Not only did I get to explore my own thoughts as a ranted, but you all have definitely helped me to consider new possibilities.

Author's Reflections

Most six-year-old children want to be astronauts, doctors, presidents, scuba divers, and all other things fanciful and important. My six-year-old self, on the other hand, wanted to be a librarian. Imagine that! I had a fiend for books, and became the ultimate nerd—I was even on the Battle of the Books team for my three long years of middle school. As I grew up, my aspirations changed slightly as I focused in on teaching elementary school. I could still share my love of *Corduroy*, *Frog and Toad*, *The Babysitter's Club*, *Harry Potter*, and so many more. I started out at The College at Brockport as an Interdisciplinary Arts for Children major, and I loved every minute of it.

My first semester as a third year student, I took Honors Sex and Culture with Dr. LeSavoy. It was so eye opening. I have been on countless volunteer trips, and social justice was always something I had been interested in, but I suppose I had never really connected the dots. I took more and more classes through Women and Gender studies, and declared my minor. At this time, I was still volunteering with the Interdisciplinary Arts for Children Program, mostly at the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester. I worked events like the Halloween Spooktacular and the Royal Ball. Children ranged in age from under a year old to about twelve, and everything that they did or wore or we as volunteers encouraged them to do—that was all so very gendered! Little boys were Jedi and little girls were fairies for Halloween. Little boys got dragons painted on their faces and built fake castles with blocks; little girls played dress up and attended the royal feast to learn how to eat like a princess. Granted, some children broke the mold, but not many of them. I started to wonder why so many kids already knew that boys can only be princes, and girls can only be princesses. It is heartbreaking to watch children not being able to

express themselves the way they want to, and I wanted to change that. Who cares if a child goes outside their structural gendered behaviors? I certainly do not, and I wondered how many people did actually feel that way. Furthermore, how do children learn all of these gendered actions? From media, family, or school? How do they all coexist to influence young children? How do these gendered stereotypes and binaries hinder development of girls and boys? Who has it worse—girls, or boys?

I combined my love of reading with my fascination for gendered norms and stereotypes and passion for all things arts and crafty to create this thesis. I wanted to write a paper that showed the essence of what I am passionate about, and validate my passions as a real concern that society should take up on a whole new level. This idea that Americans have as gender as a binary—solely with masculine or feminine traits—is something that should not be applauded, but rather disbanded. There are thousands and thousands of people who fit into the gender binary, but there are even more who do not. I propose that if the gender binary were not so strictly forced, people would not fall so closely in line with the expectations that we place on men and women.

My thesis discusses the influences of children's literature, but there is one book in particular that I focus on the most—*I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl!* By Whitney Darrow Jr. (1970). The book is illustrated with a boy and a girl as the only characters, and they fulfill gender expectations to the extremes. When Dr. LeSavoy first told me about the book, I was baffled that something so blatantly sexist and strictly gendered even existed. It motivated me to create a third character—a gender nonconforming character—who could break the binary and disband the stereotypes that the original characters played into.

I chose to make my gender nonconforming character someone who is relatable to both characters, because I wanted a sort of androgyny about them—“them” being the gender neutral pronoun that I choose to use to describe my character—something that encapsulated both masculine and feminine qualities. They challenge the binary and stereotypes in a way that is quite honestly much easier for all characters, and leaves them happier and more satisfied with themselves and each other. They are “glad” in the ending pages of my remixed version of excerpts from Darrow’s (1970) book simply because they can be whatever they want to be, which is a message that both little boys and girls definitely need to hear.

Once Upon A Time: Exposing Sexism in Children's Literature

As soon as a child breaks into this strange new world at birth, they¹ are assigned a sex. Then, based on their given sex at birth, they are assigned a gender. From then on, they learn that they are constantly expected to perform that gender, through all aspects of social life. Parents, school, peers, toys, television, books—all of these people and things steer the child in the “right” direction. For girls, it is an image of beauty, docility, domesticity, kindness, and gentle grace—the very sure definition of femininity. For boys, it is an image of the rough-and-tough, strong and secure, loud and present, intelligence and logic—the hardcore that is masculinity. These words, masculinity and femininity, are pitted against one another, creating a binary world of gender. This, of course, leads to a stereotyped set of behavioral expectations, where one should not cross the line, or even try to go near it; for, if one does, they will be marked as the “other.”

In American society, we've been getting more and more comfortable with the idea that there are “others” who occupy multiple sets of identity, yet, at young ages, children are viciously bullied into conforming to femininity or masculinity. This is because girls and boys are forced to learn very early on what their roles in society actually are, through books, toys, clothing, media, and even their parents. While these messages may not always be overt, there are hundreds of examples of subtle hints on how to be a boy or a girl, as masculine or feminine. This is the gender binary world that we live in and force our children to live by these rules. Children's literature, specifically, can change children into thinking that their actions are wrong or unhealthy simply because they are girls instead of boys, or vice versa. How can a simple children's book do this?

¹ Usage intended as a gender neutral pronoun

The actions of the characters in the stories really shape how girls and boys perceive their own actions, as well as the actions of their peers. The fine lines that society expects us never to cross sometimes show up in the smallest of subtleties on a page, and other times, in much more obviously sexist spreads.

Theoretical Framework: Sex and Gender

To understand exactly how these messages infiltrate children's literature, we must first look at the complexities of sex and gender as we know them in American society. Judith Butler (2005), in her essay *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, describes the relation between sex and gender, and subsequently, the relationship between gender as a performance versus a performativity. She first states that sex, as society has come to acknowledge it, is the body as a passive medium that "preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance" (p. 496). In this sense, the body is an external self, transcribed with some sort of "inscription" which is transfigured and signifies the gender of the body. Therefore, we have sex as a biological and external home; one's sex is defined solely by the way in which it appears. In today's society, people usually lay claim to either one category of sex or another—male or female. In turn, those people portray a specific set of traits, which can be divided into aspects of two gender categories—masculine and feminine. While there are plenty of bodies in between those two categories, American society typically does not give meaning or power to any other categories, which then fosters the reasoning behind the creation of gender as a binary rather than something that is fluid. Indeed, Butler (2005) goes on to say that "social taboos institute and maintain the boundaries of the body" (p. 497). This is completely true; and can be seen in daily life. Once someone presumes the sex of another, they also

presume that that person will follow their socially transcribed meaning that “fits” their sexed body. How a person portrays himself or herself through bodily actions and etc. is the performance piece; he or she is performing for others what they want to display in terms of gendered looks and traits. Butler (2005) continues:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance but produce this *on the surface* of the body, though the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality (p. 500).

With this statement, Butler (2005) argues that gender is not only a performance by an individual, but it is also performative, meaning that people mimic the dominating ideals about gender and create a set of behaviors. These behaviors are generally categorized into masculinity and femininity. The body alone has no set actions that correspond with gender; instead, it is something that a person wears and repeats time and again to establish a masculine or feminine repertoire.

Pragmatically: Societal Views on Sex and Gender

Currently, American society as a whole demands gender constraints be placed on our bodies, depending on our sexes. Anyone or anything outside of the binary is “othered,” and children especially are constantly policed to ensure that the lessons on gender expectations are thoroughly ground in before any action is taken place. On an individual level, there are certainly parents who nurture their children to grow up to be strong, independent people who do not necessarily follow the gender binary to its extremes; however, this is not a necessarily a common parenting style, because many

parents are not exposed to gender issues, or are so used to them that they are unaware that there is any other option. Girls do this, boys do that. It is the way that it has always been done. Society as a whole accepts that; even in the DSM V (2015), the Psychological Diagnostics Manuel, “gender dysphoria” (formerly known as gender identity disorder/GID), still has a place. This “disorder” is really used to describe anyone who does not fall under the terms “cisgendered” or even “heterosexual.” Cisgender, as defined by Julia Serano (2009), feminist blogger and author of *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, is a term used to describe anyone who is assigned one sex at birth and identifies and lives as that sex through their life. Serano (2009) breaks it down to the roots of the word—because “cis” means ‘on the same side of,’” it stands to reason that anyone whose sex and gender “matches” could be called cisgendered (likewise, anyone who does not is typically referred to as transgendered). Heterosexual, as defined by Merriam-Webster online (2015), is “of, relating to, or characterized by a tendency to direct sexual desire toward the opposite sex.” My point, therefore, underlines the fact that if individuals are not aligned with what society automatically expects from them, they are automatically “othered,” and given a title or disorder that denotes that something is wrong with them.

Examples of this “otherness” are everywhere and stem from the smallest differences in gender abnormality. Douglas C Haldeman (2000), in his article *Gender Atypical Youth: Clinical and Social Issues*, examined “gender atypical youth,” and summarizes treatment options for those children. Haldeman (2000) looked at girls who could be classified as “tomboys” and boys who could be classified as “sensitive.” This first statement is highly problematic within itself. First off, the term tomboy insinuates

that there is a slim and specific way that boys are supposed to act, and that tomboys are girls who want to follow suit, but it is not necessarily that these girls want to be boys—only that they are acting in certain ways that only boys are supposed to behave. Secondly, the term sensitive is not an equivalent to girls. Does our society really expect boys to never care, appreciate, or observe? Haldeman (2000) states that, “Our expectations for appropriate gender role behavior for children are as deeply embedded in culture and society as are our expectations that the sun will rise in the morning and set in the evening” (p. 192). With this statement, Haldeman (2000) is actually claiming that the gender binary is not something that is natural for us, but rather something society has imposed and repeated over and over. This is the gender performativity that Butler (2005) describes. It is not natural or biologically engrained into us as people; instead, it is a social conditioning. Haldeman (2000) goes on to describes that girls are seen as “less troublesome” than boys are, because:

...girls' gender atypical behavior 'mimics conventional 'masculine' characteristics' and that, generally, society endorses masculine behaviors more readily than feminine behaviors. It follows that the more socially desirable the behavior, the less likely it is to become the focus of gender atypicality therapies. This serves to underscore the socially constructed nature of GID (p. 194).

This proves that not only are girls marginalized in the greater society, but that the researchers themselves acknowledge the social influences on both young girls and, in a broader sense, acceptable behaviors of young children. The psychologists outline a few treatment options for gender non-conforming children, including reconditioning. The treatment, they claim, is to prevent social ostracism, treat comorbid psychopathology, or prevent adult transsexualism. None of these reasons are actually justified. Simply because a boy is sensitive or a girl is a little more aggressive, does not mean that they

should be put through reconditioning treatment and lose their sense of self. Because society as a whole is so conditioned to think of gender as a binary model instead of a spectrum, or something fluid, the researchers claim that, “most researchers in this area believe that it is easier to change individuals than it is to change society” (p. 196). This is what is wrong with our ideas on sex and gender. Every individual matters, and if America looked at gender as a fluid social construct, every individual would feel comfortable and have voice in our society. Psychologists would not try to change people because they crave emotional attachment or enjoy playing with trucks; stepping ever-so-slightly outside the gender binary should not be equivalent to a disorder.

Another study looked more specifically at what children’s literature really exemplifies: the gendered stereotypes that children recognize and play into. Miller et al. (2009) examines “developmental and gender differences in the relative accessibility of different gender stereotype domains” (p. 870). Essentially, the research coded open-ended descriptions of boys and girls from participants, and categorized them under gender stereotypes. This way, girls and boys were asked questions to determine whether or not they found that other children conformed to gender stereotypes, and how strict these stereotypes held up with the children. All of the girls and boys who participated in the study were from the northeastern part of the United States, and were between the ages of three and ten (Miller et al., 2009). Miller et al. (2009) found that,

Appearance stereotypes such as pretty, having long hair, wearing dresses, jewelry, and make-up, came to mind most readily when children described girls. In contrast, activity (e.g., liking sports) and trait (e.g., fighting, playing rough) stereotypes were more prevalent in descriptions of boys (p. 877).

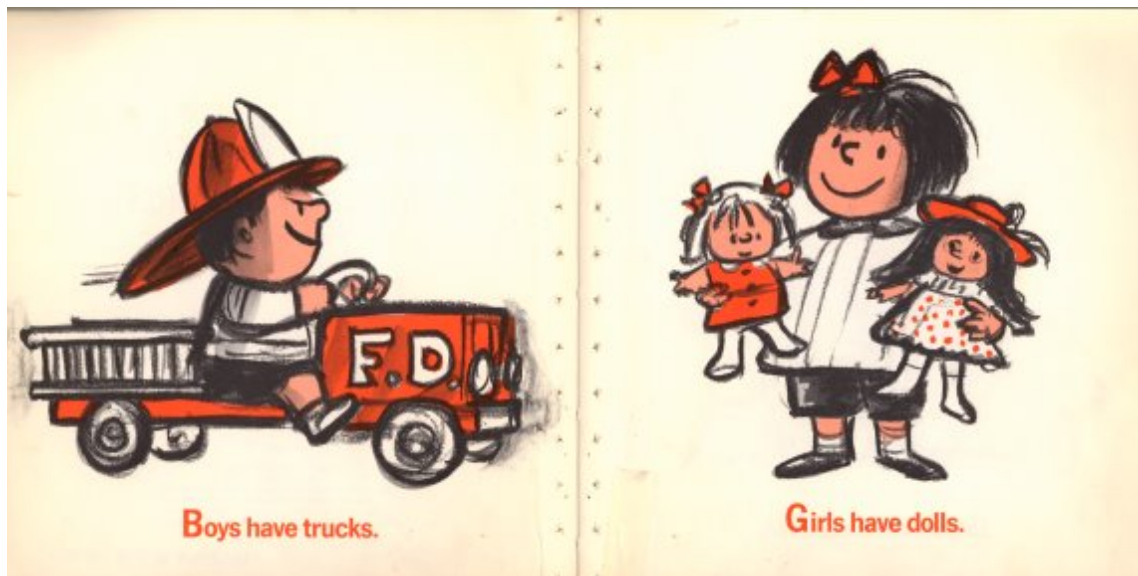
This examination of girls and boys showed exactly what seems to be important in American society, and fits right into the gender binary: girls are supposed to be pretty and

docile, seen but not heard; boys are expected to stand up to prove their bravery and outgoingness. The previous research by Haldeman (2000) looked at children who fell out of the societally accepted norm and offered treatment options; Miller et al. (2009), on the other hand, looks at children who typically fit right into stereotypes, and therefore, provide a look into the normative gender performativity in America. Both researchers recognize that gender stereotypes are learned behaviors, yet neither attributes knowledge and normalcy of gender stereotypes to anything specific. They both take gender at face value, another “it is what it is” attitude. This is problematic. Granted, perhaps the focus would have been too wide of the researchers in either study to include in their discussions, but perhaps if they had studied *where* children learn these behaviors, there would be less fuss over whether or not children develop fitting into the norm. While children’s literature may not be the sole provider of stereotyped and unequal gender behaviors, it does hold great influence over girls and boys.

The Mastermind

During the 1970’s, second wave feminism started out going strong. Women all over the country were coming out of their homes; it was a time when every piece of a woman’s experience was examined and uprooted. Sexuality, domesticity, reproductive rights, gender roles, and banding together as women living women’s experiences were all topics that led women to form “consciousness raising” groups and advocacy magazines like *BITCH* and *Sisterhood is Powerful* (Rampton, 2014). Women challenged patriarchy in a broader sense that encompassed more than just equal voting rights and stepping outside of the private sphere. It was strong, powerful, and moving. It also just so happened that the decade started out with a children’s book dedicated to the exact

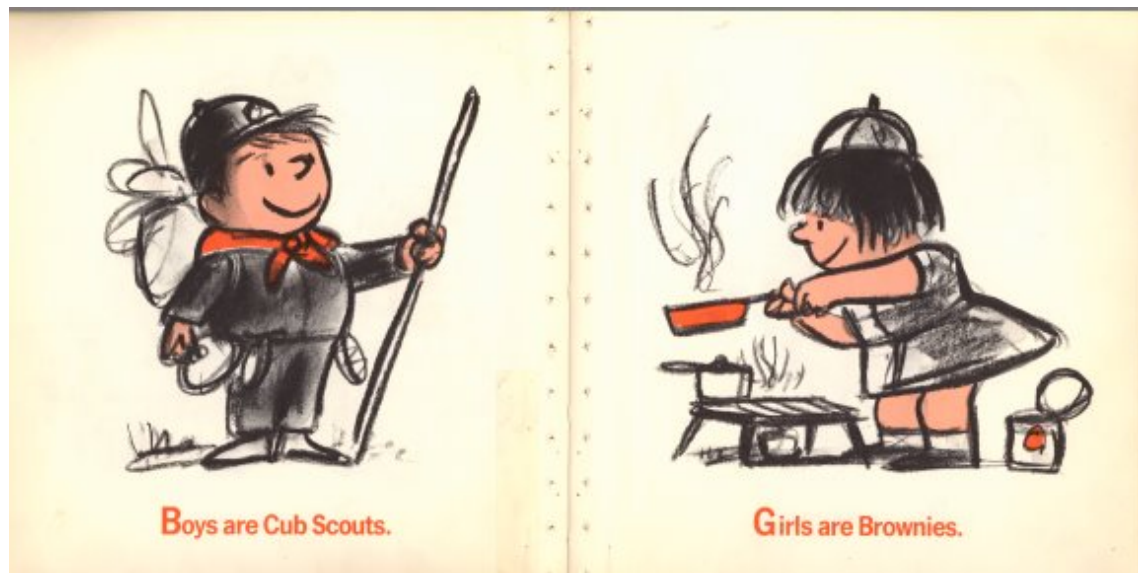
opposite of what women were trying to do. *I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl!* by Whitney Darrow Jr. (1970) rocked the shelves of public and school libraries, depicting exactly how boys and girls should act. The book starts out as the gender binary typically allows when talking about what little girls and boys like to do, as depicted below.



Boys have trucks.

Girls have dolls.

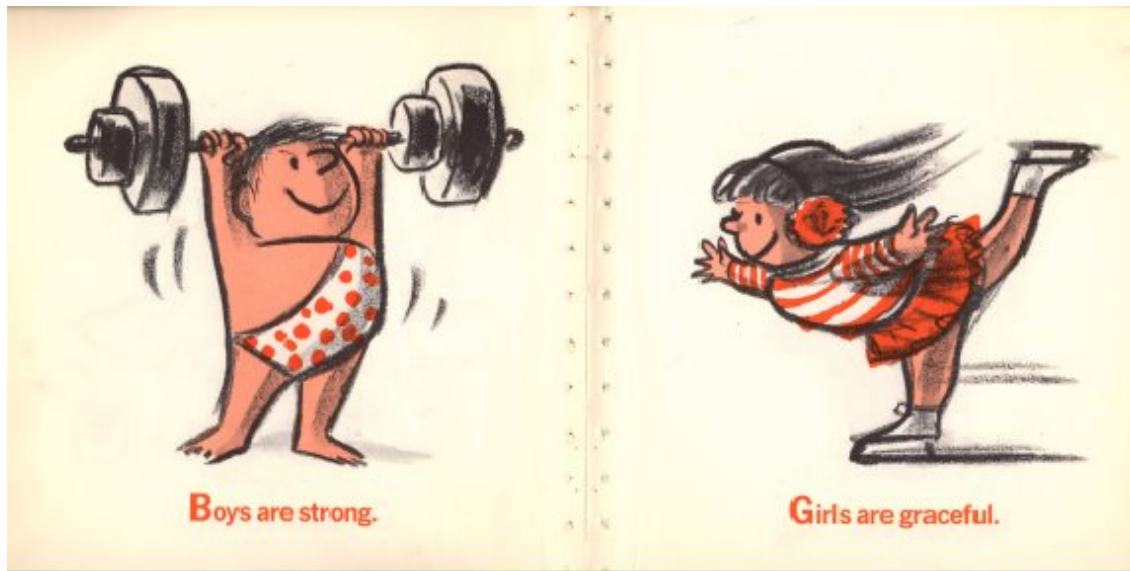
*The first example of a gendered stereotype
I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl! (1970, pp.. 4-5)*



Boys are Cub Scouts.

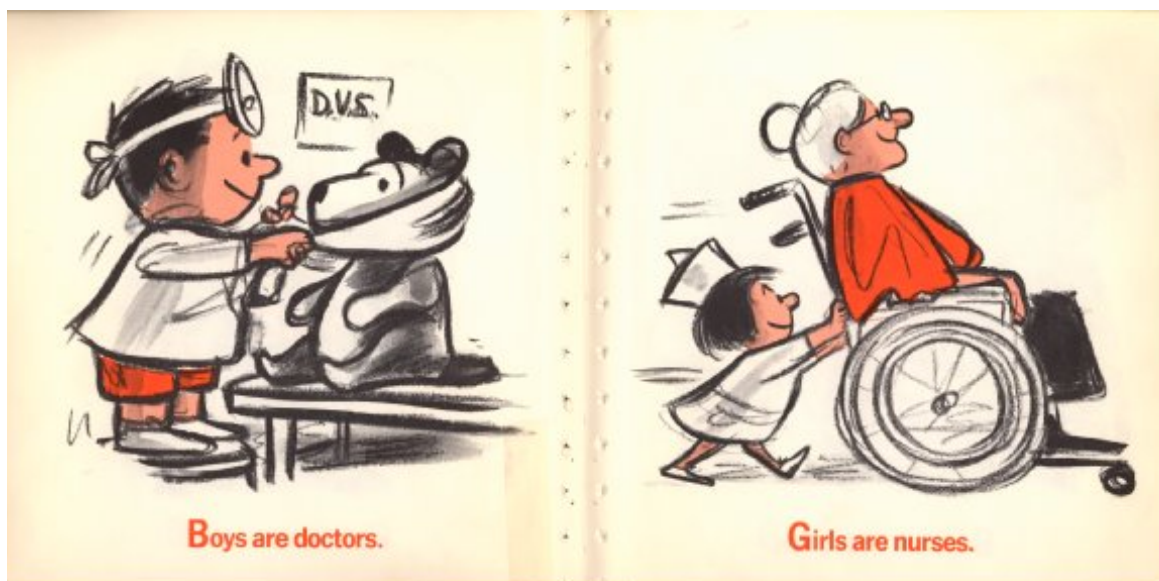
Girls are Brownies.

*While this is played out in real life, it does focus on the opposite activities of boys and girls
I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl! (1970, pp. 6-7)*

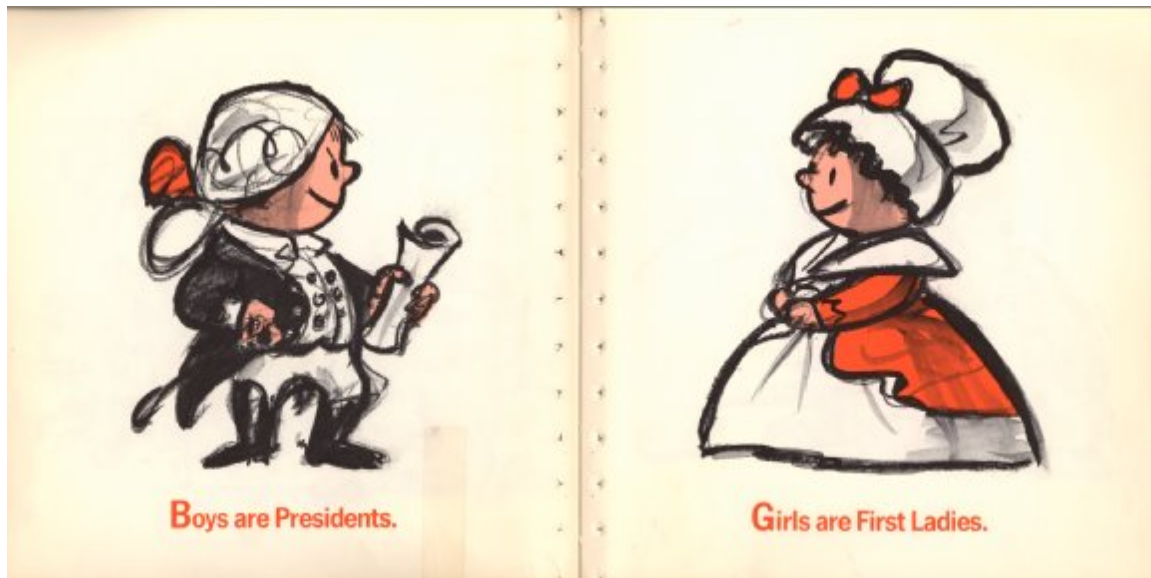


*This is the start of obvious gendered stereotypes
I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl! (1970, p. 8-9)*

Of course boys like trucks and girls like dolls; that is exactly what they have been socialized by society to like. However, as the book goes on, it turns into a heteronormative, vastly separated gender binary that touches on the daily life of men and women, career choices—even eating habits. Indeed, the following excerpts include rather outrageous examples of blatant sexism based on gender.



I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl! (1970, p. 12-13)



I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl! (1970, p. 24-25)



I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl! (1970, p. 28-29)

So who was this person fighting back with drawings of chubby toddlers fulfilling their very strict gender roles of girl and boy? Whitney Darrow Jr. was born in August 22, 1909 in Princeton, New Jersey. His father, Whitney Darrow, was the founding director of Princeton University Press, which may have helped to inspire Darrow to move into the world of publishing. He attended Princeton University, and was a humor columnist for *The Daily Princetonian* the art director for *The Princeton Tiger*. Darrow also learned

at the Art Students League of New York. After college, he began to sell cartoons to smaller magazines, such as *College Humor* and *Judge, Life*, for small sums. At twenty-four years of age in 1933, he began to sell his cartoons to the *New Yorker*, and created over 1500 cartoons, and averaged about 50 a year (Encyclopedia Britannica). Typically, his work focused on the “contradictions of human behavior,” and depicted middle class suburban families (Gussow, 1999). He commented on the quirks and absurdities of modern life, and was considered a “master draftsman” because of his expert drawing style and his witty one-liners (Gussow, 1999). Indeed, he would create his own jokes and caption them, which a lot of cartoonists at the time did not do. Occasionally he would draw children, people in “various states of inebriation, judges, lawyers, and (although he considered himself apolitical) politicians (Gussow, 1999). He also worked on covers for the magazine, books of satire, and children’s books. Outside of the *New Yorker*, Darrow has illustrated and/or written over fourteen books and collections, six of those intended for children (Gussow, 1999). Darrow retired from *The New Yorker* in 1982, and died on August 10, 1999 (Gussow, 1999).

Ironically enough, Darrow never stated his intentions for *I’m Glad I’m A Boy! I’m Glad I’m A Girl!*. Indeed, there is no record of him actually stating whether the book really was for children, like some of his other books, or simply making satire out of the way America genders its children (Sharp, 2009). However, we do know that on the cusp of a feminist revolution, Darrow wrote and illustrated a book that ended up in the juvenile section of libraries all over America. In fact, to this day, it is listed specifically as a children’s book on Amazon, GoodReads, and other websites that sell or discuss books. While the book is no longer in print, people all over the country have found it in

garage sales and library haul outs—one blogger even found it in a book give away through AAUW (American Association for University Women). Therefore, regardless of Darrow's intentions, the book was read by children—probably teachers, librarians, and parents, too—who were consequently influenced by his writing (Peters, 2014). Of course, reading Darrow's (1970) book would not be the end-all-be-all for a child, but it would certainly narrow the option of who they think they can be. It is just one example of sexism in children's literature, reinforcing the gender binary.

Darrow's (1970) book may exemplify the extremes, but there are hundreds and thousands more children's books that depict gendered images and restrict what they can do based on the actions and genders of the characters in the books (Popova, 2014). In fact, there is a whole series dedicated to letting children know how to be the "Best at Everything," but it comes with a catch—two books in the series are actually titled *A Girls' Book on How to Be the Best at Everything* by Julianna Foster (2007) and *A Boys' Book on How to Be the Best at Everything* by Dominique Enright and Guy MacDonald (2007). These books, published very recently, tell boys and girls that they are different from each other and cover criteria that pertains specifically to one gender or another. The girls' guide depicts "how to make your own" lip balm and scrapbook, while the boys' include survival tips and "ways to impress your friends" like hypnotizing chickens. This may seem a little incredulous, but these books are real and have been consumed by girls and boys within the last eight years. Other book series, like *Fancy Nancy* by Jane O'Connor (2005), pull at the heartstrings of parents describing a little girl who loves all things fancy and extraordinary, but basically boils down to a lesson for girls who might

be slipping from gendered expectations of beauty, fashion, frivolousness, and concise femininity.

A Reader's History

From 1880 to the 1920's, librarians and teachers warned parents of the dangers of "sensational fiction," which supposedly led children to grow up to be prostitutes and hoodlums (Stauffer, 2007, p. 403). Instead, they promoted books that held socially acceptable values and provided gender-appropriate role models, which of course followed the gender binary to make sure that girls married properly and boys grew up sober and hard working. This thought process was mostly due to a time period of urban growth, industrialization, and high rates of juvenile crime (Stauffer, 2007, p. 404). They knew children were socialized by what they read and refused to let children become a waste of human capital. They focused mostly on attacking dime-and yellow-novels, which promoted a lifestyle of "adventure and unrest."

In the 1930's, teachers and librarians tried a new tactic—encouraging specifically boys to read. They did not encourage reading "girl books," and therefore focused only on boy-appealing motifs, which usually centered on cowboy adventures; the books were meant to "help to determine the man he will become" (Stauffer, 2007, p. 405). Female characters were not only secondary, but they were virtually nonexistent. Therefore, girls had no role models to read about—they had to acquire socialization skills from books centered around masculinity and refusing to encourage women and girls to do anything that was not feminine, including read (Worand, 2008). Continuing on into the 1940's, traditionally masculine themes prevailed. Once again, girls did not matter, and if a girl did want to read, she was not given an appropriately gendered role model. Most of the

characters in books were men, and if there was a woman in the story, she was a damsel in distress, docile and domesticated. In the 1950-60's, studies came out that showed girls read "boy books," but boys would not read "girl books" (Stauffer, 2007, p. 406). This is not surprising, not because boys aren't interested in the same topics, but because they are socialized to hold "girlie girl" things in disdain and keep up a hyper-masculine façade.

Finally, in the 1970's, there was a surge of female characters in children's literature, thanks to liberal feminists involved with the second-wave movement. However, this just so happened to be the same time that *I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl!* (1970) entered bookstores and libraries in the juvenile section. Therefore, while there were stronger female characters being initiated into children's literature, there were still books new and available, ready to swallow up the dreams of little boys and girls everywhere. Unfortunately, in the 1980's this stagnates, and children are no more likely to see female characters as they were in the 1960's. Female characters had changed in frequency of female pictures and characters, meaning that more and more of them were becoming involved in stories, but not in role and characterization (Clark, 2002). Girl and women characters still embodied stereotypical gendered traits. It seems as though boys have certainly led the good life when it comes to reading; they've had books catered to their gender since early days (Worand, 2008). However, boys too were harmed with a lack of girl and women characters, or characters who displayed realistic and strong traits. Brinkman et al. (2011) states:

...the dearth of female characters teaches both sexes that girls are less worthy than boys. Other researchers have concluded that children's literature provides girls and boys with standards of masculinity and femininity, offers socially sanctioned behavioral models that children may imitate, and presents a basic model for understanding oneself and others (p. 758).

This explains perfectly how the history of books in America has furthered the gender binary, and created an era of books for children that not only hinder girls for not being able to see themselves in characters (or see themselves as characters fulfilling a stereotyped role), but also hinder boys from being able to express themselves in a meaningful, less extremely masculine way.

Indoctrination and Compliance

Regardless of studies, such as (Brinkman, 2011), that show that children's literature is harmful to the socialization of girls and boys, people still claim that children are too young to realize what they're seeing is real or important. Kids will be kids, right? They just don't have the capacity to understand underlying meanings and messages in the media, much less in their beloved picture books. On the contrary, Brinkman (2011) argues that research proves that the gendered meanings and messages in children's literature is unconsciously translated by children into their real life behaviors, and their expectations of others' behaviors. Clearly, books are not just used for entertainment or language arts educational purposes. The fact of the matter is, children's literature, toys, and much more, is all used to socialize them, especially when children are really young. It does matter, because children then have restricted role models and shape their own behavior in stereotyped ways and expect that to be reflected back at them. Then, when children are approached by an "other" who defies gender norms, there can be a lot of tension, which usually leads to alienation and bullying.

The encoding and decoding theory, proposed by Stuart Mill, is the process that allows for power in both the hands of the media and the audience (Milestone, 2011, p. 156). Granted, while young children aren't as educated or well-versed on the efforts of

the media to persuade its consumers, they still definitely pick up on the messages through strategies employed by the media. Because children are not typically educated in the area of media literacy, if children were to read *I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl!* (1970), they might notice that the book is encoded with these gendered messages by Darrow (1970). But more likely, children probably will not be aware of this gendering; as children decode these messages while they read, they process exactly what they see and give meanings to those messages.

The constructivist approach and cultivation theory both suggest there may be an effect of viewing gendered stereotypes upon children (Milestone, 2009, pp. 156-157). The constructivist approach proposes that children develop beliefs about the world based on their interpretations of observations and experiences, and therefore, viewing stereotyped or egalitarian depictions of gender roles will influence children's ideas about gender (Milestone, 2009). The cultivation theory states that exposure to media content helps develop concepts regarding social behavior and norms (Milestone, 2009). Thus, children's media influences a child's socialization process and the gendered information children view may have a direct effect on their cognitive understanding of gender and their behavior, and that "higher levels of exposure to gendered messages are likely associated with stronger effects on children's gender socialization" (Milestone, 2009, p. 157). Indeed, Brinkman et al. (2011) describes the combined effects of these two theories from a girl's perspective:

Young women are often treated like they have less worth than their male counterparts, and after some time they may begin to believe it. The cultural pressures placed on girls to succumb to traditional gender roles, including being ladylike and dependent and being the 'perfect girl,' limit their sense of mastery and autonomy....In fact, research suggests that the loss of self-esteem often seen

in adolescent girls can be directly linked to their experiences of gender prejudice (p. 63).

This research acknowledges not only the limitations that girls face in all examples of society, including children's literature. Then, because they are limited in their behaviors, they expect the same from other girls. It is exactly what books like *I'm Glad I'm A Boy!* *I'm Glad I'm A Girl!* (1970), have the potential to do. Granted, a child is not going to turn into a homophobic, transphobic, anti-sexist from reading just one book, but if the message is repeated over and over again, it socializes them to lean towards gender binary extremes, from both themselves and their peers.

The Next Steps

What can we do to help to raise a group of strong-willed girls and boys who embrace all different areas of a gender spectrum? Perhaps first we need to start off with stronger versions of female characters in children's literature. Indeed, The Amelia Bloomer Project, a foundation created in 2001, has already recognized that "Now more than ever, girls and boys, men and women, need positive feminist role models" (Law et al., 200, p. 4-6). This foundation creates a list of books each year for children and teenagers that hold up feminist values. The committee who chooses the books look for those that are,

...books that celebrate courageous women and girls who are portrayed not simply as 'spunky' or 'feisty,' but are brave, confident females actively shaping their own destinies and breaking barriers to defy stereotypes and societal limitations. Girls need books that will help them to recognize, understand, and resist systematic sexism around them, to claim their voices, and to be self-possessed (p. 4).

I appreciate this sentiment because it recognizes that girls are affected by the way books portray girls and women and boys and men. There is definitely a difference between how

brave boys and men are portrayed versus a spunky girl character. Obviously, if there is a need for a foundation built on nominating books for boys and girls to read with realistic, strong girl characters, then there is a problem with mainstream American children's literature.

As I have done with a few excerpted pages from Darrow's (1970) book (Appendix), many other authors have tried to create fairy-tale retellings, which also help to counter stories with gendered messages (Joosen, 2005). Not only do these stories give children better characters, but they also make children think about what the gendered messages in stories that they have heard previously condone. It starts a dialogue about the way literature can shape ways of thinking about everything, including gender roles.

This thesis has acknowledged the views of sex and gender in American society with clear cut examples of gendered stereotypes and sexism that follows, the history of children's literature and its gendered effects, and how all of those things impact children in restricted ways for both girls and boys. Of course, there are complexities about gender, literature, and social and cultural influences on girls and children that I have not discussed; however, the importance of the way children are socialized through literature stands strong. The views on children's media in general seem to ignore gendered stereotypes as a problem, and rather than disbanding or erasing those stereotypes, many popular examples of children's literature, The How to Be the Best at Everything Series as example, seems to embrace them. While we typically do not see books quite as blatantly sexist as *I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl!* (1970) featured in public libraries or bookstores today, there are a lot of subtleties that are incorporated into children's books that help to perpetuate opposing gender ideals.

Appendix

I'm Glad I'm A Boy! I'm Glad I'm A Girl! (1970) Remixed





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