



## Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 42  
Issue 2 November/December 2001

Article 2

12-1-2001

# Picture Book Soldiers: Men And Messages

Christina M. Desai  
*Southern Illinois University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Desai, C. M. (2001). Picture Book Soldiers: Men And Messages. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 42 (2). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol42/iss2/2](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol42/iss2/2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).





## **Picture Book Soldiers: Men And Messages**

Christina M. Desai  
Southern Illinois  
University

*This study examines children's picture books about soldiers and war, including fiction, folktales, and historical fiction, analyzing their implicit and explicit messages about war and the military, and evaluating them for gender stereotyping. The soldiers are found to conform almost uniformly to an exaggerated male stereotype. Different value judgments about war and conflict resolution are found in the fiction vs. the historical fiction and in the historical fiction about earlier vs. later historical periods.*

CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS have historically been used as teaching tools, explicitly and implicitly. Some quite explicitly demonstrate lessons or values the authors hope to instill in their readers. Implicitly this literature reflects the culture and values of the society in which it was created. Sometimes, by the cultural images depicted, children's books teach both intended and unintended lessons. Soldiers have been portrayed in didactic children's books as heroes, as historical figures worthy of respect and imitation. They have also been portrayed in less didactic books as rogues or fools and have appeared in stories that demonstrate the consequences of violence. This study will examine the various images of soldiers found in picture books and the values implicit in them.

Critical writings about children's books containing images of soldiers usually focus on one of two aspects. One concerns the use of such books to enhance children's understanding of historical events or periods (Heiser, 1997; Kornfeld, 1994). The other concerns the issue of war, and discusses such questions as the ethical choices faced by the characters, the violence that children are exposed to through these books and other media, the alternatives to violence taught or not taught by these books, and the historical context or justification for the wars in which the characters are engaged (Bat-Ami, 1994; Jason, 1997; Van Cleef & Martin, 1986). This study will show that a third perspective on soldier books is called for in addition to the two above. Much has been written about gender stereotyping in children's literature. While the situation has improved somewhat in recent years, gender stereotypes are still quite widespread. They are especially prevalent in books about war. To complicate matters, books dealing with historical events must balance today's values on gender models with accurate portrayal of the values of the era in which the story takes place. Understandably, since the feminist movement has provided the impetus for the current reappraisal of gender stereotypes, female characterization has received most of the attention. The male stereotype receives less scrutiny. Soldiers in children's literature present a classic stereotype whose impact on young readers should be examined along with the concerns about the historical and ethical messages discussed above.

Most of the studies in this area focus on juvenile or young adult literature (Jason, 1997; Everson, 1995), and none integrates analysis of war/peace issues with a gender stereotype perspective. This study will examine the portrayal of soldiers in light of these concerns for gender stereotypes and war/peace issues. It will concentrate on picture books for young children, since attitudes and gender identification are acquired in the early years. Samples of picture books on war or soldiers were chosen from subject headings in *A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books* (Lima & Lima, 1998), specifically "War" and "Careers—military" and from consultation with children's librarians. They include works of fiction, folktales, and historical fiction. This last category includes retellings of historical events as well as those works focusing on an identifiable historical event, though the characters and story events may be fictional.

### **Fiction**

Images of violence are all around us today, in films, in the news, in video games, in homes, and in literature. Many educators have voiced concern over the amount of violence children witness in the course of daily life. They turn to books to demonstrate the evils of war and show alternative courses of action to resolve disputes (Bat-Ami, 1994; Fassler, 1983; Jason, 1997). Many fiction picture books with images of soldiers contain implicit or very explicit anti-war or anti-violence messages. They portray the generals as pompous and greedy and the soldiers as easily tricked by weaker but either smarter or kinder opponents. Some are ultimately chastened by experience.

In *The Apple Strudel Soldier* (McGowen, 1968) a clever baker is drafted to fight in a war; he wins the enemy over to his side with his delicious strudel and saves the kingdom. The regular army soldiers in boots, braided uniforms, cockades, muskets and swords, are no match for the baker's cleverness. Similarly, a clever baker in *Forri the Baker* (Myers, 1995) defeats well-equipped marauding knights by baking fake weapons. *The Mysterious Giant of Barletta* relates the tale of a giant who defeats by a trick rather than by might the "army of a thousand men" who were "destroying all the towns and cities" (De Paola, 1984. n.p.). Two foolish brothers in Phillips' *The Brothers Wrong and Wrong Again*

(1979) defeat attacking soldiers by befriendng their chief weapon, the dragon Gilgatooth. *Frederick Ferdinand Fox* (Miller, 1987), though not expressly anti-war, presents the commander as lavishly dressed, pompous and aloof, his head out of the frame. Cleverness rather than force defeats the army of the rapacious emperor. Pompous, fat, medal-covered retired Major Brunswick wages war on his household mice in Aragon's *The Major and the Mousehole Mice* (1990) till they defeat him with kindness. Cleverness or kindness is repeatedly shown to be more effective than brute force in these tales.

More serious tales explore the consequences of violence. Ridiculously clad, mean-faced stylized soldiers destroy all but nature for no apparent reason in Emberley's *Drummer Hoff* (1967). *The Tale of the Vanishing Rainbow* (Rupprecht, 1989) shows what happens when neighboring communities become suspicious of each other and declare a war to which nobody comes. The opposing armies consist of one bear vs. one wolf, in blue vs. red nineteenth century style uniforms, complete with medals and swords. They are the only clothed characters. The uniforms are shown as enticing, but wisdom prevails. *Bang Bang You're Dead* (Fitzhugh & Scoppettone, 1969) demonstrates the difference between play war and something more serious. Fitzhugh's characters dress in assorted uniforms, one with epaulets, another with feather headdress, one in Wild West boots and holster, another in a sailor suit, but all armed with weapons and a belief that war is fun and "soldiers always win" (Fitzhugh & Scoppettone, 1969, p. 4) till real injury reminds them that sharing is less painful. Bombastic overstuffed generals who make war for the fun of it figure in two anti-war stories, Foreman's *War and Peas* (1974) and Eco and Carmi's *The Bomb and the General* (1989). Eco's general is a bodiless black and gold-braided uniform, but the atoms in the bombs rebel and render the bombs harmless. Foreman's soldiers are fat and stupid, wearing camouflage and fork-topped helmets, defeated because they are too fat to fight. In *The Battle of Sir Cob and Sir Filbert* (McAllister, 1991) two kings greedy for each other's palaces don medieval battle dress and fight till there is nothing left, then decide to be friends. Even more explicit in their anti-war messages are Vigna's *Nobody Wants a Nuclear War* (1986), Seuss's *The Butter Battle Book* (1984), Popov's *Why?* (1996), Fox's *Feathers and Fools* (1996), and Lobel's *Potatoes, Potatoes* (1967). Lobel demonstrates the lure of war,

with its attractive red or blue uniforms, polished swords and shiny medals, but the red and blue approach purple as more blood is shed and the soldiers come to realize that mother was right and war is wrong. While Vigna's story attempts to calm children's fear of war, Seuss's, Popov's, and Fox's stories seem designed to heighten awareness of its dangers, illustrating the spiraling consequences of mistrust, violence, retaliation, and escalation.

What message do children actually take away from such stories? Some studies show that children may not interpret their messages in the way we would expect, i.e., the way adults would interpret them. Van Cleaf and Martin report that in a group of six to eleven year olds, none grasped the allegorical allusion to nuclear war in *The Butter Battle Book*, and many, especially the younger children, could not identify any hidden messages in the text (1986, p. 193-4). Their responses were very concrete and based in the children's experiences rather than on understanding of global contexts. Carlsson-Paige and Levin report that the four to six year olds in their study of response to *The Butter Battle Book* "took the bread buttering controversy seriously" (1986, p. 38). The children had definite opinions on how bread should be buttered and they took sides, again thinking in very concrete terms, focusing on the weapons and the bread and butter; few of them saw any application to the world situation. Students in Ray's study (1986) did not distinguish between the attitude of Conrad, the war loving character in *Conrad's War* and the anti-war message of the text as a whole. They felt this book was the most pro-war of all Ray's selections, though it was probably the least. Ray postulates that this is because "the book develops Conrad's love of war in far greater detail than it does his change of attitude toward it" (1986, p. 114) and children focus on the concrete, both in the text and in their experience. These studies confirm findings by Cooper (1965) who studied the development of young children's concept of war and found that the concept begins with an understanding of the physical aspects of war, such as guns and other weapons, then progresses to an identification of war with the fights and war games of their experience. Only later do the international dimensions and serious carnage of war come to be understood by older children. Rodd (1985) also found that young children's images of war are based on its concrete aspects and that they understand global conflict only in terms of their personal experience of

fighting. These findings have implications for parents and educators who may want to use books to counter the prevailing glorification of violence in our society.

### **Historical Picture Books**

The depiction of soldiers in the fiction picture books is almost uniformly negative. They are portrayed as fat, greedy, stupid, or arrogant, and the reasons for the wars in these stories, if any are given at all, include greediness for more land, the glory of conquest, or blind distrust of the other side. Some are variations on the David and Goliath theme of brains over brawn. Historical fiction presents soldiers in a far different light. The values in these stories reflect conventional views on our history: the Revolutionary War, for example, is treated as a necessary war for freedom from foreign tyranny, while stories about later wars are carefully couched so as not to take sides or so as to distinguish between the wars themselves and the people involved. Books published later show more ambivalence toward war than earlier titles. The 1990s saw a small explosion of titles that explore the effects of recent wars on children too young to understand the causes. In these books, war is an inexplicable presence that causes destruction and loss, but sometimes leads to redeeming personal sacrifice; in them soldiers are faceless automatons who obey orders but are often as much victims of war as the children.

Chalk's rendition of *Yankee Doodle* (1993) is an unabashedly patriotic account of the Revolutionary War. The smartly uniformed British soldiers are shown as more disciplined and better equipped but less determined than the rag-tag American soldiers. The humorous animal characters and song motif make light of the war. A more serious but still approving tone marks the Revolutionary War stories of *The Boy Drummer of Vincennes* (Carmer, 1972), *Sam the Minuteman* (Benchley, 1969), *Six Silver Spoons* (Lowrey, 1971) and *The Boston Coffee Party* (Rappaport, 1988). The long march in *The Boy Drummer of Vincennes* is portrayed as exhilarating and the battle that follows as glorious. The firing of the guns mingles indistinguishably with the sound of the drum, and the difference in the effect of the two noisemakers is not noted. The enemy soldiers in *Sam the Minuteman* are in red, the only color used in

the book except for black, white and brown, thus emphasizing their uniforms and their uniformity. They are identical, therefore scarcely human: "They looked like a bright river of red" (Benchley, 1969, p. 37). The British soldiers in *Six Silver Spoons* (Lowrey, 1971) are again smartly uniformed and arrogant, with one exception, a captain who remembers his own little girl and saves Debby's gift by a clever ruse. Soldiers are an off-stage presence in *The Boston Coffee Party* (Rappaport, 1988). The women of the town dutifully sew shirts for the absent men but also imitate them in a clever variation on the Boston Tea Party. Uniting, they use force to appropriate the coffee a local merchant had been hoarding. Two sisters in Greeson's *An American Army of Two* (1992) also trick toy-like British soldiers and their mean faced, pot-bellied officer. While these stories show women in active roles, avoiding the female stereotypes of the earlier examples, they reproduce the stereotypes of brave American soldiers and mean, aggressive, and undifferentiated enemy soldiers.

Treatments of the Civil War are generally approving of the Northern cause, but acknowledge the pain of division. The story of *Barbara Freitchie*, published in 1965 but based on Whittier's original 1863 story, shows the patriotic courage of an old woman in the face of Stonewall Jackson's hard-faced, identical marching troops (Whittier, 1965). Coblenz's story of *Martin and Abraham Lincoln* (1947), published just after World War II, focuses on the hardships of war and the sadness left by Martin's father's absence. Little Martin must wear his father's uniform in miniature and become the caretaker of his family. Yet there is an unspoken understanding throughout this story that the war is necessary. In *Cecil's Story* (Lyon, 1991) the war inexplicably deprives children of their fathers; the soldiers in their Civil War uniforms are faceless men in the child's imagination. In Ackerman's *The Tin Heart* (1990), the Civil War divides friends, but it can also lead to new friendships, as in Polacco's *Pink and Say* (1994). In these stories war means death and destruction, but the child characters have an inkling that the principle is more important. *Pink and Say* is one of the few stories in which soldiers are main characters in the action. In Bunting's *The Blue and the Gray* (1996) war ends friendships and soldiers become cannon fodder, but again, the cause is seen as just.



More ambivalence in authors' attitudes toward war is apparent in their treatment of later wars, mirroring society's ambivalence. Picture books set during World War II range from the early tale of brave and patriotic soldier Per of D'Aulaire's *Wings for Per* (1944) in which there is no doubt about the rightness of the action, to the account of the horror of nuclear attack as described in Morimoto's *My Hiroshima* (1987), in which the destruction is shown to be too horrid for any justification. Other titles fall somewhere between these extreme attitudes. The theme of soldiers as absent fathers is developed in *All Those Secrets of the World* (Yolen, 1991), in which a father leaves for the war and returns a stranger, and in *When Mama Retires* (Ackerman, 1992), in which the mother takes a job and teaches the children to take over her housekeeping functions while their father is away at war. Personal sacrifice inspired by the hardships of war is the theme of *The Ring and the Window Seat* (Hest, 1990), in which the soldiers, clearly German, are depicted as marching in lockstep while a defiant officer stands, posing arrogantly with his back to the reader. In Mattingley's *The Angel With a Mouth-organ* (1984), war takes fathers away and returns them wounded but does not destroy their love. Several books deal sensitively with the Holocaust, including Adler's *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* (1987), Wild's *Let the Celebrations Begin!* (1991), Oppenheim's *The Lily Cupboard* (1992), and Hoestlandt's *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* (1995). In Oppenheim's and Hoestlandt's stories, the war is an unseen but threatening presence whereas in Adler's story, Hitler's role and the Nazis' conformity and complicity in the evil are spelled out. Wild's account of life in a concentration camp is also unequivocal in praising the British soldiers as liberators. War from the point of view of the losing side is depicted in two unflinching accounts, *Rose Blanche* (Innocenti, 1985) and *Hiroshima No Pika* (Maruki, 1980). Soldiers in *Rose Blanche* are portrayed first as heroes, then as arrogant and threatening, finally as confused victims of war, with torn uniforms and bandages. From the protagonist's point of view, they are nearly indistinguishable from the foreign soldiers who occupy the town in the final pages. In *Hiroshima No Pika*, a soldier is shown riding the bus with other inhabitants, with no special role or attitude. There is no mention of the soldiers who dropped the bomb, but after the explosion, "Soldiers came and took the dead away" (Maruki, 1980, n.p.). They are thus portrayed as little more than civil servants, not as actors in the world drama.

These many stories show attempts in various ways to reconcile the evils of war with the evils of the enemies' intentions and the blamelessness and helplessness of children in wartime. In only a very few of these stories though do the soldiers themselves appear as real characters with speaking parts or actions. They are not shown in battle. Though Per in *Wings for Per* (D'Aulaire, 1944) is shown as a classic hero and the enemy as evil, in the later books the focus shifts to the children. In most cases the soldiers are part of the story's background, either part of war's faceless threat or victims of it.

Books about later wars almost entirely avoid taking sides or giving any reasons for the wars. They focus on the loss of loved ones and security and show how children have coped with war in various ways. In *Sami and the Time of the Troubles* (Heide & Gilliland, 1992) war means hiding out in basement rooms to escape the gunfire in the streets of Lebanon; soldiers fight above unseen, but when fighting stops briefly, boys build forts, play war and dream of peace. The Laotian refugee child in Shea's *The Whispering Cloth* (1995) sees war as loss of home and parents. Soldiers from opposing forces are described as wearing, not uniforms, but "different clothes" (Shea, 1995, n.p.). Some shoot and some beckon without explanation. For the Vietnamese children in *Sweet Dried Apples* (Breckler, 1996) war means an absent father and hardship, followed by firebombs and finally ashes. These stories do an admirable job of showing us war from the children's limited perspective, but in leaving out the soldiers they present war almost as a natural disaster, a random occurrence for which no one is responsible. In *The Wall* (Bunting, 1990) a father takes his son to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial where the boy's grandfather's name is inscribed. A feeling of loss and absence is conveyed by the offerings of flags and crosses and old photographs along the ground. A veteran in a wheelchair wears, not a uniform, but a "soldier's shirt" (Bunting, 1990, n.p.) with medals. The scene evokes a sense of what the boy and his father have lost, but the loss is tempered with pride. Perhaps it is pride that the grandfather fought for his country, or perhaps just that the dead are remembered and honored on the wall. The reader is left to decide.

From the soldier images in these last examples, all arrogance and swashbuckling is gone. This progression of imagery from the celebratory

patriotism of the American soldiers in *Yankee Doodle* (Chalk, 1993) to the arrogance but ultimate defeat of the German soldiers in the World War II historical fiction to the very human portrayal of the legless veteran in *The Wall* (Bunting, 1990) shows perhaps our psychological distance from the pain of the earlier wars and more recent reluctance to fight in the face of current knowledge of what it means in human terms. In historical fiction about wars later than the Civil War, there is a marked absence of any discussion of causes or justification for war. This may be attributable to the fact that children would not understand the reasons, but the Revolutionary War era books do provide reasons for that war, however simplified, and children are notoriously curious about “why.” According to Everson, in adult war literature after World War I, “war itself becomes more futile,” marked by a “sense of alienation and ironic perspective” (Everson, 1995, p. 25). Rather than reflect this sense of futility felt after two world wars or the deep division in Americans’ views of later wars, historical fiction for young children delivers happy endings, however unlikely, (Everson 1995, p. 337) or concentrates on the immediate experience and consequences of war from the child character’s perspective. Even the German soldiers in *Rose Blanche* (Innocenti, 1985) are portrayed more as cogs in a great wheel than as knowing perpetrators of the atrocities Rose witnesses. This approach absolves authors from the task of assigning blame or explaining causes, which they may feel to be irrelevant from the child’s perspective.

### **Tricksters and Toys**

Two other incarnations of soldiers in picture books deserve mention: soldiers in folktales and toy soldiers. Anita Lobel in *Soldier, Soldier, Won't You Marry Me* illustrates a folk song about a girl captivated by a passing soldier; her refrain is “Oh, soldier, soldier, won't you marry me/With your musket, fife and drum?” (Langstaff, 1972, n.p.) The clever soldier, as a condition of marriage, tricks the maid into supplying him with one article of clothing after another before confessing gleefully that he already has a wife. Another rogue of a soldier is found in the folk tale *Brave Soldier Janosh* (Ambrus, 1967). In this tale an old veteran of the Napoleonic wars regales simple villagers with stories of how he defeated the conqueror single-handedly. He is a braggart and in his version the enemy soldiers are cowardly bumbler. The tale is told tongue-in-cheek,

with only the presence of a sneezing student to hint that the old soldier's stories may not be 100% accurate (Sneezing denotes disbelief, we are told.). *Stone Soup* (Brown, 1947) is another tale of the cleverness of soldiers in fooling simple villagers. It is significant that all three of these old tales portray soldiers in the archetypal role of tricksters, who take advantage of the simpleness of the villagers. Here as in the fiction, the soldiers are arrogant and uncaring, yet we want them to succeed because they are so clever.

Finally, soldiers appear as toys in picture books. Toys have long been the instruments of children's wish fulfillment and these books cater to the child's wish to be a hero, to have adventures, and to win acclaim. In these stories as in the folktales, the image of the soldier is divorced from the concept of war. The toy soldier is the embodiment of bravery, constancy, and adventure, an exciting alter ego for the child faced with the daily humdrum business of learning to adjust to the strictures of society. The classic is Andersen's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (Andersen, 1953; Isadora, 1996). Andersen's soldier's uniform has become the default image of the toy soldier, still sold in toy stores. The nineteenth century costume, in red or blue, with epaulets and feathered headgear make this image an anachronism, totally unconnected with modern methods of warfare. Andersen's soldier is idealized, brave and true, carelessly treated by the boy who owns him, but never relaxing his standards of conduct. Another fantasy involving toy soldiers is *The Battle of Luke and Longnose* (McClintock, 1994). Here the characters in Luke's toy theater come alive during the night. The cowardly soldiers beg Luke to be their general in their fight against the villain Longnose. He agrees and succeeds with the help of his cat in a crucial moment, all in good fun. The secret life of toy soldiers is updated in *The Angel and the Soldier Boy* (Collington, 1987), in which the brave but again anachronistic toy soldier is captured by a pirate, then rescued by the toy angel. This reversal of the sexual stereotypes only partially succeeds, however; for though girl rescues boy in this case, the soldier is inevitably male, the angel inevitably female.

## Soldiers and Gender Stereotyping

Those who are concerned about the violence and values in children's books about war seldom address the gender stereotyping so prevalent in them. Those who do address the gender issues in children's literature focus on calling for more active and more numerous female characters. Myers implies that we need no longer be concerned with gender issues in war stories because "domestic contribution stories for girls on the home front" (2000, p. 328) are no longer being published. But both the issue of conflict resolution and the issue of gender stereotypes would be informed by an examination of the male stereotyping prevalent in picture book images of soldiers. If part of the male stereotype may be characterized as aggressor, surely the soldier stereotype could be characterized as aggressor times two, an exaggerated version of the male stereotype. In children's literature, especially in the fiction, soldiers are shown as anonymous aggressors with weapons, fighting machines who follow orders mindlessly. In the historical fiction they are shown often as cardboard heroes, brave and invincible, or in later examples as part of the background of a violent world, perhaps off-stage but ever threatening and impersonal, like a looming hurricane.

Surprisingly few of the stories examined here contain soldiers as main characters. Few of the soldier characters even have speaking parts. In many of the illustrations they are faceless and identical. In many stories they are part of a backdrop, an element of the scenery. In *The Ring and the Window Seat* (Hest, 1990), for example, the soldiers are shown but hardly mentioned. They are there to create a threatening mood and to orient the reader since the text gives no details on time or place. The soldier type is so well understood it needs no elaboration by the author. The soldiers in *Hiroshima No Pika* (Maruki, 1980) and *Rose Blanche* (Innocenti, 1985), though they are the immediate cause of the suffering described, are only minor characters in the plot. Their role is a given; it needs no elaboration. There is no differentiation between the person and the job. When a soldier is the main character, he (never a she) acts completely in character, i.e., according to stereotype as a fighting machine. For example, the faceless general in *The Bomb and the General* (Eco, 1989) loves war for its own sake. The toy theater soldiers in *The Battle of Luke and Longnose* (McClintock, 1994) are helpless without a

leader; it is understood that soldiers follow orders. The soldiers in *War and Peas* (Foreman, 1974) immediately jump into their tanks to attack on the order of the king. The Zooks and Yooks in *The Butter Battle Book* (Seuss, 1984) fight on with ever bigger and better weapons and never a thought, while the few female characters act as cheerleaders. Only the folktales contain soldiers as characters whose actions are not predictable. Yet they are seen only in pre- or post-war situations, not engaged in the business of war.

Interestingly, there are a few stories in which soldiers do appear as true characters; they revolve around American soldiers in postwar occupied Japan. Say's *The Bicycle Man* (1982), Friedman's *How My Parents Learned to Eat* (1984) and Little's *Yoshiko and the Foreigner* (1996) portray them as individual, sensitive characters facing Japanese bias toward foreigners but able to overcome it. In these stories the war is over and soldiers have become people once again.

Rodd and others report that even preschool children have a concept of war (Rodd, 1985; Bat-Ami, 1994; p. 85; Everson, 1995, p. 12). Similarly, children form a sense of gender identification (Gerasimova, Trojan, & Zdravomyslova, 1996, p. 71) and use "gender-stereotyped styles of interaction" (Cramer & Skidd, 1992, p. 369) as young as age three or four. Traditional children's literature is full of gender stereotypes: the female characters are far fewer in number, and are more passive, more caring and more in need of protection, often the victims of violence but rarely the cause. Male characters are more often protagonists, active, aggressive, adventurous, often violent, clever, naughty, and victorious. Peterson and Lach (1990) found in their study of gender images in picture books that while traditional gender-based stereotypes have decreased, they are far from gone from children's books. Goss in a similar study found males to predominate as main characters while females were more often secondary characters (1996, p. 6). Goss also found that choices of roles for female characters have increased, but that "Male characters still received more positive consequences for their actions and females still bestowed more negative consequences on themselves" (p. 7). Turner-Bowker (1996) found a significantly greater number of males in the titles and pictures of Caldecott Medal winners and honor books for a recent ten-year period,

and found that the males were described as more active and potent. Just as changing attitudes toward war are reflected in children's literature, so too are changing attitudes toward gender roles. However, the transformation is far from complete and children are exposed to the old as well as new stories. They absorb attitudes from both and it affects their behavior.

This process is evident in their own stories. Clark (1995) reports on a study of stories written by children and found significant differences in the stories of the boys and girls. While girls' stories were concerned with social relationships, and were realistic in form, boys' stories were concerned with violent struggles between good guys and bad guys, often resolved by superheroes, and containing large doses of fantasy and exaggeration. While both use play in their narratives, "Power struggles, rules and the importance of winning is the dimension of play that boys articulate" (Clark, 1995, p. 3). Cramer and Skidd studied the relationship between preschooler self-worth and their use of gender-stereotyped styles of behavior. In their subjects "the use of gender-stereotyped styles of behavior by boys becomes increasingly important with age in relation to their perceived positive self-competence and social acceptance. On the other hand, for preschool girls, the use of feminine-stereotyped styles of behavior appears to become less important with age. . . consistent with the fact that there is more pressure on boys to conform to sex-stereotyped behaviors" (Cramer & Skidd, 1992, p. 388).

Perhaps this lessening of the correlation between girls' use of feminine behavior and their self-worth stems from the increase in behavior choices open to them, but the same broadening of possibilities does not seem to apply to the boys. A study by Arthur and White (1996) asked students to assign gender to animal characters. While the youngest children assigned their own gender to the characters, the older ones more often assigned gender along stereotypic lines, according to the activeness or social behavior of the characters. The authors found that the older boys' character assignments were most strongly correlated to gender stereotypes. In a study of electronic games and gender differences, Funk and Buchman found not only that the games themselves reinforced gender stereotypes, but also that boys' attitudes about playing these games showed less latitude:

Across developmental groupings, gender stereotyping was stronger for boys. The tendency for boys to be more stereotyped in their attitudes about electronic games is consistent with other research suggesting that males are generally less flexible than females in their attitudes toward gender roles. . . . This may be due in part to the higher value of masculine activities, which increases pressure on boys to conform to gender stereotypes” (1996, p. 227).

The pressure to conform may lead to more of those “higher value” masculine activities, but it also deprives boys of permission to “show their vulnerability and softer feelings” (Goss, 1996, p. 8). A study of a school’s falling male test scores found that stereotyped behavior is so common among the boys that aggressive behavior, lack of verbal and empathic skills, and consequent difficulties with team work had become the norm: “young men are expected to behave badly” (Barker, 1997, p. 225). A study by Ashton (1983) confirms that the presence or absence of stereotypes in children’s books affects behavior; children exposed to books containing sex-stereotypes, when offered a choice of stereotypical male, female, and neutral toys, more often chose the stereotypical toys, whereas children exposed to books with non-stereotypic characters more often chose the neutral toys. One study shows how allowing gender-stereotyping behavior leads to permitted violence against women and girls and weaker members of the community in general (Boland, 1995). Several researchers have outlined ways of giving girls more choices and more attention in the curriculum (Goss, 1996; Craft, 1993; Peterson & Lach, 1990) and others have demonstrated ways of using children’s books to teach conflict resolution without violence (Fassler, 1983; Carllson-Paige, 1986), but there has been little emphasis on expanding behavior choices for boys in the classroom or examining the implications of those limited male choices on attempts to teach conflict resolution.

It seems logical that if the male stereotype permits, or indeed encourages violence, then chances of reducing violence or achieving an end to war are slim as long as that stereotype is the dominant role model presented to boys in the society. A combination of approaches stressing wider choices of behavior styles for both girls and boys along with



exploration of alternative methods of dispute resolution is called for. Simply giving girls society's permission to act more like boys is not enough. It may be argued that the readers of picture books are too young to understand why wars happen, how they could be avoided, or whether a particular war is justified or not. And authors are not obliged to dwell on such questions; they may prefer to focus on children's experience. In either case, however, these books do present images, both textual and graphic, that inevitably affect young readers and listeners. Since, as we have seen from studies cited above, young children absorb gender stereotypes and react primarily to the physical aspects of a story, rather than to the implied messages or allegorical meanings, stories containing stereotypical soldiers arrayed in bright uniforms, equipped with powerful weapons, and engaged in exciting actions may attract rather than repel young male readers. Similarly, stories in which the actors who initiate and conduct the war are not part of the story's action may foster the attitude that war is an inevitable fact of life, uncaused and unstoppable.

Various approaches to scholarly criticism of children's books have predominated at different times. Earliest examples focused on the moral lessons taught by the stories (Craft, 1993; Hunt, 1993). This didactic model is still evident today. The specific moral lessons taught may have changed, and the lessons are certainly delivered in a less heavy-handed fashion, but the expectation that children's books should instill correct values has not disappeared. Peterson & Lach quote the Council on Interracial Books for Children to that effect: "We propose that children's literature become a tool for the conscious promotion of human values that will help lead to greater human liberation" (1990, p. 191). While using books as didactic tools goes very much against the grain of the literary critic, using them to expand horizons and explore reality is widely accepted. For some, literature should "make people more aware of the way society works" (Dixon, 1977, p. 32). Emphasis on values is especially evident, understandably, in discussions of children's war literature. The child-centered, constructivist approach evident in Ray's study (1986) investigates what lessons or messages the children themselves take from the works by exploring the texts with them, and reveals some surprising discoveries about children's interpretations. Carlsson-Paige describes good and bad examples of using this approach with *The Butter Battle Book*, warning that "When adults make direct

links between the book and the real world, it prevents children from coming to terms with this difficult topic in their own way and according to their own timetable” (1986, p. 40). Through classroom discussion, re-enactment, and role-playing, children come to their own conclusions about the message of the book. They may expand their repertoire of behaviors and their understanding of consequences. Through this active participation, they may come to understand more of the themes and beauties of the texts and a bit more about how society works than if they simply absorbed the stories passively or were “taught” what they mean.

These same techniques may be used to broaden children’s understanding of gender stereotypes and may be combined with classroom exploration of conflict resolution. But whereas there are now numerous examples of texts demonstrating the evils of war and what it is like for children to live through one, and many showing female characters in active non-sexist roles, there are very few models of soldiers portrayed as individuals. There are soldiers as fighting fools and braggarts in the fiction books and folktales, and as brave superheroes or as faceless or absent automatons in the historical fiction, but there are very few who act as individual human beings. For young children who may never have encountered any real live soldiers, these images provide little material with which to expand their repertoires of gender behavior and conflict resolution, or to consider when it might be necessary to fight. “Telling” children that *The Butter Battle Book* is about the folly of war may have no meaning for the child whose developmental level does not yet permit understanding of allegorical meanings and whose only models of soldiers are the limiting examples found in picture books and other media. If young children’s concept of war is based on their concrete experience of toy guns and playground squabbles, then attempts to expand these concepts through literature must use examples of non-stylized characters, acting unpredictably in and out of conflict situations. Without such examples, children’s attitudes are likely to be based solely on the lure of the uniforms, fascination with the weapons, and the fun of the game-like action.

### References

- Arthur, A. G., & White, H. (1996). Children's assignment of gender to animal characters in pictures. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 157(3), 297-301.
- Ashton, E. (1983). Measures of play behavior: The influence of sex-role stereotyped children's books. *Sex Roles*, 9(1), 43-47.
- Barker, B. (1997). Girls' world or anxious times: What's really happening at school in the gender war? *Educational Review*, 49(3), 221-227.
- Bat-Ami, M. (1994). War and peace in the early elementary classroom. *Children's Literature in Education*, 25(2), 83-99.
- Boland, P. (Ed.). (1995). Gender stereotypes: The links to violence. *Equity in Education Series*. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc. ED 387 771.
- Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D. E. (1986). *The Butter Battle Book*: Uses and abuses with young children. *Young Children*, 41(3), 37-42.
- Clark, E. (1995). *Popular culture images of gender as reflected through young children's story*. Paper presented at the Annual Joint Meetings of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Philadelphia PA, April 12-15, 1995. ED 388 966.
- Cooper, P. (1965). The development of the concept of war. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2(1), 1-17.
- Craft, J. (1993). *Sex stereotypes in children's literature*. ED 354 530.
- Cramer, P., & Skidd, J. E. (1992). Correlates of self-worth in preschoolers: The role of gender-stereotyped styles of behavior. *Sex Roles*, 26(9/10), 369-390.
- Dixon, B. (1977). *Catching them young*. London: Pluto Press.
- Everson, S. E. (1995). *A soldier's war, a child's peace: the dialogue of adult and children's war fiction since 1941*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1995). Dissertation Abstracts International, 56-08, A, 3124.
- Fassler, J. & Janis, M. G. (1983). Books, children, and peace. *Young Children*, 38(6), 21-30.
- Funk, J. B. & Buchman, D. D. (1996). Children's perceptions of gender differences in social approval for playing electronic games. *Sex Roles*, 35(3/4), 219-231.

- Gerasimova, K. Troyan, N. & Zdravomyslova, E. E. (1996). Gender stereotypes in pre-school children's literature. In Rotkirch, A., & Haavio-Mannila, E. (Eds.). *Women's voices in russia today*. Brookfield, VT: Dartmouth.
- Goss, G. (1996). *Weaving girls into the curriculum*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Chicago IL, Feb. 21-24, 1996. ED 394 931.
- Heiser, P. (1997). Reflections of war through historical fiction. *School Library Media Activities Monthly*, 13(8), 11-28.
- Hunt, P. (1990). *Children's literature: the development of criticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Jason, P. K. (1997). Representations of war in ethics education. *Journal of General Education*, 46(2), 96-106.
- Kornfeld, H. J. (1994). Using fiction to teach history: Multicultural and global perspectives of World War II. *Social Education*, 58(5), 281-286.
- Lima, C. W. & Lima, J. A. (Eds.). (1998). *A to zoo: subject access to children's picture books*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New Providence, NJ: R. R. Bowker.
- Myers, Mitzi. (2000). Storying war: A capsule overview. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 24(3), 327-336.
- Peterson, S. B. & Lach, M. A. (1990). Gender stereotypes in children's books: Their prevalence and influence on cognitive and affective development. *Gender and Education*, 2(2), 185-197.
- Ray, R. A. (1986). *Children's response to war literature*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Utah, 1986). Dissertation Abstracts International, 47-10, A, 3689.
- Rodd, J. (1985). Pre-school children's understanding of war. *Early Child Development and Care*, 22(2/3), 109-121.
- Turner-Bowker, D. M. (1996). Gender stereotyped descriptors in children's picture books: Does 'Curious Jane' exist in the literature? *Sex Roles*, 35(7/8), 461-488.
- Van Cleaf, D. W. & Martin, R. J. (1986). Seuss's *Butter Battle Book*: Is there a hidden harm? *Childhood Education*, 62(3), 191-194.

Children's Books Cited

- Ackerman, K. (1990). *The tin heart*. NY: Athencum.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1992). *When mama retires*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Adler, D. A. (1987). *The number on my grandfather's arm*. NY: UAHC Press.
- Ambrus, V. G. (1967). *Brave soldier Janosh*. NY: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Andersen, H. C. (1953). *The steadfast tin soldier*. (M.R. James, Trans.). NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Aragon, J. C. (1990). *The major and the mousehole mice*. NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Benchley, N. (1969). *Sam the Minuteman*. NY: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Breckler, R. (1996). *Sweet dried apples: a vietnamese wartime childhood*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Brown, M. (1947). *Stone soup: an old tale*. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Bunting, E. (1996). *The Blue and the gray*. NY: Scholastic.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1990). *The wall*. NY: Clarion Books.
- Carmer, C. (1972). *The boy drummer of Vincennes*. Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: Harvey House.
- Chalk, G. (1993). *Yankee doodle*. NY: Dorling Kindersley.
- Coblentz, C. C. (1947). *Martin and Abraham Lincoln: based on a true incident*. Chicago, IL: Children's Press.
- Collington, P. (1987). *The angel and the soldier boy*. NY: A.A. Knopf.
- D'Aulaire, I. (1944). *Wings for Per*. Garden City NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co.
- De Paola, T. (1984). *The mysterious giant of Barletta: an Italian folktale*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Eco, U. & Carmi, E. (1989). *The bomb and the general*. (W. Weaver, Trans.). NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Emberley, B. (adapter). (1967). *Drummer Hoff*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Fitzhugh, L. & Scoppettone, S. (1969). *Bang bang you're dead*. NY: Harper & Row.
- Foreman, M. (1974). *War and peas*. NY: Crowell.
- Fox, M. (1996). *Feathers and fools*. NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- Friedman, I. R. (1984). *How my parents learned to eat*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Greeson, J. (1992). *An American army of two*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books.

- Heide, F. and Gilliland, J. H. (1992). *Sam and the time of the troubles*. NY: Clarion Books.
- Hest, A. (1990). *The ring and the window seat*. NY: Scholastic.
- Hoestlandt, J. (1995). *Star of fear, star of hope*. NY: Walker.
- Innocenti, R. (1985). *Rose Blanche*. Mankato: Creative Education.
- Isadora, R. (1996). *The steadfast tin soldier*. NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Langstaff, J. (compiler). (1972). *Soldier, soldier, won't you marry me?* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Little, M. O. (1997). *Yoshiko and the foreigner*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Lobel, A. (1967). *Potatoes, potatoes*. NY: Harper & Row.
- Lowrey, J. S. (1971). *Six silver spoons*. NY: Harper & Row.
- Lyon, G. E. (1991). *Cecil's story*. NY: Orchard Books.
- Maruki, T. (1980). *Hiroshima no pika*. NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books.
- Mattingley, C. (1984). *The angel with a mouth-organ*. NY: Holiday House.
- McAllister, A. (1991). *The battle of Sir Cob and Sir Filbert*. NY: Clarkson N. Potter.
- McClintock, B. (1994). *The battle of Luke and Longnose*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- McGowen, T. (1968). *The apple strudel soldier*. Chicago: Follett.
- Miller, E. (1987). *Frederick Ferdinand Fox*. NY: Crown.
- Morimoto, J. (1987). *My Hiroshima*. NY: Viking.
- Myers, E. (1995). *Forri the baker*. NY: Dial.
- Oppenheim, S. L. (1992). *The lily cupboard*. NY: HarperCollins.
- Phillips, I. (1979). *The brothers wrong and wrong again*. NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Polacco, P. (1994). *Pink and Say*. NY: Philomel Books.
- Popov, N. (1996). *Why?* NY: North-South Books.
- Rappaport, D. (1988). *The Boston coffee party*. NY: Harper & Row.
- Rupprecht, S. P. (1989). *The tale of the vanishing rainbow*. (N. Lewis, Trans.). NY: North-South Books.
- Say, A. (1982). *The bicycle man*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Seuss, Dr. (1984). *The butter battle book*. NY: Random House.
- Shea, P. D. (1995). *The whispering cloth: a refugee's story*. Honesdale, PA: Caroline House.

Vigna, J. (1986). *Nobody wants a nuclear war*. Niles, IL: Albert Whitman.

Whittier, J. G. (1965). *Barbara Frietchie*. NY: Crowell.

Wild, M. (1991). *Let the celebrations begin!* NY: Orchard Books.

Yolen, J. (1991). *All those secrets of the world*. Boston: Little, Brown.

*Christina M. Desai is a reference librarian at Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.*