NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

How Great are "Great Books for Girls?"
An Examination of Gender Messages in Recommended Literature for Adolescent Girls

A Thesis Submitted to the
University Honors Program
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Upper Division Honors
Department of Women's Studies

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DeKalb, Illinois
May 2003
University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

Capstone Title: (print or type):

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Recommended Literature for Adolescent Girls

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Date of Approval (print or type): 5/12/03
ABSTRACT: A number of booklists recommending novels that can help children expand their ideas of gender roles have been recently published, in part because of the recent attention paid to the drops in self-esteem and academic performance adolescent girls experience related to gender roles. I examined several of these booklists and a small sample of the novels they recommend. Although many of the recommended novels offered readers examples of nontraditional heroines, they also perpetuated gender bias to some degree. In order for literature to be an effective tool in changing children’s definitions of gender, parents, educators, and authors need to be extremely critical of the gender messages in novels, and these messages need to be discussed with readers.
In the past decade there has been an increasing amount of attention paid to the problems adolescent girls face with self-esteem and academic performance. Popular books such as Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, and Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls* have given the public a glimpse into the lives of adolescent American girls, and readers did not like what they saw. In Orenstein's year long study of girls at two very different California middle schools she learned that as girls become women they see their gender as a liability (xix). Both girls and boys learn to associate femininity with constraint, and masculinity with opportunity (Orenstein xviii). This devaluation of the feminine and by extension girls and women who are expected to act feminine, results in dramatic drops in self-esteem as girls reach adolescence, which in turn causes a loss of faith in one's abilities, and decreased academic performance.

This drop in self-esteem not only affects academic performance, but is perpetuated by the American school system. Sadly, one of the places children learn to accept male privilege is in the classroom. Myra and David Sadker's famous study of gender equity in American schools, as recounted in their book *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*, shows overall that boys are allowed to dominate classroom activity, and receive more encouragement and attention than girls. More recently, the American Association of University Women (*Shortchanging*) survey of 3,000 students aged nine to fifteen entitled *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* also showed that girls participate less in school, are more likely to be interrupted when they do speak, and are tracked away from studies such as math and science that lead to higher paying jobs. Likewise, girls are the only group of students to consistently leave
the school system worse off than when they started; female academic performance actually decreases during their experience with the education system (Shortchanging).

Orenstein, the Sadkers, and the AAUW assert that the dramatic drop in self-esteem in adolescent girls, and the gender discrimination in the school system are related to imbedded cultural ideas about girls’ and boys’ abilities and behaviors. There is a pervasive and deep-seated “boys will be boys” attitude in our culture by which people expect boys to be rambunctious, aggressive, adventurous and ambitious, whereas girls are expected to be neat, nice, well-behaved and non-challenging (Shortchanging). These expectations result in teachers according more attention to male students. When the Sadkers asked educators why they spent more time helping boys than girls, responses included, “Because boys need it more” and “They can’t even sit still. They need me more” (5). Girls are often overlooked because they are quiet, neat, and basically unproblematic in the classroom, just as they have been taught to be. Boys are rewarded for rowdy behavior with teacher attention, however girls are punished for speaking up in the classroom. Through observing school classrooms the Sadkers found that “whether male comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them. However, when girls call out, there is a fascinating occurrence: Suddenly the teacher remembers the rule about raising your hand before you talk. And the girl, who is usually not as assertive as the male students, is deftly and swiftly put back in her place” (43).

Girls and boys are expected to behave differently in school based on our culture’s gender stereotypes. Also, since boys receive more attention and encouragement in school simply for acting as we expect boys to act, a gender hierarchy is reinforced through which both boys and girls learn that girls are second class. The feminine stereotype not
only puts girls at a disadvantage by assigning them second class status, but by rewarding them for their silence and compliance instead of their intelligence and ambition. In order to better the academic and psychological state of adolescent girls, we need to change the gender stereotyped expectations others have of them, and that they have of themselves.

One way of changing damaging gender stereotyped expectations girls face is through the introduction of role models that reflect the diversity and capabilities of women. A popular way of doing so is through exposing young people to literature featuring complex, strong, and independent female protagonists. “When children read about people in nontraditional gender roles, they are less likely to limit themselves to stereotypes” (Sadker 69). As one sixth grader said in response to people portrayed in classroom reading, “If they can do great things, maybe I can, too” (Sadker 69). In a study of 84 highly educated women, all of the women participating felt that their childhood reading influenced their lives, identities and decisions (Garner). As mediums for expressing cultural values including gender roles, books have the ability to influence the way children see and act in their world, and continue to affect them as adults.

Unfortunately, most students will not be exposed to capable and independent female characters through the school system unless their teachers are particularly proactive about gender equity in the classroom. Most characters in required school reading are male. A study of the sex of characters in popular reading textbooks yields startling results. In popular reading textbooks used from 1964 to 1976, 70 percent of characters were male (Foley par. 5). In a similar study conducted in 1990 found no change in the number of male and female characters, 70 percent of characters were still
male. In the 1990 study, a mere 19 percent of main characters were female, and even
male supporting characters outnumbered females two to one (Foley par. 6).

An examination of gender roles in Newbery Medal winning novels revealed that
although winning novels have become more progressive in their portrayal of gender roles
in recent decades, characters have often been portrayed in stereotyped gender roles
(Powell). Also, historically, females have been underrepresented in Newbery Medal
winners (Powell 51). Although newer award winning books have become more
progressive in their depiction of gender, it is important to remember that the use of classic
books that may not portray gender so favorably persists in the classroom.

Since the feminist movement of the 1970s, there has been increasing attention
brought to gender inequities in school textbooks and novels. Why, then, are female
characters still underrepresented in required school reading? One reason is the widely
held belief that boys will not read books about girls, but girls will read books about boys.
This belief is pervasive in the publishing industry as well as education. It is not difficult
to discern the root of this phenomenon when one considers that both boys and girls are
taught to devalue the feminine, which includes stories about the female experience.

This extends to stories deemed feminine, even though they feature male
characters. As Elizabeth Duro, author of "'But That's a Girls' Book!' Exploring Gender
Boundaries in Children's Reading Practices" observed, a five year old boy who was
taunted for checking Beauty and the Beast out of the library. Even though the beast is
male and central to the story, his male classmates deemed this book feminine and
teasingly called the boy checking it out a "girl" until he exchanged the book for another
(par. 2 & 3). In a culture where the gender hierarchy is so marked that to call a boy a
“girl” is a hefty insult, it is no wonder that boys are reluctant to appear to relate to feminine experience by reading books about or marketed to girls. For boys, this would be a step down, a loss of privilege, and counter to the gender stereotype of male toughness. Girls also police the gender boundary that keeps boys from reading “girls’ books,” as Duro’s study of reading practices in fifth graders shows.

This phenomenon affects the publishing industry as well as teaching practices. Although there have been significant improvements recently, books with female protagonists were often not published because it was believed that they would garner only half the audience of a book with a male protagonist. Award-winning young adult author, Scott O’Dell was even asked to change the sex of Karana, the main character of The Island of the Blue Dolphins, despite the fact that it was based on the true story of a Native American woman’s experience (Segel 181). This attitude persists in many teacher’s minds, as well, encouraging educators to choose books with male protagonists so as not to lose their male audience, a danger teachers are well aware of. There is a general concern that boys do not read as much as girls. Thus, if boys are reluctant to read stories with female protagonists, teachers will often rely on books with male protagonists to encourage boys to read more. This results in teachers, despite their good intentions of encouraging male reading, further devaluing the feminine by choosing readings with mostly male protagonists.

Far from inconsequential, the devaluing of the feminine through reading practices can have a serious effect on students as P. Gilbert author of “And They Lived Happily Ever After: Cultural Storylines and the Construction of Gender” notes:
By entering into story worlds, and by being inserted into the story lines of their culture, students come to know what counts as being a women, or being a man, in the culture to which the stories belong. They come to know the range of cultural possibilities available for femininity and masculinity—and the limits to that range. Through constant repetition and layering, story patterns and logic become almost “naturalized” as truths and common sense. (qtd. in Trousdale 3)

The dominance of male characters in classroom reading reinforces and “naturalizes” the idea that girls are second class. It implies that boys’ stories are more interesting and important than girls’ stories. It implies that girls cannot be at the center of action; rather they belong on the sidelines as supporting characters. It justifies boys’ reluctance to read stories with female protagonists by showing them that girls’ stories are not worthy of classroom attention. It reinforces the idea that stories about girls are frivolous, meant only for girls’ entertainment, and not worthy of serious study. Furthermore, it denies both girls and boys the opportunity to vicariously experience the lives of many interesting female protagonists, and to expand their notions of gender roles.

In order to introduce educators, parents and children to books which can help expand readers’ perceptions of gender roles, several booklists recommending novels featuring nontraditional female protagonists have recently been published. Interested in the messages about gender these booklists and their recommended novels were sending, I decided to evaluate them based on three basic questions. First, what criteria is being used by authors of these booklists for selecting novels that positively portray girls? Second, what messages about gender are the booklists themselves sending? And, third, what
messages about gender are the novels these booklists recommend sending? To answer
the first two questions I critically examined six booklists, paying special attention to the
introductions. To examine the gender messages recommended novels send, I read and
analyzed a small selection of the novels recommended for adolescent girl readers. My
research focuses on adolescent girls because it is at this age when girls experience a
serious drop in self-esteem related to confining and damaging gender roles. I wondered
if the heroines of these recommended novels could act as positive role models for
adolescent girls by expanding their definitions of gender roles.

I evaluated the gender messages in these books and booklists based on a feminist
perspective, which is appropriate considering that in recommending books to foster
strong and independent girls, these booklists have a feminist purpose. For this analysis, I
will be using a definition of a feminist novel very similar to that used by Roberta
Seelinger Trites in her book *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's
Novels*. Protagonists in a feminist novel may be female or male. The protagonists of
feminist novels may experience gender related conflict, but are not defeated by it.
Although traditional gender roles may be present in a feminist novel, they should not be
lauded, romanticized, or encouraged to persist. Thus, historical fiction depicting a time
of strict gender roles can be historically accurate, but also feminist by not romanticizing
gender bias. Feminist novels should not simply reverse gender roles, implying that one
must be either masculine or feminine, and that masculinity and femininity are polar
opposites. Neither should a feminist novel only offer 'heroes in drag' which implies that
to be heroic, one must be masculine (qtd. in Trites 5). On the contrary, feminist novels
often celebrate traditionally feminine qualities that have often been seen as inferior to
traditionally male qualities (Trites 5). Unlike many female protagonist who are tamed, tailored and silenced by the end of the novel to fit society’s expectations of womanhood, protagonists of feminist novels should either be or become empowered throughout the course of the novel. Feminist protagonists should also either maintain or gain their voice and individuality (Trites 7). Trites also notes that in feminist novels, characters with power do not have power over others. Rather, they have power to express themselves, and reach their goals without dominating others (8). In sum, the feminist protagonist “does not simply grow, she grows in power. No longer the passive ‘good girl’ who grows into a prescribed and circumscribed social role, the feminist protagonist learns to recognize and appreciate the power of her own voice. Her awakening is not bestowed on her by a male awakener; instead, she wakes herself and discovers herself to be a strong, independent, and articulate person” (Trites 7-8).

The six booklists I chose to examine were all published in the last ten years, and are meant to only be a sample of those available. The criteria used by the booklists I studied, although obviously designed to find heroines who defied the traditional feminine stereotype, were not as nuanced in the examination of gender as the feminist criteria outlined above. Most often, the authors looked for strength and independence in heroines, and quality writing in books. In Let’s Hear It for the Girls authors Erica Bauermeister and Holly Smith say they looked for books with “strong and resourceful girls and women” of a variety of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, as well as books that capture readers’ attention. Shireen Dodson, author of 100 Books for Girls to Grow On, chose books she thought were well-written, held her interest, and would foster interesting discussions. Dodson also looked for books that had a strong, three
dimensional character, male or female, whom readers could learn from. Many of her recommendations feature African American characters. Authors Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair of *Declarations of Independence* sought out books written by American authors from 1990-2001 that feature strong, empowered heroines. They chose books about “fierce, spunky, or rebellious” girls who vary in their sources and experiences of empowerment (xi). *Gender Positive!* by Patricia L. Roberts, Nancy L. Cecil and Sharon Alexander is slightly different from the other booklists I studied in that it is targeted specifically to teachers and librarians to help them choose “nonstereotyped” literature. The authors sought out books with one or more of the following qualities: balance in number of males and females, both males and females depicted in a variety of roles, reversal of traditional gender roles, females portrayed as having mainly desirable traits, variety of characters, and females and males shown as making contributions to society. Archie Givens, author of *Strong Souls Singing*, seeks with her book to bring attention to African American literature, and to dispel negative stereotypes with heroines who are strong, admirable, and have “power, idealism, faith, dedication and perseverance” (3). Finally, in her book *Great Books for Girls* Kathleen Odean looked for female characters who were strong, brave, athletic, and took risks. She says, “I found female characters who are creative, capable, articulate, and intelligent. They solve problems, face challenges, resolve conflicts, and go on journeys. These girls are not waiting to be rescued; they are doing the rescuing. Nor are they waiting for a male to provide a happy ending: They are fashioning their own stories” (8).

The creation of these booklists is both admirable and necessary in a time when, despite improvement in gender equity, girls still are stamped with second-class status and
experience damaging drops in self-esteem. Also, the abundance of booklists published illustrates the desire of their authors and readers to inspire and empower girls through literature. Although this represents positive change, I was concerned that booklist authors were not being critical enough in their examination of gender, and inadvertently perpetuating the gender divide they were so commendably trying to dispel. Through my examination of these six booklists I became concerned about three main things: First, that designating the recommended novels as books for girls was perpetuating the divide between boys’ and girls’ reading material. Second, with the exception of Kathleen Odean, none of the authors addressed the fact that in many novels female main characters lose agency and voice by the end of the novel instead of gaining them. Third, I was concerned that the way sexism was portrayed in the recommended novels may not offer readers useful tools for combating sexism in real life.

Determining whether or not recommending novels as books for girls is furthering the gender divide in reading is a complicated matter. Designating these books as girls’ books might discourage booklist readers from recommending them to boys, who could also definitely benefit from seeing girls and women in expanded roles. In a culture that puts girls at a disadvantage, they deserve special help and attention. Yet, it is important to not further entrench the divide between the genders at the same time.

I felt the best way to determine whether or not booklists were further entrenching a divide between the genders was through a comparison of Great Books for Girls with its companion book Great Books for Boys. In her introduction to Great Books for Girls, Kathleen Odean makes a point to say that boys also need to read books about strong, and interesting girls. She also notes in Great Books for Boys that in choosing books to
recommend she made a point to include stories about girls. However readers will find obvious differences in the two booklists. In the first edition of *Great Books for Girls*, published in 1997, books are divided by reading level and further categorized into fiction, biography, and poetry and magazines. Fiction is further divided into adventure and survival stories, contemporary life, sports stories, mysteries, historical fiction, fantasy and science fiction. Biography includes sections on leaders and activists, professionals and educators, scientists and inventors, women in the arts, sports biographies, and women in history. In *Great Books for Boys*, published in 1998, the fiction sections are much the same as they are for girls with the addition of humorous stories, and ghost stories. The biography section is also very similar with artists, musicians, and writers instead of women in the arts; men and women in history instead of women in history; and an added section called adventurers and explorers.

The notable difference is that in *Great Books for Boys* every reading level has a nonfiction section including categories of nature and science, technology, history, hobbies and sports, and in the beginning readers section trucks, planes and other technology. Clearly, this reflects a gendered view of reading and is representative of the popular idea that boys read nonfiction, while girls do not. If girls read less nonfiction than boys, it is probably due to the fact that, as these booklists show, they are not encouraged to; it is labeled as a male reading practice. In the introduction to *Great Books for Girls* Odean expresses concern about boys being more encouraged than girls to try new technologies, and to excel in math and science. Yet, she perpetuates the problem by recommending books on science and technology for boys and not for girls. In *Great Books for Girls* Odean laments the lack of nonfiction books featuring girls, but there are
many that do not feature people at all that could be used. Surely, girls are not better off without nonfiction, especially considering that many girls who once loved science and math lose interest in them as they grow older because they learn that as girls they are not supposed to be interested in or good at such topics. It is in this way that separating out books into girls’ and boys’ camps can reinforce assumptions about what male and female readers are interested in and what subjects are appropriate for them.

My second area of concern in evaluating these booklists was whether or not they were perpetuating the traditional female story in which a rambunctious and empowered girl loses voice and agency, and is tamed and silenced to meet society’s standards of womanhood. For practical purposes I could not analyze every recommended book, but I did recognize books of this nature in the booklists. For example, Carol Ryrie Brink’s novel *Caddie Woodlawn* is recommended in three of the six booklists I studied. Caddie is described as mischievous, independent, and as defying traditional gender roles of the 1800’s in which the novel is set. This may be how Caddie acts as an adolescent, but by the end of the novel Caddie has accepted her duties to become a lady and give up her independent ways. Similarly, the first book recommended for grades 4-8 in *Gender Positive!* is *Little Women*. The description is as follows: “A warm, loving, human family is shown. A daughter, Jo, is a courageous, warm and honest girl, who has a quick temper that sometimes gets her into difficulty. Jo leaves home to become a writer to help support her family” (64). It almost seems as if the reviewer had not finished the novel. Yes, Jo did leave for New York to become a writer, but by the end of the novel she puts her writing on hold to be a wife and mother. In the descriptions of both *Caddie Woodlawn* and *Little Women* no attention is paid to the fact that both heroines are
compelled to constrain their adventurous spirits, and quiet their individual voices in order to grow from girls to women. Not pointing out the fact that Jo and Caddie are forced to tame themselves implies a silent acceptance of this phenomenon. I am not suggesting that these books be abandoned. In fact, Jo and Caddie might make particularly appropriate role models since today's young girls go through a similar silencing when they reach adolescence. However, it is vital to address the issue so that the idea of girls losing their independence and voice as they mature is not presented as a natural occurrence.

My final area of focus in examining these six booklists concerned the representation of gender bias in the recommended novels. Even though individual heroines overcame gender related obstacles, were those obstacles allowed to remain in place unquestioned? Are these books representing gender bias as a natural part of our society that individuals may overcome, but that cannot be entirely removed? Is gender bias represented as something that may be overcome at all? Is gender bias represented as a social force? These are difficult questions and require careful analysis of entire novels, not just their descriptions in booklists, to answer. It depends on how the author addresses and describes gender bias.

I think that, for the most part, gender bias is represented as something that the characters are able to overcome. Yet there are examples of highly recommended books in which the heroine gives in to a gender biased society because she simply feels she has no power to leave or change it. This is evident in *Julie of the Wolves* and will also be discussed later with *Shabanu*. The heroine of *Julie of the Wolves* leaves her Inuit village to escape an arranged marriage, and survives alone in the tundra by befriending a pack of
wolves. After one of the wolves is killed, presumably by her own father, she resolves to remain in the tundra forever. Yet, reminded of her own frailty by the death of her pet bird, decides she must return to society and her father. Even though she has survived in the tundra for most of the novel, she bends to society’s idea that she is not capable of taking care of herself. This may speak to the power of societal forces, but hardly makes for an inspiring ending.

Another way in which gender bias can be misrepresented is by presenting it as a natural, not a social force. A social force is something created by people to serve some purpose and therefore can be affected by people, whereas a natural force is something entirely out of human hands. Casting gender bias as a natural force justifies and perpetuates sexism by implying that people have no power to change it. In novels gender bias as a natural force may be represented with an injury, or simple bad luck that keeps female characters from breaking out of traditional gender roles. We see this in Julie of the Wolves with the death of her pet bird. This death can be blamed on no human force, but serves to remind Julie of her limits as a girl. We see this even more in Shabanu, which will be discussed in detail further on.

Nearly the opposite of presenting sexism as a natural force, implying that it is housed only within individuals is equally detrimental. As Angela Hubler explains, the depiction of sexism as residing in one ignorant individual implies that sexism “is not linked to justifications of male dominance within society at large or to other forms of male dominance, for example, economic inequality between men and women,” and that this “denies young readers information crucial to their ability to understand how they might confront sexism” (“Beyond” par. 4). Hubler illustrates this point with the novel
Who Let Girls into the Boys' Locker Room, recommended in Great Books for Girls, in which girl athletes are able to win the respect of their gender biased male teammates simply by explaining to the boys that girls can be capable athletes. In this novel sexism is not presented as a pervading social force, but the misconceptions of a few individuals.

Who Let Girls into the Boys' Locker Room also presents gender bias as something that individuals are able of overcoming simply by proving themselves. This is problematic not only because it implies that girls need only excel to be accepted as equals by their male peers, once again casting sexism as residing in the individual, not society. It can also imply, as Hubler states, that sexism remains in today's society because "women have individually not been strong enough in the past," placing the blame for continued sexism on women instead of society ("Beyond" par. 12). Presenting sexism as something that can be overcome simply on an individual level is also detrimental in that it implies that while individuals may overcome sexism, it remains in place as an obstacle for others.

Although many recommended novels offer readers heroines who are able to overcome obstacles, the defeat of Julie, and the taming of Caddie and Jo is still present in recommended novels. Similarly, individual characters overcoming gender obstacles may be inspiring, but there needs to be a discussion, inside or outside the context of the novel about the obstacles themselves and efforts to change them. There needs to be recognition that gender bias is a social force, and not located solely in individuals. Nor, should gender bias be represented as a natural force which people have no control over. Like the taming of adventurous girls, these topics are often left out of the discussion.
Overall, these booklists highlight many wonderful and inspiring novels that can be useful in expanding readers' views on gender. However, all books are not only products of their authors, but products of culture, and our culture is one that deflates girls' confidence as they reach adolescence and tells them they rank second to boys. Books that portray girls and women respectfully, in a variety of roles, and as having strength, independence and agency can help readers to examine and expand their conceptions of gender roles. However, we have to be critical and careful in choosing these books. Gender biases needs to be recognized, explained to, and discussed with readers so that biases are not inadvertently perpetuated.

In addition to examining the booklists themselves, I also analyzed a small sample of the novels recommended. I chose one book from each of the following four categories I identified my examination of the booklists: heroines who find empowerment in adventure; heroines in isolation from society; heroines who experience more conflict with race, ethnicity or class than gender; and heroines who experience major conflict directly related to gender. In my review of booklists, I found that heroines experiences as described in the booklists often fell into one of these categories. These categories are not meant to cover all recommended books, but to create a practicably analyzable sample and represent common scenarios in recommended books. In my analyses I compare the novels to the model for a feminist novel, and point out examples of gender bias that if left ignored will perpetuate traditional views of gender in readers.

A heroine who has adventures, The Hero and the Crown

The Hero and the Crown by Robin McKinley is a fantasy story about a young girl named Aerin who is the only daughter of a king. She has never been fully accepted by
her people because her mother was a foreigner suspected of witchcraft. Aerin is also seen as an outcast because all other members of the royal family develop a gift of being able to do small magic, called kelar. Aerin, however, has shown no such abilities. She also struggles with the one story she knows of her mother, that she died of a broken heart upon having born a girl. Yet, Aerin finds happiness in scraping up what fighting lessons she can, training an old injured warhorse and trying to discover how to make a legendary potion called kenet said to repel dragon fire. As she reaches her 18th birthday she is too excited about finally discovering the formula for kenet to notice that her cousin and best friend Tor has fallen in love with her. Tor is also in line to be king, because as Aerin says, people usually find a way to keep king’s daughters from becoming queens.

In order to test her new discovery, Aerin sneaks out of the palace to investigate the report of a small dragon in her father’s lands. With the help of the horse she trained, her kenet, and her basic fighting skills, Aerin is able to defeat the small dragon and is soon called upon to defeat others. After she gains some reputation as a successful dragon slayer, a messenger comes to her father to report an impossibly large, powerful dragon wreaking havoc in one of the villages. Her father cannot send troops to aid the village because he is riding north to deal with a border skirmish, a political outing that Aerin was not allowed to attend. However, Aerin promises the messenger that she will go alone to aid his village and face the dragon.

Aerin survives this encounter through sheer bravery, but is very seriously wounded and burned. At home Aerin is given a hero’s welcome, but her scorched lungs fail to heal and she is in serious danger of dying until she receives a message in her dreams to seek out a man who claims he can heal her. With nothing left to lose, Aerin
sneaks out of the palace in the middle of the night and rides to seek this vision. Who she finds is Luthe, a powerful mage who lives in isolation and indeed does heal her.

He also tells her the story of her mother, her own untapped potential, and her kingdom's great need of her. Luthe explains that the problems Aerin’s kingdom is experiencing with its borders and the dragon is the work of Aerin’s uncle, an evil mage who can only be defeated by a member of his own family. Aerin’s mother, he explains, had great strength, but little imagination. She thought that only a male could defeat her brother, but Luthe explains to Aerin that it is she who must face him. He tells her that although she did not develop the talents for petty magic that her other relatives have, she has a deeper stronger magic inside of her. He also presents her with an ancient sword that can only be drawn by a woman.

Thus Aerin leaves to face an evil power much greater than the dragon that almost defeated her, taking only her old horse and her new sword. However, she makes some unexpected friends along her journey, packs of wild dogs and cats that help her along the way. Through impressive determination, bravery, and talent Aerin is able to defeat her uncle after a long and great battle and recaptures a crown, a powerful royal heirloom that may help her kingdom defeat her uncle’s armies who are already at war with her people.

On her journey back to her kingdom she sees Luthe once more and they both come to terms with their love for each other. Yet, Aerin feels she has a duty to her kingdom and to Tor and cannot leave them to live a life of seclusion with Luthe. However, Luthe is not entirely mortal, and because of her magical experiences, neither is Aerin. They part ways as she continues on towards her kingdom knowing that they will eventually be together again someday.
When she arrives, her father’s armies are almost beaten back to the castle gates by her uncle’s forces. She boldly fights her way through the throng, and gives the crown to Tor who gains power from it and together they lead their army to victory. She and Tor eventually happily marry and rule the kingdom as equals. Yet, Aerin knows that she will one day reunite with Luthe when her time in her kingdom is through.

In many ways, The Hero and the Crown reads like a fairy tale. There are princes and princesses, dragons and sorcerers. But there is one very obvious difference: This story centers around a brave and dragon-fighting princess. Unlike traditional fairy tales, the heroine of this story is in little need of rescue. In fact, Aerin is one of the strongest characters in my sample. She is extremely brave, not because she does not have fear, but because she is able to overcome it. She grows in strength, confidence and ability throughout the novel, and gains a mature insight into her world. Aerin pursues her dreams in spite of constraints. Although she accepts help from other characters, in many ways Aerin is her own teacher and rescuer. Aerin is married at the end of the novel, but this is not the conclusion of her story or adventures, as is the case with female characters in traditional fairy tales. Also important is the fact that Aerin is not loved for her appearance or traditional feminine dependence, but for her mind and personality. Aerin is also capable of loving two men, which is very unusual for girls in most stories, especially fairy tales. In these ways, Aerin is the perfect fit for the feminist model for character development, yet there are some examples of our society’s views of gender in the novel which merit discussion.
Throughout the novel, Aerin’s society is seen as gender biased in general and oppressive to Aerin specifically since she is the only female character the reader knows intimately. Aerin may be able to fight dragons and defeat sorcerers, but she is denied inheritance of the throne based on her gender, and although she displays remarkable bravery outside her kingdom, is afraid to speak up at court. It seems that confronting society’s gender norms is more difficult than fighting dragons. Because of her adventures outside of her oppressive society, by the end of the novel Aerin grows considerably in confidence and voice, and because of her and Tor’s egalitarian views, the reader is given the impression that their society will no longer be as gender biased as it was when Aerin was younger.

Yet, this portrayal of sexism and its removal is slightly problematic. Although readers may relate to Aerin’s desire to fight evil, have adventures, and prove herself to her society, almost no readers have the kind of power to affect change that Aerin does. Aerin happens to be royalty and is able to easily affect her entire society, whereas the vast majority of girls would have to pursue change through very different channels. Although Aerin may be a wonderful and useful role model for readers in many ways, she does not offer readers a very useful example for changing societal norms.

Furthermore, Aerin does not gain her power to affect social change because of her ancestral right to the thrown, or by her intelligence and competence, but because she happens to be in love with Tor. Although their marriage is one based on love, equality, and mutual respect, Aerin only gains access to the power to affect wide-scale social change through marriage and because Tor shares his power with her.
Despite these problems, *The Hero and the Crown* most closely fits the feminist model for a children’s novel of the books in my sample. Interestingly, it was also the least recommended. (Many similar fantasy adventure stories were recommended, including other novels of the same author. *The Hero and the Crown* is also automatically ineligible for recommendation in *Declarations of Independence* because it was published prior to 1990.) This is probably at least partially due to the fact that no booklist, no matter how well-researched, can be entirely comprehensive. However, it is important to realize that if parents and educators are relying on such booklists as the ones I have examined to find books with empowered female characters, they are more likely to be recommended *Caddie Woodlawn*, a decidedly unfeminist novel, than *The Hero and the Crown*.

**A heroine in isolation, *Island of the Blue Dolphins***

Scott O’Dell’s Newbery Award winning *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was first published in 1960. It is based on the true story of a Native American woman named Karana who lived alone on an island off the coast of California from 1835 to 1853. In O’Dell’s interpretation, adolescent Karana lives happily in her community, the Ghalas-at, with her father, the chief, her older sister and her younger brother. Their lives are disrupted, however, when Aleut hunters come to the island. When the hunters try to leave the island without leaving a fair share of the hunted sea otters for the Ghalas-at fighting breaks out, and many of the Ghalas-at men are killed, including Karana’s father.

After the loss of so many of their community, the remaining members of the Ghalas-at decide to leave the island by ship. When they are already out to sea, Karana sees her younger brother, Ramo, still on the island. The others tell her that the ship will
come back for him another day, but she refuses to leave him, and pushing through their
grasp leaps off the ship into the stormy sea.

Karana and Ramo return to their empty village for the night, sure that the ship will
return for them in a matter of days. Tragedy strikes when Karana awakes the next
morning to find Ramo dead, killed by wild dogs. In her shock and grief Karana does not
leave the village for many days, until she finally decides to leave her former life and its
painful memories behind, and avenge her brother’s death. Karana’s days are then filled
with the tasks of building a shelter safe from the dogs, collecting food, and preparing
weapons. Every day she looks for the ship to return, but it never does.

After Karana has fashioned a bow, arrows and spears, she hunts the group of wild
dogs killing several of them and wounding their leader. The wounded leader escapes her,
and she finds him several days later. Somehow touched by his new powerlessness,
Karana cannot kill him, but takes him into her shelter and nurses him back to health. She
names him Rontu, and they become fast friends.

Karana spends several years alone on the island until a new ship of Aleut arrive.
She hides from all of them except a girl her age whom she befriends. She could leave
then, but decides to stay on her island and her home. However, when another ship comes
some time later, she marks her face with blue chalk to symbolize that she is not married,
and leaves her island with happy memories.

Karana is certainly a strong and capable character. She throws herself overboard
to aid her brother. She survives completely independent and alone for years. She builds
her own home, finds her own food, and protects herself with weapons of her own making.
She grows in compassion throughout the story, especially because of her experience with Rontu. These are all obvious characteristics of Karana. What particularly interested me about *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was more subtle; the surroundings in which Karana’s story played out.

The first surrounding in which Karana’s story takes place is within the Ghalas-at community, which O’Dell makes clear is a very gendered place. Even the kelp is divided in male and female forms, each with different properties and uses. The main distinction used by the Ghalas-at is gender, and through small comments in the narrative, the reader learns that women occupy a lower place within the village. Upon seeing that a woman had come with the Aleut hunters, “everyone laughed at the idea that hunters would bother to bring their wives with them” (11). After the battle with the Aleuts, the new chief calls for a reorganization, “The women, who were never asked to do more than stay home, cook food, and make clothing, now must take the place of the men and face the dangers which abound in the village” (26). This comment belittles the work the women of the Ghalas-at did, implying it was somehow less important than “dangerous” men’s work. It also ignores the difficulty of the work the women did, which also included gathering food such as bass so large that they took two people to carry. After the reorganization of labor, the women worked so hard that the Ghalas-at actually fared even better than before (27). But, the men were unhappy, saying that the women “had taken tasks that rightfully were theirs and now that they had become hunters the men looked down upon [the women]” (27). Even though they were actually able to collect more food this way, the chief reverted to gender divided tasks to appease the men who had perceived a loss in status as women shared their work. This, along with the women’s catch of bass, seems to
say that women are capable of working outside strict gender roles, in fact they are quite
good at it, but that gender roles are necessary to maintain social order and to give human
beings identity.

Parts of this gender division stays with Karana even after her community has left
the island. Her brother, Ramu, immediately declares himself chief, which seems rather
ridiculous since Karana is twice his age and far more experienced. But, only a male can
be chief and neither of them question this in the slightest. Karana also at first will not
make weapons because it is forbidden to women. Even though she needs them for
protection, and there is no one from her community to enforce this rule, she combs the
island for lost weapons rather than make them herself. She finally decides that she must
make weapons if she is to survive, and in doing so gains a new feeling of self-reliance.

When I read Island of the Blue Dolphins as a child, I saw Karana as a capable and
inspiring heroine who could accomplish anything on an island that was all hers. It was a
fantasy, having that much space to oneself with no restrictions. Yet, when I reread it as
an adult, I felt much differently. It now seemed Karana was actually being fenced in, that
whenever she struck out in a new direction, she was reined back in. This happens on
several occasions, the two most notable of which involve her attempts to leave the island
and kill a devil-fish. In her early days on the island, Karana decides to attempt a several
day canoe trip to the mainland. She accomplishes the arduous task of hauling the canoe
to the shore, and leaves the island without fear. However, the next day she notices that
the canoe is leaking and decides it is too dangerous to continue. She must turn back. She
does not attempt the canoe trip again. Later in the story she decides to hunt devil-fish, or
squid, that is “the best food in the seas” (102). She spends all winter fashioning special
spears for the work, and two summers hunting the elusive prey. When she finally spears one it results in a long and difficult fight in which she and Rontu are injured. She manages to kill the devil-fish with a small knife, but is defeated by the fight. She leaves “the best food in the seas” on the shore, and even though she sees other devil-fish after that, she does not try to catch them.

These incidents and others seem constructed to remind the reader and Karana of her limits. She may try a number of dangerous or difficult things without fear, but sometime during her task she is defeated and never attempts it again. I found this oddly reminiscent of novels in which something horrible befalls the heroine when she leaves the domestic sphere, or displays independence. This is exemplified in the classic novel *What Katy Did* by Susan Coolidge in which Katy is “punished” for her disobedience and independence by falling from a swing, which prevents her from walking again for four years. Karana experiences similar reminders of her limits. Like Katy with the swing, neither the leak in the canoe nor Rontu being injured by the devil-fish are directly Karana’s fault. On the contrary they naturalize the limits projected onto girls by implying that girls will be punished by fate for exploring or showing independence.

This is not to say that *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is not a valuable and inspiring book for both girls and boys. It offers children a way to experience a kind of solitude most will never have access to in real life. It can also show girls that they, like Karana, could be physically and mentally capable of being completely independent. However, booklist authors, parents and educators need to recognize issues like gender hierarchy and the limits placed on Karana, and discuss them with readers. By ignoring issues of gender bias like these we further naturalize them, but by pointing them out and discussing them
Shabanu befriends a baby camel who she helped birth. His mother has died, so she must care for him entirely. She names him Mithoo, and they become close companions.

After a sandstorm destroys their water source, Shabanu's family decides to begin the trek to Hamir's home for Phulan's wedding early. Along the way, Shabanu loses her grandfather, and comes upon the body of a dead traveler, a reminder of the potential danger of the desert she so loves. But, they reach Hamir's home safely and begin preparing for the wedding.

Upon reaching Hamir's home, Shabanu is strictly warned by her father not to let Phulan wander the farmland alone. He explains that the landlord has been known to offer his tenants' daughters as prizes to his hunting companions. They keep the girl with them for their stay and then send her home with payment for her family. This landlord, Nazir, is also bitter towards Hamir's family because they have made a very successful farm, which he can sell for a high price if they leave.

One day as Shabanu and Phulan are gathering water, Shabanu returns to the spring after bringing water to her family's house with the startling realization that she left Phulan by herself to do the washing. As she races back, she encounters one of Nazir's hunting parties discussing who has rights to Phulan. Shabanu shouts at the men, throws her water jugs at them, and pulls Phulan onto their camel to make a getaway.

Nazir, enraged by Shabanu's defiance, comes to Hamir's house for retribution, and kills Hamir. Even after this murder, Shabanu's family must find a way to appease Nazir so he will not evict Hamir's family. Nazir's brother, Rahim, a politician, agrees to intervene on the behalf of Hamir's family.
It is soon decided that Phulan will marry Murad, even though he was supposed to be betrothed to Shabanu. Phulan is happy, but Shabanu seethes because now she will have to be married to someone she does not know, and probably will not like. She soon learns that this someone is to be Rahim, the politician, who although kind, already has three wives and is old enough to be her grandfather. He has taken an affectionate liking to Shabanu and offers her and her family expensive gifts. Shabanu is disgusted, but forced into the betrothal by her family who think it is a good match and are afraid that if Shabanu does not marry him, Nazir will take away Murad’s land.

Shabanu’s one ray of hope comes from her aunt Sharma who lives a life of independence with her daughter after running away from her abusive husband. Before the wedding, Shabanu slips out in the middle of the night to run away and live with Sharma to avoid marriage. Just when she thinks she has gone far enough that her father will not be able to follow her, her camel Mithoo stumbles and breaks his ankle. Incapable of leaving him to die, she waits until her father arrives in the morning. He beats her for running away, and she finally submits to marrying Rahim. But, she decides that there will always be a part of her, just for herself, that he will never reach.

*Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* is highly recommended to adolescent girls because of Shabanu’s determination in the face of adversity, the power and description in Staple’s writing, and the opportunity it offers readers to discover Shabanu’s culture. Yet, I do not believe that it should be lauded as an inspiring and great book for girls to look to as a source of role models. Shabanu certainly does model strength, spirit and determination, but like so many other heroines, the process of growing up is meant to
tame and break her to meet society’s sexist standards. Also, the fact that Shabanu’s society is sexist and punishes female independence is not necessarily problematic in recommending it to girls, but that this sexism is not in the novel recognized as the culturally constructed system is.

Shabanu’s world is not very friendly to girls. In the first chapter the reader learns that, although Shabanu’s parents do not feel this way, daughters are traditionally seen as a burden because of the dowry required for marriage. Shabanu’s aunt takes great pride in her two sons. Various family members wish that Phulan be blessed with many sons. Shabanu and her female relatives even go on a pilgrimage to pray that Phulan have sons. As an afterthought to her prayer, Shabanu wishes Phulan a happy marriage. Shabanu’s mother may say that, ‘You and Phulan are better than seven sons,’ but that sentiment is hardly reinforced by the dominant culture. This practice of holding sons in high praise sends the clear message that girls are not worth nearly as much as boys. In fact, girls are a burden to the family because of the dowry required for their marriage, whereas boys are a high blessing.

Indeed, the lives of the female characters in Shabanu revolve around marriage and family. By the third page the reader learns that thirteen-year-old Phulan will be married by the next monsoon, which, “God willing, will bring food for our animals and fruit to the womb of Phulan” (3). Sharma is exceptional because she is not married. Even Shabanu’s childhood home is transitory. “As Muslim girls, we are brought up knowing our childhood homes are temporary. Our real homes are the ones we go to when we marry” (21). Life, as represented by a “real” home, does not begin for girls until they are married.
Yet, to Staples’ credit, the women of *Shabanu* are not colorless drones, always bowing to male power. They are not flat stereotypes of female submission. They are fully developed individual characters who occasionally poke fun at the patriarchal practices of their society, but obey them nonetheless.

Sharma is an interesting character. She has managed to escape the prescribed female destiny of arranged marriage. She is proof that women can rebel against society and win. Yet, that her success is unexplained is slightly troubling. Sharma’s life of independence with her daughter does not fit with the stories of women being hunted and killed for disobeying. It does not fit with Shabanu’s recognition that “there is nowhere a girl can go safely alone” (56). Sharma is Shabanu’s only role model for female independence, but she seems an unrealistic one since the reader never learns how she has managed to escape a seemingly inescapable fate. It seems as if Sharma’s character was included in the story to illustrate that women can and do rebel against sexism, and to give Shabanu and the reader some hope for Shabanu’s future. However, this is not entirely successful because there is no explanation for why Sharma was able to succeed where so many others failed. Sharma may model a life of independence and joy to girls like Shabanu, but without the tools and knowledge necessary to reach that life of independence, as could be provided by an explanation of Sharma’s success, she only represents a distant hope and not an attainable reality.

With the exception of Sharma, female independence and rebellion from the mandate of arranged marriage comes with a heavy price. On their way to Sibi, Shabanu and her father encounter armed men searching for an eloped female relative. After the men leave, her father tells her that *when*, not *if*, the men find the girl, they will kill her.
Shabanu immediately interprets her father’s comment as a warning that she must obey the rules. She learns that rebellion, female choice and independence is punishable by death. Shabanu also discovers that death to women can be dealt out randomly. Her aunt Sharma tells a story of a woman being stoned to death “because her husband accused her of looking at another man” (104). Women in Shabanu’s world must learn extreme obedience, and even that brings no guarantees. As the woman stoned to death for an unproven accusation illustrates, their lives can be taken away at the whims of men.

Shabanu accepts the dangers of female disobedience as a reality, but not necessarily as right. Before Hamir’s tragic death, when she is still betrothed to Murad, she decides that, “If he isn’t a good man, I shall be like Sharma—strong and independent,” which at the end of the novel she bravely attempts. But, like so many other heroines before her, Shabanu’s independence is stopped in its tracks by a natural force. No one is responsible for Mithoo’s broken ankle. It is a convenient way to prevent Shabanu from succeeding in her quest for independence without anyone having to be directly blamed. This naturalizes sexism. It implies that girls will be punished by fate for breaking cultural boundaries. It makes it appear that sexism is a force of nature, not a cultural structure that can be changed. Some might say that Shabanu ends in a triumph of the spirit because Shabanu faces her fate with strength and determination to maintain her individuality. Yet, Shabanu does not gain freedom, or voice, or agency throughout her adolescence; she loses them. Her playful, energetic, rebellious spirit is corseted to fit cultural standards. The novel would have been much more inspiring for today’s American girls if Shabanu had been able to escape her fate, which she had the bravery and determination to do, or at least if sexism was addressed within the novel as a
culturally constructed system. Instead of an example of a girl triumphing over adversity, readers get yet another reminder of the limits placed on girls' lives.

With *Shabanu* it is important to keep in mind that her story takes place in another culture, and we cannot judge that culture by American standards. Although it is wrong to judge a culture by another's standards, I think it is equally as wrong to tolerate prejudice and oppression in the name of cultural diversity. One would not tolerate the apartheid in South Africa because it is wrong to judge another culture by our standards. Likewise, the sexism of Shabanu's culture should not be excused from criticism.

What is the solution? Can books which reflect gender biases help children to expand their definitions of gender roles? Yes, I believe they can, but the solution is not so simple as handing a child a book and expecting their deep-seated beliefs about what girls and boys can and cannot do to be instantly changed.

First of all, we need to be careful not to over-praise books for girls. As illustrated in my analyses of the above four books, even books with "strong" heroines can perpetuate gender bias. Praising a relatively lesser degree of gender bias as an example of equality is extremely dangerous. It reinforces the idea that some degree of sexism is natural, that it is in the water, so to speak. From this viewpoint, there is either nothing wrong with some degree of gender bias, or if there is, there is nothing to be done about it.

This is not to say that novels displaying some degree of gender bias are useless, or should not be recommended to girls. On the contrary, girls grow up in a society of gender bias, and reading about others who navigate through such a society could be particularly inspiring. However, it is extremely important to not simply hand girls books
that in some way perpetuate gender bias without some discussion of what gender bias is, how it is presented in the novel, and how it affects people’s lives. This discussion can take place in booklists, classrooms, book clubs, on a one on one level, or in the novel itself. We cannot simply hand girls books with relatively strong heroines and say, “This is a good story with a strong and inspiring role model. We want you to grow up to be like her.” We need to be very critical of the messages literature sends about gender. Adolescents deserve and are capable of understanding this level of complexity. I would encourage authors to consider this, and to be conscious and critical of messages their writing may send. I would also encourage booklist authors to not only explain the positive qualities of recommended books, but also detail the ways in which gender (or race, or class, etc.) bias is perpetuated throughout the novel. This works to de-naturalize gender bias by recognizing it for what it is, and giving readers the opportunity to analyze and discuss it instead of simply accepting it as part of a novel and our culture.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to create an environment in which readers can talk about gender bias. Research shows that although exposure to literary characters who display nonstereotypical gender traits can expand readers view of gender roles, this change may be short lived (Trepanier 156). Simply handing children books is not enough to change their perceptions about gender. What can induce change, however, is classroom discussions and activities related to gender. In her research with third graders, Peggy S. Rice found that after simply reading The Paperbag Princess, a story in which a princess rescues a whiny prince and then decides not to marry him after all, students were resistant to the nonstereotypical roles of the characters. However, after doing class activities in which the students were able to reflect on and personalize the story, their
opinions changed. Before the activity only 20 percent of boys and 22 percent of girls said they “liked the story a lot”. After the activity, however, the numbers jumped to 53 percent of boys and 100 percent of girls (38).

The books were not enough; children had to discuss gender for their perceptions to change. This may be most effective in the classroom since it will reach the most possible students. However, the classroom is not the only place for change. Shireen Dodson’s *100 Books for Girls to Grow On* is based on her experience with a mother-daughter book club. This club and others like it allow readers to discuss and analyze how gender is portrayed in literature and relate this to their own experiences. (*100 Books for Girls to Grow On* includes suggestions for discussion questions and activities to help readers examine gender as well as a number of issues.)

Discussion of gender in a classroom, book club, or even in a one on one setting can also make it possible to use books with a high degree of gender bias without perpetuating that bias. Novels such as *Shabanu* and *Little Women*, for example, can be used as jumping off points to discuss gender roles in other cultures and historical periods. Well-written books that portray gender in a biased way should not be thrown out of the curriculum. Rather they should be used, so few novels with female protagonists are used in classrooms as it is that it would be ridiculous to get rid of any, but gender as portrayed in these novels should be discussed and examined. Novels that portray gender bias in obvious ways, like *Shabanu*, can be especially useful in starting a dialogue about gender with readers who are not accustomed to discussing it. Novels that take place in another time or culture also allow children identify and think critically about gender bias without
attacking the culture they participate in (Brown 55). This can help ease reluctant readers into a discussion about gender.

It is also important not to automatically disregard books set in a culture or time period with high degrees of gender bias because of the messages this omission sends. This is an issue of whose stories are interesting, important, and worth telling. Not including books of different time periods and culture implies that stories that take place in those settings are unimportant. It is also important for readers to understand not only gender bias in their society, but how attitudes towards gender, and likewise race, class, and other factors have changed over time, and vary throughout different cultures. The fact that attitudes change over time and across cultures can be especially helpful in explaining how these attitudes are not biologically innate, but culturally constructed.

Occasionally within discussions of how to correct gender bias, in this case through the use of literature, girls can be inadvertently robbed of any agency to help themselves. They are often, like their literary counterparts, cast as maidens needing rescue. Although girls definitely deserve the help of parents, mentors, and educators to counteract and change the gender bias they experience, girls also deserve credit for the ways in which they are their own rescuers. Girls are not passive sponges absorbing whatever information happens to pass their way. Rather they make conscious, and not so conscious decisions about the values their culture presents them with.

Angela Hubler, in her research on adolescent girls and reading, has found that girls often mentally edit the books they read, picking and choosing the elements that they want to pay attention to and discarding, or ignoring others. When asked to discuss Caddie Woodlawn, girls in Hubler’s sample either completely ignored the ending in
which Caddie is tamed to fit society’s standards and were hard pressed to recall it, or were critical of it (270). The girls in Hubler’s study actively sought out books with characters that they could identify with and characters who did not succumb to traditional female stereotypes (273-5). Hubler also found that while girls sought out books with nontraditional female characters, they “ruthlessly criticized others that failed them in this respect” (276).

Indeed girls can be highly critical of traditional female stereotypes as evidenced by articles in *New Moon Magazine: the magazine for girls and their dreams* written by girls ages eight to fourteen. Writing for *New Moon*, Rachel Smith points out that, “In most fairy tales girls read when they are young, a woman character is pretty, but helpless. The handsome, dashing, young prince rescues her, and, as an added bonus, gets a child-making machine, too.” In another *New Moon* article, Hannah Fisher critiques nursery rhymes for perpetuating traditional female passivity under the guise of niceness. She notes that:

*Being ‘nice’ in our culture still means being passive and obedient and keeping all your rebellious, angry, or adventurous feelings inside. Especially as we grow up, it’s important that we feel free to express ourselves without being limited by what society tells us is ‘nice.’ Better yet, let’s change our cultural definition of ‘nice’. Nice should still mean kind, generous, and polite, but it should also mean outspoken, unique, ambitious, and colorful.*

Obviously these girls, along with the participants of Hubler’s study are anything but passive readers soaking up cultural values from literature unchecked. They read with
gender in mind and strongly criticize literature which presents models of gender that they find harmful. As Hubler's study shows, they are capable of accepting or rejecting material based on their ideas about gender. Yet this is no excuse to leave adolescent girls to shoulder the responsibility of counteracting harmful gender messages without outside help. First of all, it is important to note that while the writers for *New Moon* may represent the potential of girls to read critically, their experiences should not be understood as universal. They have the privilege of being within an environment that pays special attention to gender by working with *New Moon* magazine. They are encouraged to think, talk, and write about gender, while most adolescents are not.

Secondly, literature is only one of many sources of gender messages in our culture. Although girls may be capable of counteracting some harmful gender messages in literature, they are not capable of fending off all negative gender messages, as evidenced by dramatic drops in self-esteem and academic performance in adolescent girls. There are simply too many harmful gender messages in the form of classroom environment, television, magazines, and politics for girls to counteract on their own. Girls will only be able to criticize traditional gender stereotypes in literature if they maintain a sense that those traditional stereotypes should not exist. The barrage of harmful gender messages girls receive may damage their ability to hold on to an alternative view of gender and subsequently their ability to reject traditional stereotypes.

Girls are in danger of losing this ability to reject and critique traditional gender stereotypes as they reach adolescence. In "'Cinderella Was a Wuss': A Young Girl's Responses to Feminist and Patriarchal Folktales" Ann M. Trousdale and Sally McMillan relate the results of a longitudinal study of one girl's reactions to gender in literature.
Nikki, the participant, was interviewed at ages eight and twelve, and asked to comment on four folktales: three with nonstereotypical portrayals of gender and one with stereotypical portrayals of gender. At age eight Nikki's responses to the folktales reflect her resistance to traditional feminine stereotypes and belief in equality between the genders, but by age twelve her attitudes about gender had changed:

At eight, Nikki was not struck by the romantic aspects of fairy tales, but saw them as tales of action and adventure. At 12, fairy tales were primarily stories about romance and marriage...At eight, Nikki expressed utter confidence and a joyful attitude about the equality- or superiority- of female physical prowess. By the time she was entering adolescence, her ideas of relative female-male strength revealed a struggle with various outside narratives that place physical prowess in the domain of males...

(22)

At both ages eight and twelve Nikki was aware that our culture places constraints on females, and that these constraints conflicted with her own ideas about gender (24). At eight she was able to fully reject harmful notions about gender, but by twelve she began to accept and enforce gender stereotypes even though she recognized them as unfair.

We cannot rely solely on girls' active reading to save them from harmful messages in literature, but it is an excellent place to begin. Girls' already active and critical reading practices can be enhanced through discussion of gender. They can be augmented with not only classroom readings of literature that breaks traditional gender boundaries, but with classroom activities to help students digest new information about gender as discussed by Peggy S. Rice. The classroom use of literature featuring
characters in nontraditional gender roles helps both female and male students to counteract the messages of girls' second class status. Especially by using literature with nontraditional heroines, we send the message that girls' stories, and by extension girls, are important, interesting and worthy of scholarly attention. It also allows male readers to empathize with female experience, something they are not normally encouraged to do.

Making gender analysis and activities a part of the curriculum also equips students to recognize gender bias, and gives them the necessary vocabulary to discuss it. As evidenced by Hannah Fisher's writing on nursery rhymes, children aware of harmful gender messages are not satisfied with rejecting them; they want to change them. The first step towards changing something is having the tools necessary to recognize and name it. Classroom discussion could give students these tools.

Booklists recommending literature to help expand readers' notions about gender are certainly useful in this respect as they help point educators, parents, and readers to books featuring nontraditional characters. Yet, as I have shown, even seemingly progressive novels can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. Parents, educators and all concerned about gender need to be at least as critical of literature as girl readers are, if not more so. The sheer amount of publications on using literature to change children's perceptions of gender show that people are interested in using reading as a means of change. Research shows that literature can be an effective agent of change, but it is not as simple as handing children books. We need to get involved with what children read. We need to discuss and analyze gender messages in literature. We need to make this discussion and analysis part of the curriculum. In a time when girls see their gender as a liability as they reach adolescence it is especially important to show both girls and boys
the range of characteristics women are capable of possessing. Literature can do this, but it is not a quick fix. If used carefully, and if the gender biases within it are discussed, literature can be a source of change and inspiration for readers of all ages.
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