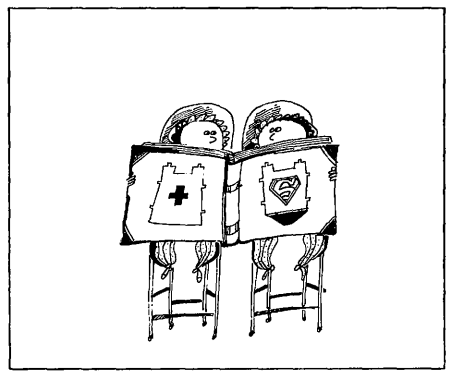
"NOTHING SPECIAL": THE PORTRAYAL OF GIRLS AND WOMEN IN CURRENT JUNIOR GRADE READERS

Elaine Batcher and Alison Winter

Une enquête menée récemment par la Fédération des associations d'enseignantes de l'Ontario a trouvé un sérieux manque d'équilibre dans les présentations des femmes et des hommes, des filles et des garçons, dans les livres de lecture primaires approuvés par le Ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario dans sa Circulaire 14, 1986. *Dans la plupart des séries de livres de lecture, une majorité des pages avaient des garçons comme personnages principaux dans les textes de fiction, et des hommes dans les textes non-fictifs et mythiques. Les poèmes et les illustrations mettaient le plus souvent les hommes en vedette. Cet inéquilibre servirait à encourager les garçons et à décourager les filles, une impression confirmée par une analyse des activités des personnages, ainsi que des intrigues. Celles-ci indiquaient des occasions pour que les garçons excèlent, et "rien de spécial" comme espérances pour les filles.*

One insight I have gained from my research among adolescents is that the most ignominious insult with which one can offend a person is to speak of her or him as "nothing special."[1] A short walk through any shopping mall where young people gather will confirm the truth of this, as clothing, comportment and possessions all attest to teenagers' efforts to be both acceptable in the style of a particular group, and in some way special within this selected style. Those who have no group or individual style to highlight them are considered to be "nothing special." Damned or merely excluded, they are ignored.

In a recently conducted study commissioned by the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario (FWTAO),[2] a major finding repeats and confirms eleven-year-old data indicating that "nothing special" is about as much as girls and women can ever attain as characters in Junior grade Readers. The study was a deliberate return to subject matter addressed initially in 1975.[3] Once again, Readers approved for use in Junior grade classrooms by the Ontario Ministry of Education in *Circular 14* were evaluated for their portrayal of women and men, girls and boys, as possible role models or conveyors of messages about life's possibilities to children in grades 4, 5, and 6. Sample books from each Reader series were read in entirety, categorized and evaluated along several dimensions.



Cartoon by Christine Roche

The first set of criteria dealt with the frequency with which each character type (woman, man, girl, boy) was represented in primary, secondary and background positions, or in a shared story, within Fiction, Character Non-Fiction (all non-fiction referring to people or mentioning gender), and Myth, and the number of times poems and illustrations were female- or male-oriented. The highest counts on the average and for almost every criterion, in almost every Reader series, were found to be those for boys and men. Fictional stories were most frequently about boys, myths and non-fictional material were overwhelmingly about men. While girls were allowed a modicum of representation, women were scarcely there at all. Similarly, poems and pictures were far more likely to be about males than females. With the exclusion of Myths, poems and pictures, which were not counted in the earlier study, these were essentially the findings of 1975.

The second set of criteria inquired into the presentation of each of the character types. Three scales, developed and adapted from literature and the social sciences, were applied where possible to a major female and male character in each story. The self-actualization scale (adapted from Atwood)[4] and the legalistic moral development scale (from Kohlberg)[5] were used in the previous study. Because of recent doubts cast on the universality of Kohlberg's work, we used also a scale distilled from the work of Gilligan and termed it the affiliative moral development scale.[6] While the variation on all three scales was more limited than it was on the first two scales in 1975, indicating more similarity of character presentation than previously, the average presentations, overall and within most series, of women, men, girls and boys, were different.

Women, although usually depicted as more "moral" than men, especially on the affiliative scale, were shown as less self-actualized. The average girls' scores on all three scales were higher than those of boys. Reader/girls were often shown as achieving their goals (self-actualization), and often shown as doing the right thing for the right reason (moral development). This was not the case in 1975 and would appear encouraging. When we looked further at the contents of the stories, however, there was evidence which did not appear in these numbers.

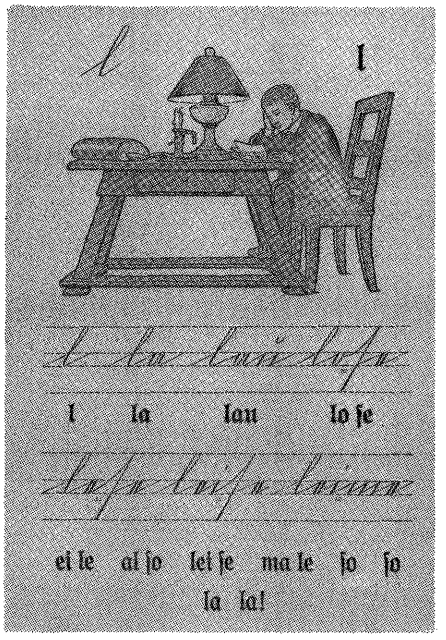
In a single Reader, selected at random from among the Readers with the greatest diversity of content material,[7] girls were seen to perform 26 tasks as compared to boys' 11 tasks. While the boys' tasks included handling equipment, playing piano, dancing, arguing, collecting stickers and protecting mussels, girls were seen to become afflicted with the vanity of city girls, fracture the English language, abandon ballet recital, go on a diet, dream sad dreams and cry soundlessly. In the same book there were 45 activities for men and 15 for women. Men's activities were such things as investigating a kidnapping, writing memoirs, acting in silent films and operating a restaurant chain.

Women's activities were such things as being a loyal and true friend, eyeing a letter suspiciously, bossing the neighbourhood and being laid up with a sick headache. Boys and men would have opportunities to excel here. But no matter how well and with what intent the girls and women accomplished their activities, these characters could never be special, unless we count as special that slight moral "elevation" with which Victorian men damned women to keep them out of the world of action.

Story plots were another indication of the differences in treatments of females and males, specifically in the relative nature of the challenges set for each. While boys were asked, albeit unrealistically, to take upon their shoulders the adult burdens of saving a drowning man and killing a bear, a girl was given very little to achieve. At best, she might be mistaken for a boy and earn a place on the hockey team, at worst she had to endure captivity and hope her father would soon save her from the sasquatches. Even though the treatment of boys was artificial, boys' maxi-achievements stood in contrast to the also artificial but mini-achievements of girls. In stories about boys, something happened and boys were seen to make it happen. In stories about girls, if something happened, it wasn't much of an event. This should be understood in conjunction with the fact that there were relatively few stories about girls.

There were some stories when a girl or woman was seemingly featured, and these should be discussed for the ways in which they included a female but gave her minimal representation. The only child in a story centering on three men was named "Leslie," and the only indication of her sex was the one picture in which she appeared with long hair.[8] The child captured by the sasquatch was simply a screen on which to project the events of a plot about these mythical creatures.[9] The title character, "The Lady with the Missing Finger," was a device to begin the unfolding of the real tale, a detective story with historical and sea themes which began with her death.[10] These females were in the stories, but their presence was not the highlight of events.

In those relatively few cases where a female was both featured as central character and essential to the plot, it was frequently the case that the plot worked actively against her being seen as special in any way. At times, this was a simple defeat, such as in the story of the pioneer woman who made pemmican



Page from a school primer c. 1900

from an entire buffalo, and instead of being congratulated for her effort and success, was given two more buffalo to process.[11] At times, the story took a tortuous route to deliver the message. A young girl given the responsibility of looking after her grandfather's antique shop was shown as overcoming a series of challenges in creative ways. But in the end, her grandfather dressed up in a suit of armour deliberately to scare her and to show the reader that here was a normal girl after all -- frightened and defeated.[12] Both of these stories, incidentally, were presented as humour.

After thousands of pages of reading, we felt immersed in a medium we came to know and understand as The Old Metaphor (TOM). This was the viewpoint through which every story was told. It was as if all of human existence had to be seen, digested, processed and finally given back to us, the readers, by a man, an old but timeless man, a man who tells us his story. We know this story. We have been listening to it for thousands of years.

TOM is a male-dominated view of the world in which dualism -- "either/ or" thinking" -- holds sway. Men name things and thereby call them into creation. Men decide the future of the world and "men's" (meaning people's) place in it. Important values are those of men. Emotion is limited to that which is "appropriate" for either sex. Men may shed a tear for the bloodless sinking of a ship, for example, but would be expected to remain dry-eyed at a family funeral. Boys are men-in-training who must be toughened and readied to inherit the world, whether they want it or not. Women, where they exist, are always "other." Girls can function as ersatz boys or airheads, but what they might become if allowed a full existence is unknown and unexplored.

This was the force of our reading. Stories primarily about boys, and non-fiction pieces featuring men's achievements, and myths about men who were gods or were given godly powers, all lent credence to The Old Metaphor. In 1975, TOM was deeply ingrained on every page. The influence of TOM in the 1986 books was somewhat more subtle, but still there. It was there in the imbalance of numbers; it was there in the imbalanced presentation of activities and story plots and achievements and emotions. Our report called for recognition of TOM as dated and limiting, and for some massive changes in the Readers to embody new metaphors, many new viewpoints of existence. We rejected minimal changes, such as pictures of girls with jeans and mothers who hold jobs outside the home, as simply reinforcing TOM with current appearances.

There is a clue to these new metaphors in this concept of being special. I have written elsewhere that it is the task of adolescence to find something that one likes to do and that one does well.[13] The finding of such a talent or skill might be seen to make one special. It would seem to me that the message that one can and should be special is aimed at the boys who will read the stories, but not at the girls. It would seem to me, and I have tried here to show, that the message aimed at girls is that they are *not* special, and they are never to get it into their heads that they might be. I want to illustrate this point with a series of examples.

There is, in one of the newest Readers, a story about a little girl who loves to dance, so much so that she dances all day, everywhere she goes.[14] The story does not point her toward the possibility of a shining future as a dancer, nor toward the more easily attainable but still attractive hope of keeping dance as an interest that enriches her life. Perhaps the editors felt they were tired of stories about ballerinas, as indeed they might be, since dance seems one of the few acceptable "careers" for girls and has been overdone in Readers. Instead, we are told the girl is constantly wearing out her shoes and is a nuisance to her family.

When her mother takes her shopping

for new shoes, a mysterious man gives her an unusual-looking pair and says they will make her walk on clouds. She protests that she does not want to walk on clouds and is told, "Nonsense! That's what they all say at first, and then they end up loving it." Her magic slippers make her dance all night and forget where she has been in the morning. Now compliant and conforming, she dances only at her dance class and is no longer a nuisance to others.

We considered this story to be one of the poorest of offerings to young minds that we came across. Denise, the "heroine" of the story, is not special at all. She serves as a vehicle to show that compliance and conformity are valued in girls, and headstrong interests of the sort needed to make a success at anything, are not. A strange man, given credibility and power by the story and by the mother within it, is allowed to impose his way with the girl by way of an exotic gift which she refuses but is made to accept. If not physical violation (which the shoes may represent), then spiritual violation occurs. The mother offers no defense of her daughter and, by her acquiescence is shown as accepting of the male culture which would force such attentions on her child. Proof of our construct of the meaning of this story is the detail that she is made to forget what transpired while she was sleeping.

Contrast the treatment of Denise with that of the twelve-year-old boy hero of the recent film, "Flight of the Navigator." His creators have given him exciting adventures in a magical place, the future. He remembers his experiences and they have enriched his life, *and* he is allowed to bring back a treasure from that other place to keep for himself -- a small, living space-creature whose life he saves and who will be his friend on earth. Poor Denise would have been richer for even one of these blessings, but she gets nothing save the dubious pleasure of cloud-walking. She was not allowed to bring home treasures, even though she intended them as gifts to others. And she is certainly nothing special. The story flattens her. She is no longer a nuisance to others and "she walks down the street just like you and I."

The intention of making a female "normal" was the rationale behind all those kitchen photos of post-war movie stars. Their lives were so far beyond the realm of "normal" women's existence that studios believed the only way they could be made accceptable to the general

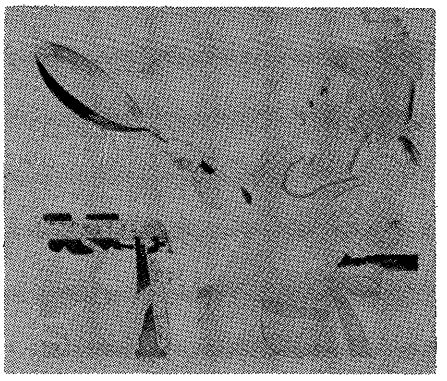


Illustration from a children's book (1936)

population was to show them cooking for their men, and thus "normal" women, just like all the women in North America.

This flattening of women is an image Carol Hill's novel *The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer* acknowledges and deliberately shatters.[15] The heroine, Amanda, is described as "America's leading lady astronaut," and as "An astronaut, a physicist, and an extremely good pilot." Her specialness is presented in the following way:

> *Sometimes [Amanda] thought of it in this way: I've been picked. Just like Copernicus got picked. Everybody who has something important and different to do gets picked. And it's me. ME!*

Hill is obviously speaking the language we wish Readers were speaking. She quotes Coleridge, *Anima Poetae*, at the start:

> *If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he woke -- then Ay! -- and what then?*

The gift of flower or spaceling empowers "he" who has received it. He is special. Hill's heroine Amanda is special -- she has been picked. Denise will never be special, and it is Denise whose story young girls and boys will read.

There are many affirmations of manhood in the stories children read, but few if any affirmations of womanhood. Girls who read the stories in school Readers are forced to make daily identifications with boys and men in self-betraying ways. This cannot make them feel very good about themselves. We do not think this is the way things should be. Perhaps the gaffes in the stories mirror gaps in our knowledge of what girlhood and womanhood are in life. But isn't literature supposed to allow us to work through these things? Shouldn't our children be led to explore the possibilities of their existence through the experiences of others? Shouldn't school books affirm life rather than deny it? We think so. And we wish that people in the text book industry would catch onto this a little faster. We are insulting and betraying so many children through their errors.

[1] See for example, Elaine Batcher, "Building the Barriers: Adolescent Girls Delimit the Future," in Greta Hofmann Nemiroff (Ed.), *Women and Men: Interdisciplinary Readings on Gender* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1987), pp. 150-164.

[2] For a full report of the findings see E. Batcher, A. Winter and V. Wright, *The More Things Change...* Available for purchase from FWTAO, 1260 Bay Street, Toronto M5R 2B8.

[3] E. Batcher, D. Brackstone, A. Winter, V. Wright, ... *And Then There Were None* (Toronto: FWTAO, 1975).

[4] Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).

[5] As described by Nancy Porter and Nancy Taylor in *How to Assess the Moral Reasoning of Students* (Toronto, OISE, 1972).

[6] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[7] *Star Flights* (Toronto: Nelson, 1984).

[8] "Passing Thro'," in *Star Flights* (above).

[9] "Karen's Diary," in *Zap: Monsters* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1981).

[10] "The Lady With the Missing Finger," in *Yesterstories: The Lady With the Missing Finger* (Toronto: Globe/Modern, 1979).

[11] "Pemmican by the Pound," in *Pingo* (Toronto: Gage, 1980).

[12] "Ghosts are Braver Than People," in *Driftwood and Dandelions* (Toronto: Nelson, 1970).

[13] Elaine Batcher, "Building the Barriers," above.

[14] "Denise, the Little Dancer With Big Feet," in *Flip Flops* (Toronto: Nelson, 1983).

[15] Carol Hill, *The Eleven Million Mile High Dancer* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

Note: for authors' biographical note see top of p. 38.

Elaine Batcher is an independent researcher and writer in Education and was hired by the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations to co-ordinate the project which resulted in the publication of The More Things Change...

Alison Winter, a teacher with the Halton Board of Education, and Vicki Wright, current President of the North York Women Teachers' Association, worked on the 1986 and 1975 projects.

CANADIAN WOMEN'S WRITING RETREAT

From 14-21 August 1987 the Canadian Women's Writing Retreat will be held at Far Hills Inn, Val-Morin, Quebec.

Women writers of English fiction, poetry, plays, non-fiction prose, and translators working from French to English, will be able to take intensive workshops. Well-known Canadian women writers will conduct morning writing workshops and afternoon discussion groups. There will also be a panel discussion led by representatives of the Canadian publishing industry.

The Retreat will not be devoted solely to work. As well as readings over the week, there will be time for recreation. In the Laurentians, the well-appointed inn offers hiking, swimming, boating, tennis, squash, billiards, and just plain relaxation.

For further information, please contact Debra Martens, c/o Centre for Continuing Education, Dawson College, Victoria Campus, 485 McGill St., Montreal, Quebec H2Y 2H4; telephone (514) 931-8731, local 6102, or call Greta Hofmann Nemiroff at (514) 931-8731, local 6075.

APOGEE, PERIGEE*

(for Ann)

"How great a thing is a single cup of wine! For it makes us tell the whole story of our lives." —Po-Chui

Last call. We dawdle over drinks,
swapping shop talk, life stories.
Heads nod in commiseration at each tale
played out against the blues wailing
in the background. The last ice cube
gone to its watery grave, we scrounge
from cups abandoned on the pinball
machine, window sills, til the bartender
glowers and turns rude. Reeling
with booze and sudden intimacy,
we gravitate to blacktop
mountain breezes
the wash of moonlight.

Braced against the redwood wall,
born-again flower child
in your long gauzy dress
and flowing hair, reliving
the night in Gramercy Park you
and a famous funnyman bayed at the
moon.
A lousy lover, you remark offhand with
the too-loud laugh of the newly
divorced,
but hilarious, a real corker.

After love in Gramercy Park,
down on your hands and knees
in the soft wet grass howling
your satisfaction
or dissatisfaction
to the luminous ear above.

Passersby, bemused at first,
catch the spirit of the thing
and throw back their heads,
add baritone, bass,
throaty contralto
to the primal chorus.

The police let you off with a warning.

When you'd had your fill,
you handed him over to a friend
with a sense of humor (cluing
her in to the pros and cons)
and married an engineer
from M.I.T. Good-time Annie
opting for the fourteen-room house
on the Charles River, closing
the shutters on twenty-five years
of full moons, swallowing
the indomitable howls
that rose in your throat.

Later tonight, impulsive young boys
half-joking will invite us
to skinny-dip in a nearby lake.
You will take them up on it,
dazzled by the eclipse of years,
eager to slip out of the shadows,
make up for lost time.

*The two points in the moon's orbit when it is closest to and farthest from the earth

WATCHING SWIMMERS AT THE Y

Above them, behind glass, I sip
a V-8, feet up after my workout,
and watch capped and goggled
heads bob along roped lanes.
In the shallow end, a family—
smiling mother, a small girl
with inflated orange arms
kicking for all she's worth.
The father has an infant boy,
blue bathing suit bulging
with diapers, in tow.

How happy they look together
splashing laughing
as if the future held nothing
but endless Saturday mornings
floating in a heated pool.

Across from me, around
the transparent corner,
a young girl—fourteen
or so—can't take her eyes
off them either, dreaming
most likely of her future:
"A boy for you,
A girl for me"
such stuff as songs are made on.

I dream of another time,
another pool, two children
who kicked their way out
of my grasp, disappearing
into their ever-widening
circles of separateness.

Sensing something, her downcast
eyes lift suddenly, catch mine
eavesdropping. Through double layers
of glass, we stare at one another—
refractions in a time-warped mirror:
...some day soon...way back when...
and the span between so short.

Pat Jasper
Markham, Ontario