Excerpt From *ABR* November/December 1997: Volume 19, Issue 1

A B C

20th Anniversary 1977-1997

Feminist Subversions

Roberta Seelinger Trites

Over the last thirty years, feminism has had a decided impact on children's literature. Prior to the Women's Movement of the 1960s, most children's books subjected the child reader to some fairly heavy-handed indoctrination into gender roles: Peter Rabbit got to run off and have an adventure, while his pokey sisters, the good little bunnies Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-Tail, stayed home and did what mummy told them to do. All but one of the animals in the 100 Acre Woods were male: Winnie-the-Pooh, Piglet, Eeyore, Tigger, Owl, Rabbit, and Roo. The exception, Kanga, was a mother who never participated in any of the adventures. Even novels with rebellious girl protagonists almost always ended with the girl being socialized into societally sanctioned behaviors, which meant they were no longer rebellious, vocal, or had any fun: Anne of Green Gables, Jo March in *Little Women*, Laura Ingalls in *The Little House* series, Caddie Woodlawn and Mary in *The Secret Garden* all end up silenced at the end of their narratives.

Illustration by Greg Maier

It is especially over this matter of voice that feminism has changed the face of children's literature. No longer are silent protagonists the norm in the denouement of children's books; if anything, female protagonists grow more vocal as they grow stronger. Voice manifests itself multiply in children's novels; the same patterns can also be traced in picture books. A number of very politicized feminist children's and adolescent books express their ideologies directly, by affirming pro-choice politics as Rosa Guy's *Edith Jackson* does, or by deriding male perpetrators of incest as Cynthia Voigt's *When She Hollers* and Francesca Lia Block's *The Hanged Man* do, or by offering feminist revisions of history as Carol Matas's *The Burning Time* and Karen Cushman's *The Midwife's Apprentice* do. But many children's authors communicate their ideologies on more intricate levels, by exploring characters' subjectivities, by revising intertextuality, by foregrounding female characters' spoken and written voices, by affirming female community, or even by using metafiction and narrative structure to make feminist statements.

Princess Smartypants kisses the man she doesn't want to marry, he turns into a frog, and she lives happily ever after.

The study of subjectivity emerges most often in children's books as a simple matter of agency: when does the female character act as subject, determining her own choices rather than being objectified by patriarchal forces? The American Library Association awarded its most prestigious honor to one feminist picture book concerned with female subjectivity when it selected Emily Arnold McCully's *Mirette on the High Wire* to receive the Caldecott Medal in

1993. Mirette is a young girl who wants to learn to walk on tightropes. Not only does she fulfill her dream by studying under the world's most internationally renown maestro of the high wire, but she also actually saves him when he freezes in fear on the high wire. Finding a picture book in which a young girl succeeds in a male-dominated activity is unusual enough; having a girl rescue an adult male is even more unusual.

Issues of agency are even more intricate in Angela Johnson's *Toning the Sweep* because it is a young adult novel and thus affords the author more space in which to explore how a female protagonist experiences subjectivity. The recurring metaphor for Emily's subjectivity is her operation of a camera. Emily mourns her family's distance from African-American rituals surrounding death, like toning the sweep as soon as someone died, that is, pounding on "a sweep, a kind of plow, to let everybody know . . . to ring the dead person's soul to heaven." The adolescent girl develops her own ritual for helping her grandmother who is dying of cancer by videotaping all of the woman's friends as they speak about their friendship. During the course of the novel, Emily learns that the people she is filming feel what Roland Barthes notes about photography in *Camera Lucidia: Reflections on Photography* (1981): "In front of the lens, I am . . . the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art." She grows to understand that her own and other people's subjectivity and objectivity exist on an ontological spectrum that includes both what the individual wants to be and how others perceive her.

Some feminist authors revise traditional folktales and master narratives to fit their own agendas. Virginia Hamilton revises John Henry in *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl*. *Swamp Angel* is Anne Isaac's feminist revision of the Paul Bunyan story; Swamp Angel is a larger-than-life native of Tennessee who defeats the bear she wrestles. In Babette Cole's picture book *Princess Smartypants*, Princess Smartypants kisses the man she doesn't want to marry, he turns into a frog, and she lives happily ever after. Cynthia Voigt revises both the traditional quest tale and Cinderella in *On Fortune's Wheel,* when the pauper Birle, whose feet are too small for the shoes she is given at the castle, decides that she would rather live by herself than marry the prince and live stifled in the castle. When the prince shows up at her cottage having given up his patrimony to live with her, Birle thinks:

> What of her own life? What of her own work? What of the years she had thought to live with her daughter, the two of them, on the little holding distant from all the rest of the world. Must she give that up? . . .
>
> She had gone beyond a place where the world could tell her *must.* Aye, and they both had.
>
> Whatever [his] work, she would grow the herbs and prepare the medicines, she would be herself and his wife too, and the mother to Lyss and whatever other children they had. . . . Her life was in her own hands.

Unlike Princess Smartypants, Birle is able to reconcile her career choice with marriage. She maintains her agency and her voice within a stable relationship.

Many writers, especially authors of multicultural children's texts, actually explore loss of voice as aphasia: a silence so profound that females are reduced to one-dimensionality. Mildred Taylor explores the phenomenon in African-American culture when Cassie Logan is silenced repeatedly by her brother in *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*. Cassie's brother is involved in fighting for civil rights in rural Mississippi during theDepression; Stacey feels that his maturity (he is fourteen to Cassie's eleven) allows him to interrupt his sister, to tell her to hush, and to ignore her in the presence of adults. Cassie continues to assert her voice, however, and her brother ultimately acknowledges how important it is that she do so.

> "Cassie, how come you so quiet?" he said as he wiped his face. "You ain't gone and changed on me, have ya? . . . Or maybe you thinking . . . I'm the one changed. . . . Why if we don't change, things don't change. . . . You eleven now, you oughta understand that."
> "And I s'pose you do, huh?" I questioned, growing just a bit tired of his attitude of adult superiority. . . .
> He grinned at me. "Now you sounding more like Cassie."

Jinda Boonreung also overcomes aphasia in Minfong Ho's *Rice Without Rain*, a story set in Thailand during the rebellions at Thammasart University in 1976. Jinda eventually rejects both her boyfriend's silencing of her and his androcentric values when she chooses to remain in her village with her family rather than continue to live at his beck and call.

Female community provides many feminist authors an arena in which girl characters can test and strengthen their voices. Books like Cynthia Voigt's *Tell Me If the Lovers are Losers*, Rosa Guy's *The Friends*, and Katherine Paterson's *Lyddie* validate female friendships because within them girls' agency is less threatened than it might be within their male-dominated families. (Published in the same year as the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, *Lyddie* even includes a commentary on sexual harassment in the workplace.) Books like Janet Lunn's *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay* and Barbara Wersba's *Love is the Crooked Thing* are one step more radical in demonstrating girls exploring their subjectivity within—and sometimes despite—heterosexual relationships. Nancy Garden's *Annie on my Mind* and Leslea Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies* are controversial lesbian validations of female community. Virginia Hamilton's *Plain City*, Patricia MacLachlan's *The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt*, Jean Thesman's *The Rain Catchers*, and Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace* validate the mother/daughter experience in terms that Marianne Hirsch would applaud, for in these books, mothers do not exist only as the objects of their children's subject formations. Carolyn Heilbrun, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and Barbara Johnson have made calls for validations of the mother's experience in our culture and literature; children's books have met these demands.

Finally, narrative structure and metafiction often work together in feminist children's novels as female story-tellers self-consciously reflect on narration as a form of identity-formation. These reflections tend to create both embedded narratives, as these girls tell the story within the story, and metafictional passages, as the narrators comment on what it means to create story. Willa Pinkerton in Patricia MacLachlan's *Unclaimed Treasures*, for example, assures the reader that every story has "a beginning, a middle, and an end" and understands that "if you put all the letters of the alphabet in a box, there is every story ever written. Every story possible." Her intuitions about story-telling allow her to tell the story of her life in a story-within-the-story that reveals how she grows in the same way that novels do, in a series of related incidents, each with its own plot. Jan Brett's picture book *Annie and the Wild Animals* has a similar embedded narrative; Virginia Hamilton's *Arilla Sun Down*, Susan Creech's *Walk Two Moons*, and Paul Fleischman's *The Borning Room* are novels that also combine metafictional passages and embedded narratives to demonstrate female characters who are empowered by recognizing themselves as discursively formed.

It is a platitude in the criticism of children's literature that social agendas in children's fiction tend to fall twenty years behind the social movements of a given culture. This is especially true in such cultures as ours that hold an inherently conservative and Romantic view of childhood, believing that childhood is a time of innocence and that children should be protected from politics. As a result, the ideologies in children's fiction tend toward upholding the status quo, traditionally affirming the patriarchy and capitalist culture. Feminist children's fiction is nowhere near

as radical as is feminist fiction written for adults, but in its own quiet way, the genre is very neatly undercutting the patriarchy in a variety of innovative ways.

Roberta Seelinger Trites is the author of Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels, *published this year by University of Iowa.*

A CHECKLIST OF FEMINIST CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Block, Francesca Lia. *The Hanged Man*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.
Brett, Jan. *Annie and the Wild Animals*. New York: Putnam, 1985.
Cameron, Eleanor. *A Room Made of Windows*. Boston: Little, 1971.
Cole, Babette. *Princess Smartypants*. New York: Putnam, 1987.
Conford, Ellen. *Jenny Archer, Author*. Boston: Little, 1989.
Creech, Sharon. *Walk Two Moons*. New York: Harper, 1994.
Cushman, Karen. *The Midwife's Apprentice*. New York: Clarion, 1995.
Fitzhugh, Louise. *Harriet the Spy*. New York: Dell, 1964.
Fleischman, Paul. *The Borning Room*. New York: Harper, 1991.
Garden, Nancy. *Annie on my Mind*. New York: Farrar, 1982.
Guy, Rosa. *Edith Jackson*. New York: Viking ,1978.
—. *The Friends*. New York: Holt, 1973.
Hamilton, Virginia. *Arilla Sun Down*. New York: Greenwillow, 1976.
—. *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl*. New York: Harper, 1983.
—. *Plain City*. New York: Scholastic, 1993.
—. *A White Romance*. New York: Philomel, 1987.
—. *Zeely*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.
Ho, Minfong. *Rice without Rain*. London: Deutsch, 1986.
Hoffman, Mary. *Amazing Grace*. Illus. Caroline Binch. New York: Dial, 1991.
Hunter, Mollie. *A Sound of Chariots*. 1972. New York: HarperTrophy, 1988.
Isaacs, Anne. *Swamp Angel*. Illus. Paul O. Zelinsky. New York: Dutton, 1994.
Johnson, Angela. *Toning the Sweep*. New York: Orchard, 1993.
Little, Jean. *Look Through My Window*. New York: Harper, 1970.
Lunn, Janet. 1986. *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay*. Toronto: Puffin, 1988.
MacLachlan, Patricia. *Cassie Binegar*. New York: Harper, 1982.
—. *The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt*. New York: Harper, 1988.
—. *Unclaimed Treasures*. New York: Harper, 1984.
Mahy, Margaret. *The Tricksters*. New York: McElderry, 1986.
Matas, Carol. *The Burning Time*. New York: Delacorte, 1994.
McCully, Emily Arnold. *Mirette on the High Wire*. New York: Putnam, 1992.
Newman, Leslea. *Heather Has Two Mommies.* Northampton, MA: In Other Words Publishing, 1989.
Paterson, Katherine. *Lyddie*. New York: Dutton, 1991.
Taylor, Mildred. *Let the Circle be Unbroken*. New York: Dial, 1981.
Thesman, Jean. *The Rain-Catchers*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991.
Voigt, Cynthia. *On Fortune's Wheel*. New York: Atheneum, 1990.
—. *Tell Me if the Lovers are Losers*. New York: Atheneum, 1982.
—. *When She Hollers*. New York: Scholastic, 1994.
Wersba, Barbara. *Love is the Crooked Thing*. New York: Harper, 1987.