‘Princesses are not into war ’n things, they always scream and run off’: Exploring gender stereotypes in picture books
Janet Evans

Abstract
Gender stereotyping in children’s books is not an issue which has disappeared, for all that we have been aware of its problems for a number of years. Here Janet Evans reopens this issue and provides some useful insights into what might be appropriate responses.

“Elizabeth was a beautiful princess. She lived in a castle and had expensive princess clothes. She was going to marry a prince named Ronald. Unfortunately, a dragon smashed her castle, burned all her clothes with his fiery breath, and carried off Prince Ronald”.

Robert Muncsh and Michael Martchenko
The Paper Bag Princess

Thus starts the beginning of what must be one of the most well-known books for young children dealing with male/female sex stereotyping and role reversal. Muncsh (1980) tells of Elizabeth, a beautiful princess who was going to marry a prince called Ronald. Ronald is seized and carried away by a dragon who also smashes her castle and burns her clothes. Elizabeth resorts to wearing a paper bag, the only thing she can find and sets about getting the prince back. In a series of clever, non-violent moves she totally exhausts the dragon and rescues Prince Ronald, who instead of gratefully accepting his deliverance from the claws of the dragon, starts to criticise Elizabeth for her tatty, non-princess like appearance. Elizabeth immediately tells Ronald what to do with himself and the intended wedding is cancelled. The last picture shows the back of Elizabeth gleefully skipping into the sunset as she celebrates a very lucky escape from a wimpish yet arrogant male chauvinist.

Much has been written over the last two decades about the way in which children’s literature has portrayed women and men, girls and boys in specific, gender stereotyped roles. The character which Elizabeth plays in The Paper Bag Princess makes us think twice about books where there is no flexibility whatsoever in relation to gender stereotypes; books in which it is accepted without question that girls do not play football, rugby or cricket and boys do not play with dolls, play houses or feed the baby. Many of these gender stereotypes are slowly but surely being challenged and replaced by more egalitarian thoughts, however, negative stereotypes still linger in some peoples’ minds.

Freebody and Baker (1987) in their work looking at gender bias in children’s books found that the roles played by both male and female characters frequently conformed to traditional, stereotyped images, with women in submissive, “in-the-home” type roles and men involved in more active, outdoor activities. These gender stereotyped images were created by both the text and the illustrations working together. Often however the illustrations alone reinforced these same stereotypes showing men and boys in stereotyped male activities whilst women and girls were left in stereotyped female activities.

Recent research into the role that children’s literature has to play in channelling children along particular gendered paths has resulted in some interesting information. Gilbert (1994) looked at why, when it is obvious that girls have ability and opportunity and often perform better in exams than boys, do many of them leave school with modest ambitions. It would appear that something happens to girls which leaves them with the impression that they are not as good as, are less talented than and cannot do as well as the men who surround them in later life e.g. husbands and bosses. The texts we are exposed to in our culture indicate how we should “read” the world. These texts tell us what it is to be a man or a woman in today’s society, that is, we are “positioned” by the texts and hence begin to act accordingly. The texts go further and tell other people how to view us, hence women are expected to act as women and men as men. Concepts of femininity and masculinity are constantly and continually being constructed by media texts to include television, journals, newspapers and advertisements. Women are seen as passive, child rearing dish washers who have soft hands, whilst men are active, professional smoothies who race about in flash cars looking cool and handsome.
When we begin to look at texts for young children we can see many examples of these “gendered discourses”; nursery rhymes, songs, children’s television and of course books, all provide ample examples of gendered roles. It would seem that the simple act of ensuring that children have access to literature in which both girls and boys are seen as equals, doing similar activities, might actually change people’s stereotypes. However even when children were presented with non gender stereotyped literature they still kept to their existing viewpoints. These had already been shaped by previous exposure to gender discourses which in themselves are reflections of the dominant discourse of the Western culture and society (Davies and Banks, 1992; Trousdale, 1995).

The whole picture is complex and has led to a great number of picture books published in the last few years striving to be politically correct with illustrations which try to portray human beings engaged in meaningful activities in appropriate situations. In a move which is a touch ironic and in many cases satirical some picture books seem to have taken a sideways dig at the whole issue of gender stereotyping. The result has been a whole “glut” of exquisite humorus books where both text and illustrations address the issue of satirical some picture books seem to have taken a sideways dig at the whole issue of gender stereotypes which try to portray human beings engaged in meaningful activities in appropriate situations. In a move which is a touch ironic and in many cases satirical some picture books seem to have taken a sideways dig at the whole issue of gender stereotyping. The result has been a whole “glut” of exquisite humorus books where both text and accompanying illustrations address the issue of gender in an “alternative” manner to that which has already been shaped by previous exposure to gender stereotypes. However even when children were presented with non gender stereotyped literature they still kept to their existing viewpoints. These had already been shaped by previous exposure to gender discourses which in themselves are reflections of the dominant discourse of the Western culture and society (Davies and Banks, 1992; Trousdale, 1995).

The majority of the responses however had a rather unexpected twist. Faine’s uncomplicated version was short and yet explicit: the story will be about a horrible prince and dragon who was eventually defeated. They were asked to give their ideas of what the story would be about. Their responses were quite surprising. Only one or two children told the story in a conventional way whereby the prince kills the dragon, saves the princess and they get married and live happily ever after. Jacqueline’s response was of this type. The dragon took the princess to the cave, the prince came to the cave and killed the dragon, he cut him up and the princess came out. The prince and the princess lived happily ever after.

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In an attempt to find out how children would respond to a well-known picture book which presents an alternative view of a traditional fairy story, I decided to work with a class of 36, eight- and nine-year-old children. The fairy-tale genre allows young readers to deal with deeper issues, values and emotions in an unthreatening manner, indeed “... (this genre) ... can act as an accessible metaphor for things not yet intellectually understood,” p64 (Freemantle, 1993). Traditional fairy stories often present the young reader with the opportunity to identify with characters who do brave and courageous deeds in dangerous situations against all odds or who look beautiful and wait to be rescued, thus reinforcing the mainstream stereotyped image indicating what it is like to grow up male or female in a western society. In The Paper Bag Princess a very atypical fairy story, the author and illustrator show no regard for the normally accepted, stereotyped way in which prince, princess and dragon stories have historically evolved. They assume that their audience will be familiar with the traditional fairy-tale genre and that they will be able to use their familiarity to make sense of a text which challenges the norm. Although the characters, the beginning and the setting are kept almost the same as in most traditional fairytales, the author brings about a totally different, unexpected resolution through subtly changing the plot. I felt The Paper Bag Princess was an ideal book to use to explore whether the children:

1. Had preconceived, gender stereotyped ideas of how traditional prince/princess fairy stories are constructed in terms of beginning, setting, characterisation, plot and resolution and whether their previous experiences with this genre affected the way they would respond to the book prior to the initial reading.

2. Had previously formed ideas of what princes and princesses looked like and whether these came from exposure to images in other books of the fairy-tale genre, for example, beautiful, helpless princesses with long hair and blue eyes and handsome princes who are tall, dark and protective.

3. Thought the protagonist would be a male or a female and who they thought would defeat the dragon.

4. Were surprised by any aspects of the story when it was eventually read to them.

5. Would recognise that it was a parody on the traditional prince, princess and dragon fairy story.

Before reading the book the children were told that there were three story characters: a prince, a princess, and a dragon who was eventually defeated. They were asked to give their ideas of what the story would be about. Their responses were quite surprising. Only one or two children told the story in a conventional way whereby the prince kills the dragon, saves the princess and they get married and live happily ever after. Jacqueline’s response was of this type. The dragon took the princess to the cave, the prince came to the cave and killed the dragon, he cut him up and the princess came out. The prince and the princess lived happily ever after.

The story will be about a horrible prince and a nice princess. The dragon saves the princess from the prince!

Jenny’s version was also short but had a surreal aspect to it in the form of a dragon with a hosepipe: The nasty prince burnt down the princess’s house and the dragon came to save her. The fire fighter dragon had a hose pipe and squirted water and saved the princess!

In the short period of time given to thinking about the storyline, Pascale showed a remarkable ability to express some quite complex thoughts: The nasty prince lived far away and wanted to kill the princess. The dragon heard about it because he read newspapers, he came out of
his cave and found the prince . . . he saw him riding across the desert. The magic dragon turned himself small, then grew tall just as the prince got to the castle. He breathed fire and killed him . . . he died after he killed the prince.

In these unorthodox versions of the story it was the prince who was the “baddy” and the dragon who saved the princess. However it was interesting to see that although the overall storyline might not be exactly as was expected, the princess was still perceived as the character who was weak and who needed saving from evil. As Gemma’s response showed: The princess would be saved. It wouldn’t be the dragon and the prince was too ugly to be saved.

Having thought about the overall storyline and still prior to reading the book, each child was given one of three tasks. One task was to draw a picture and write a short description of the character who defeated the dragon to include how this character felt. Another task was to draw and write about the character who was saved, commenting on how this character felt. The third task was to draw the last picture in the book and write about the end of the story. The children’s responses to these more specific tasks, far from supporting their initial, non gender stereotyped ideas about what the overall story would be about, began to conform much more to the expected norm of fairy story characters. All of the children’s responses were similar in their acceptance of gender roles, that is, the male prince was active and did the fighting and the female princess was passive, being gratefully appreciative of her brave prince.

The character who defeated the dragon

The boys were overt in their references to princesses as weak creatures who constantly needed rescuing, it was one of the boys, James, who when considering who would defeat the dragon made the statement used in the title of this article:

Princesses are not into war ‘n things, they always scream and run off. The dragon might chase after the princess.

Other boys in the class made similar stereotyped statements:

James: The prince was tough and he might have weapons and princesses are weak.
Peter: It couldn’t be the princess because princesses don’t always have weapons.
Matthew: The prince might be tough, tougher than the princess and he might be the princess’s boyfriend.
Matthew: The princess might run off and the prince will stay and fight.

The girls seemed almost programmed to accept the notion that princes are strong and brave; several of them touched on concepts of goodness and badness and suitable justice being seen to be done e.g. the naughty person is defeated.

Sarah: The prince always defeats the naughty person because he is the bravest.
Lauren: You never know, the princess might be strong and brave. The dragon is usually fierce.
Hannah: In every story that I have read the prince kills the naughty person.
Zoe: The princess is always beautiful with servants and the prince fights for her so that she won’t get hurt.

Sarah’s stereotyped portrayal of the character who defeated the dragon: the prince with his blood thirsty killing instruments in his hands.

Transcription of Sarah’s writing: I think that the prince is a good fighter, brave and angry, and to do it to the evil. I have to have weapons. He might have an axe and a sword on it, and a badge of the castle. The prince was a bit scared. He is a very handsome bloke.
The character who was saved

Here the responses of both girls and boys conformed to stereotyped gender roles and the influence of previously read literature and television programmes was evident. The children were drawing on their knowledge of the way traditional stories are portrayed in traditional children’s literature and by the media.

Clare: The princess would be saved because in stories the prince usually saves the princess.

Kate: Normally the princess would be saved because in stories the dragon captures the princess and the prince has to save her.

Jonathan: The prince wouldn’t have been captured because he would have a sword and he can fight a dragon. The princess would need to be rescued.

Steven: I’ve drawn a princess. No other character would be rescued because girls are weak.

Philip: On television programmes the prince usually gets slaughtered by the dragon.

Katie: The prince kills the dragon for bullying the princess. The dragon dies. The prince and princess go to live together in a new castle.

Elizabeth: The princess is captured by the dragon. The prince likes the princess and sets off to save her. The prince finds the dragon’s cave and kills the dragon.

There were a few non-stereotyped resolutions and Simon presented a slightly different resolution which doesn’t indicate who did the capturing: The dragon is captured and locked up, the Prince makes friends with him and feeds him and looks after him like a pet. The dragon could help with cooking because of his fiery breath.

Graham too had a different notion of how the story would end: After a battle they make friends because the dragon gives up.

Elizabeth’s very neat solution to the story (pre-reading) shows a strong awareness of the fairy story genre with all the associated gender stereotyping of character roles.

After the children had completed their particular task I read the book to them along with showing them the illustrations. The shared reading was accompanied by “oohs” and “aahs” and many exclamations of the “I didn’t think that would happen” type. The children were given the opportunity to respond to the text in small discussion groups and were then asked to write down some of the things that surprised them about
Elizabeth’s contemporary portrayal of a very
down to earth prince and princess standing along-
side a bloody, sword pierced dragon, somehow
belies the obviously strong gender stereotyped
undertones to her understanding of the text.

The prince rescued the princess from the dragon. He felt very
proud of what he had done so did his father. The
princess’s father was more than pleased, he was
delighted. The prince, feeling very bold and brave, went out and the
dragon came out of his cave and the
prince killed him by sticking his sword into the
dragon. The dragon was defeated forever. The end.

Transcription of Elizabeth’s writing: The prince
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the story. Their responses were quite revealing. It was
evident that many of the children had expected the
story to run along traditional gender stereotyped lines
and were quite indignant when this story went
“against the grain”. They had a kind of “how dare
this story not do as it should” attitude. However their
responses also disclosed the fact that far from being
cornered about who did or didn’t get rescued, killed
or married, quite a few of the children were much
more preoccupied with other, more unexpected
details such as the fact that the paper bag didn’t get
burnt, even when faced with extreme heat. Inciden-
tally none of the children questioned why the princess
herself didn’t get burnt … presumably it was taken
for granted that the main good characters in a story do
not die.

Ben was a child who was more interested in how
many forests the dragon burnt rather than with the
sex of the protagonist or the paper bag not being
burnt. His comment indicated that he was very much
aware of how the fairy tale genre usually ends: One of
the things that surprised me in the story was that the
dragon burnt 50 forests and then 100. It surprised me
because they used to love each other.

Some of the other readers were surprised to find that
the protagonist was a girl and not a boy, they related
what they heard in the story to their previous
experiences with this genre. Elizabeth’s response

Steven: One of the things that surprised me in the story
was that the prince got carried away. It surprised me
because in all the other fairy stories the princess always gets
carried away by the dragon. It surprised me that the
princess wanted to save the prince. It surprised me because
in a story the prince always saves the princess.

Jonathan: One of the things that surprised me was when
the princess saved the prince and he shouted at the princess
because she stunk and she was wearing a paper bag. And I
thought that the princess would be captured and the prince
would save the princess but it was the other way round.

Pascale: It surprised me because it is usually the princess
who is captured. It surprised me when the princess called
Ronald a toad. It just shows you that girls can do the same
as boys. Girls are as brave and as strong as boys. And it
surprised me that Ronald and Elizabeth said together “We
are NOT getting married, because you, Elizabeth, are not
acting like a princess. You, Ronald are a wimp because you
are scared.” It was surprising because usually they get
married. (in these kinds of stories)

Simon: One of the things that surprised me in the story
was the clothes were burning but the paper bag wasn’t. It
surprised me because the paper bag wasn’t burnt but the
clothes were. The paper bag will burn easy but the clothes
won’t.

Zoe: One of the things that surprised me in the story was
that the paper bag was not burnt, it surprised me because
paper bags normally burn. Another thing that surprised me
was that the dragon carried the prince off and it is normally
the princess that gets carried off. Also another thing that
surprised me was that the princess shouted at the dragon
and she wasn’t scared because in other films the princess is
scared.

Gemma: One of the things that surprised me was the Paper
Bag Princess went to the dragon’s house to save Ronald. It
surprised me because she would probably be scared if she
was me. Another thing that surprised me was the dragon
taking the prince away. It surprised me because it is usually
the princess. Another thing that surprised me was the
dragon flying round the world in ten seconds. It surprised
me because nobody can fly that fast. Another thing that
surprised me was them not getting married. It surprised me
because they used to love each other.
was a very clear example of this: One of the things that surprised me was that the dragon carried the prince off. It surprised me because in most fairy stories it is the princess that gets carried off. One of the other things that surprised me was that the princess didn’t go away (from the entrance to the cave) but knocked again when the dragon stuck his head out. It surprised me because girls are weak usually in fairy stories.

It seems evident that children often respond to books in totally different ways from those expected by the teacher. The responses to The Paper Bag Princess showed that rather than having a concern about whether the book conformed to traditional stereotypes, these 8 and 9 year old children had other preoccupations which were more pertinent to them. Amongst other things they focused on why paper bags didn’t burn, the speed with which dragons fly and the fact that dragons are able to burn large numbers of forests. It is more than evident that when responding to texts we need to give children space to air their views and to voice their opinions at as many different levels as possible.

When researchers first started looking at children’s texts for gender stereotyping it was to show that it existed. There was a naive assumption that finding the evidence of stereotyping would be enough to persuade publishers, writers and illustrators not to produce books which encouraged traditional gender stereotyped views of men and women. This in turn would lead to the “New Reader”. The New Reader, like the New Man would only be presented with texts that had been through a politically correct sieve. As a result the next generation would be free of stereotypes.

As we now know, this did not happen, simply ridding books of gender stereotyping did not rid the world of stereotypes. Educators who were committed to teaching equity issues realised that some form of direct teaching was needed. In the first place this was done to get children to notice the different gender images and it involved engaging pupils in discourse about the role models presented in picture books. Several books, including The Paper Bag Princess were used because they presented wonderful opportunities to discuss a particular genre: the fairy tale, and also because they promoted equal opportunities (Hughes, 1991). However the work carried out with this group of children shows yet again that such simplistic solutions need to be treated with care. Children may be able to complete tasks which force them to relate to non-traditional story lines in texts, however they may not fully internalise the non gender stereotypes being presented to them. If the concepts presented by the texts have not been fully understood then there will be no transfer of learning to real life hence the children’s fundamental thinking will not be changed by reading the literature (Trousdale, 1995). The idea that children, or indeed, adults may be left unchanged by what they read, is disconcerting. Certainly the responses these children made gave us a window into the complex thoughts of the eight and nine year old. Our own thoughts are often confused and intricate so why should we be surprised to find that children’s thoughts are equally as complex. The responses from this piece of work highlight a couple of other issues Firstly, children need to have a basic understanding and familiarity with the genre being examined in order to recognise when the traditional format has been deliberately changed. It was clear that some children lacked an awareness of the way fairy-tales usually “work”. Due to this lack of awareness they missed the humour of Robert Muncsh’s spoof and were left coping with a text that they did not understand. Secondly as has already been mentioned, some children had their own agendas. “Why didn’t the paper bag burn?” was an interesting question but not one which was being considered, the issue of gender stereotyping was at the top of the agenda for the teacher, yet, for the child who posed this question, it was paper bags that didn’t burn that were a top priority.

It is evident that authors of children’s books and educators of young children cannot assume that children will automatically focus on what they expect them to focus. Children respond to texts in diverse and sometimes unusual ways which draw on their previous experiences and which show their ability to make sense of texts according to what is meaningful for them at any given period in time. In using The Paper Bag Princess I tried to explore a few issues relating to gender stereotyping and in so doing I finished up with more questions than answers. The more opportunities we give children to read and interact with picture books the better, however the idea of challenging gender stereotypes through the use of picture books is not always as straightforward as it seems. Even if children are allowed to discuss non gender stereotyped books and are encouraged to deconstruct the “hidden message” to facilitate better understanding of the wider issues at play, one still cannot guarantee that they will be fully aware of the potential or otherwise of their position as a male or female in their culture. Pidgeon (1993) states, “Reading may be one of the behaviours that reflects and confirms gender identity, but it also has the potential to extend it” p34. Evidently educators need to be much more flexible and as Davies and Banks (1992) point out, unless children are given the opportunity to talk about and begin to understand how the gendered discourse works then no amount of exposure to literature claiming that girls and boys are equal will change their views. The opportunity to respond to and begin to deconstruct the meaning of as many non-stereotyped texts as possible is therefore a crucial step along the road to allowing children to become aware of how they can be positioned by texts.
Bibliography


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