

Kara Lynn Braun

Free to Be ... You and Me
Considering the Impact of
Feminist Influences in Children's
Literature from the 1970s

What are Little Boys Made of?
What are little boys made of, *made of*?
What are little boys made of?
Love and care
And skin and hair
That's what little boys are made of.
What are little girls made of, *made of*?
What are little girls made of?
Care and love
And (see above)
That's what little girls are made of.
—Elaine Laron

The beauty of Elaine Laron's (1974a) poem lies in its simplicity and it, without doubt, reflects the world we wish for our children. However I would suggest that it is perhaps too simple and that if we really want a world where boys and girls can be equal and I think they deserve nothing less—they should be told that the world and particularly our culture as it stands today is not equally accommodating for boys and girls, women and men, just as it was not in 1974. Children have an innate sense of justice and thrive on knowing the truth and we must honour that sense of truth in the stories we give them.

Looking at this body of children's literature from the 1970s that was so obviously influenced by popular feminism, I see two problems. First, the way in which adult relationships are portrayed is not realistic. Conflict is seldom an issue and if it is, it's very neat. Secondly, women's roles as mothers are not accurately reflected. We have books about moms who work but seldom stories

that speak to the reality of juggling work, relationships and children. I'm a mother, I'm a student, I'm "married," my partner runs a business—I consider my life pretty dynamic—that's on a good day—on bad days I think it's just crazy and the only thing I can remember from my childhood that might have suggested what was to come is that "Calgon" bath commercial where the woman says, "take me away."

Free to Be... You and Me (1974), the book in which Laron's poem was published, represented a movement whose time had come. The work of early "popular" feminists such as Gloria Steinem was being heard—"men and women are equal" was the message. And what better way to ensure a future of equality than to tell young girls and boys that they could be anything they wanted, as long as they worked together, and respected each other. (Assuming all other things are equal was the part they left out.) In reality we know just how gender-constrained the world remains.

To be fair, the '70s did see a mass of books that dealt with "reality"—books about divorce, disability, families of mixed race, etc. These books are all shelved in what is called the "issue" section at any children's library and I have been told that kids don't go near them. Parents do because they make them feel good. But kids want adventure and fantasy—the books I'm asking for must be full of these things but they can also reflect reality in a way that is very telling and in a way that honours children as people who have a pretty good idea of how things work.

Published in 1974 as a Ms. Foundation Project, *Free to Be... You and Me* was developed and edited by Carol Hart, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Mary Rodgers, and Marlo Thomas. Thomas explains in her introduction that she found herself unable to find inspiring books for her young niece. She writes, "I wanted a book for Dionne, a special book, a party of a book, to celebrate who she was and who she could be, all the possibilities and all the possible Dionnes." And so *Free to Be... You and Me* was conceived. Popular writers such as Carl Reiner, Shel Silverstein, Carol Hall, Judy Blume, and Anne Roiphe contributed with titles such as "Parents are People," "It's all Right to Cry," and "Glad to Have a Friend like You."

The Sun and the Moon

The Sun is filled with shining light
It blazes far and wide
The Moon reflects the sunlight back
But has no light inside.
I think I'd rather be the Sun
That shines so bold and bright
Than be the Moon, that only glows
With someone else's light.

Elaine Laron (1974b)

It has taken me a long time to realize that you can't always be the sun. Sometimes you have to be the moon—and it's ok to be the moon. Is it possible that some of our preconceived notions about equality, messages that I clearly remember being part of my environment were not more than a little misleading? One should of course acknowledge the class and cultural limitations of *Free to Be...* The book would have been accessible to a particularly middle-class audience—an environment rich with reading material, pretty much free of violence and discrimination—I grew up in an environment in which I could easily soak up this stuff and very easily imagine a future of equality. I just wish there had been some sort of disclaimer that said I could not expect everyone to have read the book nor to have understood the message as I did and therefore should probably expect some resistance along the way.

I don't think we can underestimate the influence of children's literature especially in the hands of people whom we trust and admire. *Eloise* by Kay Thompson, was published in 1957 and is enjoying a recent revival of sorts. The main character, Eloise is the perfect example of a not-so-stereotypical little girl. I can't read this book without hearing my Nana's voice and I knew that she wished the two of us could be just like Eloise and her Nanny who lived at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, running up and down the halls and pestering the bellhops. Similarly, my uncle, someone who has always encouraged me to be independent—he used to tell me to go play on the road—gave me my own copy of *Free to Be... You and Me*.

What kind of stories would I like to see? Stories that reflect the realities of this world, with characters that question those realities. The '70s were full of books about very independent, adventurous, bold, boisterous, spunky little girls who who could match any boy—in terms of strength and bravery. Some of these were pretty over the top. My daughter's favourite, from 1973 is called, *Benjamin and Tulip* by Rosemary Wells. The first line reads, "Every time Benjamin passed Tulip's house, she said, 'I'm gonna beat you up.'" Eventually Benjamin and Tulip learn to be friends of course.

As inspiring as these very un-stereotypical characters are it would be nice if once and a while, one of these very self assured young girls would run into somebody who says, no ... it doesn't matter how confident you are ... this is the way the world is ... and have the young girl take in the dynamics of the situation ... perhaps question why she is encountering such resistance ... and then come up with a way—perhaps with the help of friends or family, to work through the problem. We must also acknowledge the desperate need for thoughtful stories about young boys. Stories about kind, caring boys—eager to imagine a world that is different and that speak to what it means to be a boy in this culture. Stories that tell little boys how much we respect them as unique human beings, that we expect a great deal from them, and that we trust they will grow as thoughtful and caring people.

Mothers are present in many of the stories as supporting characters, offering advice or threatening punishment but seldom do the mothers in these

stories do anything else. Unless the story is specifically about mothers who work, and there are lots of books about all the “things” that mothers can be, they remain very stereotypical.

Parents Are People

Mommies are people.
People with children.
When mommies were little
They used to be girls,
Like some of you,
But then they grew.
And now mommies are women,
Women with children,
Busy with children
And things that they do.
There are a lot of things
A lot of mommies can do.
Some mommies are ranchers
Or poetry makers
Or doctors or teachers
Or cleaners or bakers.
Some mommies drive taxis
Or sing on TV.
Yes, mommies can be
Almost anything they want to be.
Carol Hall (1974)

Stories such as Hall’s seldom look at how mothers combine their work as mothers with other interests. I had a mother who worked at a job she seemed to enjoy and I think I always assumed that I would want to do the same. But I also knew that my mother also did the majority of work in our home including the cooking and cleaning and was the parent most intimately concerned with our day to day activity. And I knew she was often tired and overwhelmed. I grew up expecting to share equal responsibility for a home and for children with a partner who would want the same thing for both of us. But low and behold, for whatever reasons, I am currently the primary care giver to our child and I seem to be doing more than my fair share of dishes.

Admittedly, I have chosen to stay at home. However I do consider the time I spend alone with our child as challenging and as valuable as my partner’s work. I also expect for us to share child care equally when we have rare opportunities to parent together. But it does not seem to happen just because I expect it and there have been few successful models for us to turn to.

I wish that I could be the perfect role model but I cannot and so I think

about stories that we can offer our children—stories that we did not have. What about a story where the mother really wants to stay at home with her baby and has a partner who wants to work so that she can do that. But sometimes she feels that she is the only one making a point of remembering doctor's appointments and birthdays and writing to grandparents and so she figures out a way of asking for help without getting mad at her partner and she is able to help that person see that it isn't fair for her to have all that responsibility just because she is at home caring for their child. The same woman might decide that she really wants to work outside of the home and could ask her partner to help her make that a possibility.

Sarah Garland (1982) is a British writer and illustrator whose work accurately depicts what spending time with a child is like. Garland has a knack for identifying the "everyday" things like struggling to get children into car seats while balancing grocery carts and keeping an eye on dogs. Or collapsing on the kitchen floor with a cup of tea because a young child is demanding to be read to that very second. While her stories are exceedingly simple, the illustrations are incredibly comforting—and children love them. Of course there is no universal mothering experience and when I say that somebody's particular depiction of mothering speaks to me—it will not speak to everybody.

I would like to see more stories that speak to the dynamics of wanting to be with children but having other passions as well. I'd like to write a story about a woman who has a special talent for dreaming while she is with her children. While reading to her young children she projects herself into far away places and has great adventures. While playing with blocks she fantasises about her own building projects. The beautiful part of the story is when the woman is actually given the time at some point in the day to do these things, by somebody who obviously cherishes the work she does. Because being with children is work. Balancing careers and mothering and relationships is work. And I wish I'd grown up with stories that were respectful of this. Perhaps the realities of being an adult wouldn't have taken me so by surprise and taken me so long to realize that work is ok. Children aren't afraid of work. They just innately, do, they are driven to work—it is just us that calls it play.

I have a great deal of respect for the work that happened during this period and I certainly think we are further ahead than we would have been without it. The '70s were a unique time for children. There was lots of exciting work being done and there wasn't the extreme commercialism that we started to see in the '80s and that is so prevalent today. Likewise the '70s were a very special time for children's literature and it was a natural period for me to look at. These were the stories that I grew up with and because of that they have a great deal of meaning for me. They reeked of possibility and they were exciting. The Concise Oxford says, that to "excite" is to "rouse the feelings or emotions of [a person]." I think it's the perfect word to describe what happens in families.

To conclude, I am most intrigued by the stories not told in these stories. As daughters of this liberal feminism of the early '70s—we got a very clear

message but it was very idealistic and it made assumptions about the world as it was in 1974 and the world that we were going to grow into. I can't say whether my life would be any different if there had been more stories that accurately reflected what life is like—but when I look at the way parents and especially women are portrayed in children's books I think—come on, kids know what's going on—lets write stories that are real!

In this world, certain ideologies exist that make it very difficult for men and women to be equal. Yes, the stories, so thoughtfully given to us were non-sexist, but the world is not. I certainly grew up *wanting* to believe that I could be anything I wanted to be. But a young person's sense of self must be incredibly strong if it was going to go head to head with institutionalised sexism. Popular culture, for example, that perpetuates sexism through everything from comic books to video games, and a school system with a curriculum that has been proven gendered time after time. And most significantly, the home, where gendered stereotypes play themselves out like a worn record. What about all the other factors that will contribute to our personal happiness and self-esteem? It's very difficult for many young women to feel good about themselves and to like themselves when they are constantly faced with media messages that question who they are.

What these stories didn't tell us was how we might go about realising our expectations in the real world. The notion of having it all and being it all, and having to be all, has become very problematic for women. Assuming you will be treated as an equal does not guarantee that you will be. The fact that you have decided you will not do all the housework does not mean that the person you chose to share a house with will think the same way.

Housework

... Children,
when you have a house of your own
make sure, when there's housework to do,
that you don't have to do it alone.
Little boys, little girls,
when you're big husbands and wives,
if you want all the days of your lives
to seem sunny as summer weather
make sure, when there's housework to do,
that you do it together.

Sheldon Harnick (1974)

Finally, what I find troubling about *Free to Be... You and Me*, from a materialist feminist, stay at home mom perspective is that the book fails to ask questions. I really wish for stories that ask questions about why things are the way they are. Questioning after all is the first step to realising change. Why

aren't all people equal? Aren't some people disadvantaged to the point of never being able to be equal? Will it be hard for little girls to grow up and be anything they want to be? Will there be people who will stand in our way? Even people who love us?

Yes boys and girls can do anything but why aren't my mother and father equal? Where were the stories about men and women who argue but who respect each other and work to find solutions for everybody. Stories with adults who didn't agree about everything but who honoured each other enough as individuals to work things out. Stories that acknowledge the "exciting" dynamics of families—the rousing of emotions that is so a part of life. It is something to write stories that inspire children, that nurture creativity, personal growth and self esteem. I continue to struggle for a balance between fostering not only self esteem, but a critical awareness of the world and the cultures unto which our children must exist.

As feminists, let's write *for* children. Stories that are not about making us feel good but that will serve our children well. Let's tell them the stories we wish we'd been told, the stories we yearn to tell. Yes we'll tell them about the world we want for them and the worlds we want them to be able to imagine for themselves but let's also talk about the world that we live in. Stories that reflect the dynamics of real families and that model resolution. Life is not easy, nurturing relationships, finding balances as women between the needs of children, partners, and ourselves—will rouse "emotion"—it will be *exciting*. Only in acknowledging *that* can we really be *free*.

Notes

Books that are problematic can be very useful—they provide excellent opportunities to ask questions and challenge stereotypes. You can start practising this with very young children. For example, why do you think the Mother in this story is always doing the dishes?

Develop reading strategies, ie., reversing gender, pasting revisions into books. Have you ever tried to make Tigger a "she" instead of a "he?"

As adults we have to tell our own stories and be honest with ourselves and thus tell our children about why things are the way they are. We can say, "Mommy is tired right now and feeling lousy because nobody is helping with the dishes."

Theatre is an incredible tool—acting out favourite stories (including personal stories) will often offer unique insight into a situation.

References

- Garland, Sarah. 1982. *Going Shopping*. London: Puffin Books.
Hall, Carol. 1974. "Parents are People." *Free to Be... You and Me*. Eds. Carole Hart, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Mary Rodgers and Marlo Thomas. New York: McGraw-Hill. 48-49

Kara Lynn Braun

- Harnick, Sheldon. 1974. "Housework." *Free to Be.... You and Me*. Eds. Carole Hart, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Mary Rodgers and Marlo Thomas. New York: McGraw-Hill. 54-59
- Hart, Carole., Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Mary Rodgers, and Marlo Thomas, eds. 1974. *Free to Be.... You and Me*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Laron, Elaine. 1974a. "What are Little Boys Made Of?." *Free to Be.... You and Me*. Eds. Carole Hart, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Mary Rodgers and Marlo Thomas. New York: McGraw-Hill. 38
- Laron, Elaine. 1974b. "The Sun and the Moon." *Free to Be.... You and Me*. Eds. Carole Hart, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Mary Rodgers and Marlo Thomas. New York: McGraw-Hill. 136
- Thompson, Kay. 1957. *Eloise*. London: Reinhardt.
- Wells, Rosemary. 1973. *Benjamin and Tulip*. New York: Dial Books.