



Gendered Issues in Children's Literature

Critical Observation, Reading Recommendations and Exploration

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Selecting books worthy of this list was no simple task. This is not due to a lack in suitable literary works, but quite the opposite. In the last two decades, many of the children's and youth's books published are rooted in the feminist struggle, gender equality and the pluralistic values of the early third millennium. With this abundance in mind, we chose to recommend 9 excellent, but less familiar books, or at least books that are not usually the first in any gender-focused list. Admittedly, we could not ignore the classic and transcendental Pippi Longstocking, but with it we recommend equally wonderful books, that are of great literary significance and contribute to the development of critical thinking.

This list provides a peek to the rich and vast world of children's literature. Anyone interested in this or other topics, is invited to contact the Yemima Center for the Research and Teaching of Children's and Youth Literature, at Beit Berl College, for many other recommendations.

Happy reading!

Reading Recommendations for Preschool

1. **The Dot**

Author and Illustrator: Peter H. Reynolds | 2003

Vashti, a young schoolgirl, believes she "just can't draw!" and only agrees to try her hand at it when encouraged by her art teacher. Vashti offhandedly scribbles down a dot, signs her name at the bottom of the page - at her teacher's request - and a week later is surprised to find the drawing hanging over the teacher's desk in a beautiful gold frame. The teacher's faith in Vashti allows her to launch herself into a long process of painting dots in various colors and sizes, for which she is highly regarded at the end-of-year exhibition at her school. When another student



approaches her to confesses his admiration and his own lack of artistic talent, Vashti encourages him to try to draw a line and to sign his name, thus symbolically closing the circle.

Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:

* The story begins with a seemingly traditional heroine: a girl whose faith in her abilities and her self-esteem are low. Due to this, her female teacher's faith in her is significant in the gender aspect; it is possible that her teacher understands her inhibitions in light of the avoidance learning that girls still often undergo.

* The story encourages in-depth study, which gradually builds Vashti's confidence. The closure at the end is significant due to the "pay it forward" motif. Vashti becomes a mentor for someone else (a male child) after the helplessness that characterized her in the beginning of the story.

* The illustrations depict the art teacher as dark-skinned, as is the student talking to Vashti in the end. This implies the importance of cultural diversity and the significance of giving, supporting and encouraging that crosses boundaries of age, gender and ethnicity.

* The usage of a dot, which is a linguistic punctuation mark, as well as a geometric and a graphical one, expands the scope of meanings of this work. This is also implied by the dedication of the book: "Dedicated to Mr. Matson, my 7th grade math teacher, who dared me to 'make my mark'". Reynolds implies that in art, as well as in math and many other areas, children need the trust and support of a "significant other" to motivate them to explore their problems and develop a sense of competence.



2. **The Princess and the Pig**

Author: Jonathan Emmett | Illustrator: Poly Bernatene | 2011

A poor farmer and his little pig Pigmella return home from the fair, stopping to rest in the shade of a magnificent castle. At that very moment, a wealthy queen accidentally drops baby princess Priscilla from the window, and the two switch places without anyone noticing. Both sides are shocked once they discover the dramatic switch but are quick to explain it away as a magic spell: "It's the sort of thing that happens all the while in books" they say (the illustrations depict The Prince and the Pauper, The Sleeping



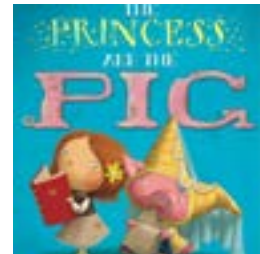
Beauty, Thumbelina and Puss in Boots). The pig is therefore raised in luxury worthy of a princess, although she clearly has trouble learning how to eat, dress or behave as a princess (or as a human being). The princess, on the other hand, grows up in the village, living a happy life free from the responsibilities of the palace. Surprisingly, and despite the revelation of the truth about the switch, the story's happy end does not entail "restoring the order" but rather exposing the rigidity of thought and suspicion of the upper class. Priscilla the pig ends up marrying a prince who fails to redeem her, for some reason, from the "spell"... while Pigmella the princess continues her humble and happy life with her loving family.

Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:

* The book is based on prior knowledge of fairy tales and children's literature, but it uses that knowledge to play with its readers, challenge the social order, and break existing norms.

* The book exposes our perceptions as such - perceptions only, thus emphasizing the danger of blindly relying on past traditions without adjusting them to the ever-changing reality. The book ridicules those who cling to their opinions and the damage they inflict on their surroundings.

* The women depicted in this book do not behave as expected. The pig-princess behaves as, well, a pig - in her appearance, in the way she eats and in her interests. On the other hand, the true princess, raised as a common villager, also does not act as a classic princess, but as an ordinary girl and woman, horrified by the possibility that she is a princess and happy when she is allowed to continue her humble life.



3. **The Day Louis Got Eaten**

Author and Illustrator: John Fardell | 2011

"Louis and his big sister Sarah were out in the woods one day... when unfortunately... Louis was eaten up by a Gulper". Sarah doesn't panic and immediately pursues the terrifying creature. But then the Gulper is eaten up by a Grabular, which is then eaten up by an Undersnatch, which is then eaten up by a Spiny-backed Guzzler - and so on and so forth. But Sarah never gives up and continues in her pursuit of the increasingly larger creatures until she finally rescues her brother from danger.

Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:



* Although the book is called *The Day Louis Got Eaten*, its true protagonist is Sarah, Louis' older sister. Sarah is the one embarking on a rescue mission and she does so by choice. She's the active, thinking and creative character throughout the entire book. With determination and composure Sarah faces all the surprises she encounters, and as the illustrations show, she also displays impressive technical abilities. She turns her bicycle into a pedal boat, using a breathing tube, kites and poles to get her to the happy end of the mission.

* Sarah acts in much the same way as male knights have always acted. But unlike them, she does not use violence, nor fight her enemies head-on, and in fact she does not seem to want them dead at all. She uses resourcefulness and creativity to rescue her brother.

* When Sarah rescues Louis he's not at all surprised, nor does he thank her. It might be impolite, but it also testifies to his faith in his sister's high abilities and to the normalization of gender equality. "I knew you'd come" Louis tells his sister once he sees her.

* Louis' turn to rescue his sister comes later, and contrary to her peaceful ways, he returns to the traditional masculine way - shouting and threatening. Unlike the brother's relative indifference to being rescued by Sarah, she thanks him, demonstrating the added value of interpersonal relationships founded on awareness, emotion and politeness.

Reading Recommendations for Early Readers

4. **Pippi Longstocking**

Author: Astrid Lindgren | Illustrator: Lauren Child | Translator: Tiina Nunnally 2007 [1945]

Astrid Lindgren's book was first published in 1945, and is as relevant today as it was then, both in content and style. The heroine is nine-year-old Pippi, a girl who lives alone at Villa Villekulla, as her mother died soon after her birth and her father, Captain Ephraim Longstocking, is missing at sea (though Pippi is convinced that he arrived safely to a small island and became the king of its natives). Keeping her company until her father's return, are a monkey named Mr. Nilsson, a horse who lives on the house's porch, and the bourgeois neighbor's children: Tommy and Annika. The book has 11 chapters, each depicting an amusing episode in Pippi's life, illuminating gender, intergenerational, class and social issues in a fun yet critical light.





Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:

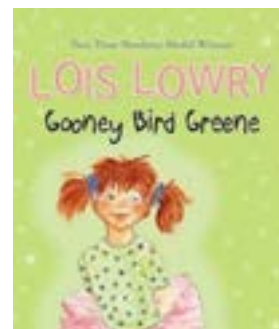
* Pippi is describes as an “unconventional” girl. Despite her young age, she’s independent and never questions her ability to conduct herself in the world of adults without support. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll always come out on top!” she tells the sailors as she leaves them to move into Villa Villekulla.

* Pippi is also describes as superhumanly strong: “the strongest girl in the world”. This characterization goes against the tradition of depicting young girls in literature, although it also explains her confidence. Using her great strength, Pippi throws out from her home the policemen who wish to take her to a children’s home, apprehends burglars and saves children from a fire. It is no coincidence that whenever Pippi uses her strength and shows how great it is, those who learn their lesson are grown men.

* The solutions Pippi finds to the various problems in the plot, do not fit the accepted social order. For instance, she refuses to be taken into a children’s home, as is the norm for abandoned or single children in an orderly society. She also fails to fit in at school, and is eventually expelled by her teacher (certainly not to Pippi’s displeasure...). Although these instances do not depict actual reality nor encourage the readers to imitate Pippi’s behavior, they do encourage them to question social order and conventions, while providing a platform for imagination and escapism.

* Through Pippi’s original character, the book shatters traditional power structures, and even inverts them.

Pippi is a young (intergenerational minority) girl (gender minority), who lives on her own and navigates the world as an individual. She lacks formal education but is rich in alternative knowledge, does not distinguish truths from lies but her heart is always in the right place. Her peace of mind, kindness and optimism channel her physical and mental abilities towards solving human hardships, and are never misused.



5. **Gooney Bird Greene**

Author: Lois Lowry | Illustrator: Middy Thomas | 2002

Gooney Bird Greene is a new student in the second grade. She arrives at school unaccompanied by a parent a few weeks after the school year began, dressed in pajamas and equipped with sushi for lunch. She demands a desk at the center of the classroom, and immediately



fascinates her surroundings. The red-haired Gooney (a clear descendant of Pippi Longstocking) is a colorful girl who likes being in the center of attention, gathering around her an audience of listeners with tall tales that turn out to be true... all thanks to creative descriptions of the facts and the use of puns (Gooney says she was in jail! Could it be? Yes, if it's a game of Monopoly:-)).

Lois Lowry is an award-winning author. The Gooney Bird Greene series has six books – Don't miss any!

Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:

* Gooney loves the attention showered upon her by her classmates, and she actively seeks the love of her audience. She is brave, has a sense of humor, and is strong both physically and mentally.

* Gooney is characterized by her love of clothes and fashion. Although it is a gender stereotype, her taste in clothing is unique, eclectic, colorful, independent and different from any known fashion trend. She explores her own unique taste without embarrassment or apology.

* Gooney is a social leader. She sweeps the class with her stories and unique style. While others might enjoy their power and status and try to keep it for themselves, Gooney gladly shares her secrets with her surroundings. She shares her storytelling talent with her classmates, trying to teach them how to find their inner voices. This is, of course, a symbolic act, doubly so when done by a young girl.

6. **Mercy Watson to the Rescue**

Author: Kate DiCamillo | Illustrator: Chris Van Dusen | 2005

Mercy is a piglet belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Watson. The Watsons do not raise Mercy in their yard or in a sty, but inside their own home, as if she were their daughter. They love the piglet to death, seeing only goodness and beauty in her, as her name (Mercy) implies. But the pig herself is... to put it mildly – a pig! Hedonistic, gluttonous, indulgent and clumsy. The gap between the heroine's crassness and the great love showered upon her by the Watsons stands in the center of the books in this series (six so far). The funny and far-fetched plot of the books shows that unconditional love is possible, and the books celebrate the spirit of silliness in life, and the power of love and all its wonders.





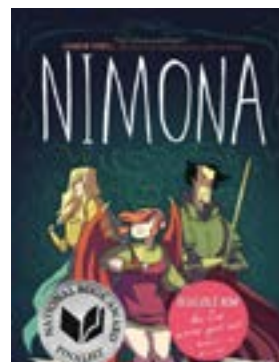
Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:

* Choosing a little pig as the heroine of the story challenges the interpreters. If this were a story in which all the characters are animals, it could be interpreted metaphorically, making personification the central literary technique organizing it. However, Mercy is an animal living with a human couple devoted to her. Does she serve as a metaphor for an extraordinary daughter? Or is she a pet? Can a pig be a pet? The story, therefore, teeters on the fine line between realism and social allegory.

* Mercy's identity as a pig - an animal humanity's view of is complex and connects to various religious taboos - joins her gender identity. These make her a distinct representative of minority groups. Asking the readers to find love and empathy in their hearts for the weakened heroine is, therefore, a serious and weighty request.

* Illustrator Chris Van Dusen made the book even more complex by emphasizing the pig's less-than-flattering sides in the illustrations. Her clumsy body, animalistic features and constant hunger are evident in the illustrations, standing in stark contrast to the perfection and purity attributed to her by Mr. and Mrs. Watson. Thus, the book creates a complex image of contrasts and contradictions, making the reading experience more challenging. There is no "good" versus "bad", "beautiful" versus "ugly", or "right" versus "wrong" here. The truth is in the eye of the beholder, and the life experiences, relationships and emotions available to all of us are richer and more multidimensional than any reduction social tradition offers.

* The family unit, with its love, devotion and protection given to those who belong to it, is open to different possibilities of realization and fulfillment, and is no longer bound by the conventions of the past. The Watsons are apparently childless (biologically), but Mercy is their daughter for all intents and purposes. When she invades their bed to feel their warmth in the cold night, her behavior echoes that of toddlers all across the globe. In the end, the Watsons' willingness to open their home, their bed and their hearts to Mercy is laid at the readers' feet. How willing will they be to experience and experiment with small and unusual acts of love?



7. **Clementine (series)**

Author: Sara Pennypacker | Illustrator: Marla Frazee | 2006-2015



Curious, funny and energetic, kind, sensitive and honest, loyal, creative and full of ideas – such is Clementine, the original heroine of Sara Pennypacker’s book series. As of today, the series includes seven books, depicting with sensitivity and humor the life of Clementine – a third grade student in a public school in Boston – and her relationships with her parents, her younger brother, her best friend Margaret, her cats, her neighbors and her classmates.

Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:

* Portraying a girl as the protagonist of an entire series of books is significant. Studies suggest that boy-readers sometimes face difficulties identifying with “girl books”, but the red-headed Clementine’s colorful personality and the conflicts in her life have the potential to appeal to them as well. These books are, therefore, recommended to all genders.

* Clementine’s mischievous and “tom-boyish” nature originates in the model set by Pippi Longstocking. However, in stark contrast to Pippi, author Sara Pennypacker places Clementine in a stable and functional family. Clementine’s parents love her very much, and their relationship as a couple is thriving. Her conflicts, therefore, do not arise from external sources, but from internal ones – from her original personality and emotional complexity, which are just as likely to exist among the lower-middle class.

* As a child, Clementine’s point of view allows the defamiliarization of social norms. Defamiliarization is the literary technique of presenting to readers common things in an unfamiliar or strange way so they could gain new perspectives and see the world differently – as if they are seeing it for the first time. It is no coincidence that gifted illustrator Marla Frazee depicted Clementine standing on her head on the cover of the first book. Clementine’s greatness is her ability to look at the world with constant doubt, and to carefully examine its rules, inviting the readers to do the same.



8. **The Princess in Black (series)**

Authors: Shannon and Dean Hale | Illustrator: LeUyen Pham | 2014–2021
The book series The Princess in Black consists of nine books (so far). The heroine is Princess Magnolia, who outwardly seems nothing less than



perfect – sweet and clean, prim and dressed in finery. But in times of trouble, Princess Magnolia turns into the Princess in Black, saving the kingdom (and its goats) from various monsters, troubles and dangers. She does all this without being discovered, and is always back just in time to drink her hot chocolate. Throughout the series, the Princess in Black is joined by several other warrior princesses, but the secret remains safe; after every adventure, they return to their reality and go on with their daily routines.

Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:

* This book series parodies two well-established traditions: the folk tale tradition in which the princess is a damsel in distress in need of a prince to rescue and marry her (Snow White, Cinderella and more), and the tradition of Superheroes, whose extraordinary powers create an alter ego for their average day-to-day persona (most famous of which is Superman, the hero of the comic book series first published in 1938). The subversion of the Princess in Black books is in shifting the gender emphasis of both these traditions and interweaving them; It is no longer the princess who is in distress and needs the help of an active male savior. The princess is the one with extraordinary powers who repeatedly saves her kingdom (and Jack, the goat-herder).

* The element of concealment is also important. Keeping the secret removes from the princess the element of pride and adoration that she could have won for her extraordinary powers. This way, she is not exempt from proving her worth and values in the “reality” where no one is aware of her abilities. Ironically, this is a fantastic reality, which is usually not what one might describe as a boring routine from which one seeks to escape to a more magical reality.

* Unlike the well-known older “Disney Princesses”, Magnolia and her friends offer a new model for the responsibilities of their title. Alongside the façade that meets the traditional representational expectations (gracious hospitality, fancy clothing and unicorn riding), and without actively preaching against them, the Princess in Black goes out to fight against hazards and evils that threaten the inhabitants of her realm. Her signature black cloak and mask, similar to those of Zorro, add a subversive aspect to the supposedly fragile identity of the fair-haired and bright-eyed princess.



* The Princess in Black offers readers a “two-layered” princess, teaching them an important lesson about the difference between the book and



its cover. On the outside – refinement, manners and obedience to social traditions, and on the inside – toughness, strength and independence. Don't we all have potential for this? It is no wonder that Jack, the goat-herder, admires Magnolia and is inspired by her to dream of becoming a warrior himself (spoiler alert: in one of the sequels, he does).

9. **Nimona**

Author and Illustrator: ND Stevenson | 2015

This is a graphic novel for young adults, whose main protagonist is Nimona – a young, stubborn, spunky shape-shifter. Nimona shows up one day at the lair of the villain Ballister Blackheart with the metal-hand, announcing herself as his new sidekick. Lord Blackheart is not interested in having a sidekick, but Nimona leaves him no choice, joining in his quest for revenge against the handsome Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin and his friends at the Institute of Law Enforcement and Heroics. The book unfolds the personal stories of the characters, bringing into question basic perceptions of good and evil, identity and self-definition, environmental influences on the individual, and more.

Reading the story through a gender-sensitive lens identifies a few emphases:

* Nimona, the main character, can take on the form of any person or animal, real or fictional, large or small, male or female. Although her starting point is in the female form, she can – and likes – to decide for herself what she looks like and what her identity is.

* At the same time, the book does not present the fluidity of self-identity in simplistic terms. Nimona's ability of metamorphosis ("shape-shifting") is one of the things causing society to consider her a threat and label her as a monster. The book raises the question: are monsters born or are they made that way by the way people treat them? This question occupies generations of women, who struggle to define themselves without being bound by the dictates of society and its perceptions.

* Nimona is a complex character – strong, active, magical, independent and omnipotent, but that does not prevent her from sometimes feeling lonely, afraid, insecure and needy. In this she represents a more complex, rich and layered femininity than ever before.

