Breaking Barriers: Women's History for Children

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At this conference, we gather to celebrate the history and legacy of the Women's Liberation Movement and its reverberations in our own time. This mood of retrospection and celebration is particularly appropriate, given that from its outset, the women's movement was deeply conscious of its status as both agent and inheritor of women's history. In addition to the rapid expansion of women's history in the academy, an accompanying concern with establishing the role of contemporary feminism in a long legacy of personal and political contributions by women pervaded the "revolutionary moment." A 1972 advertisement for the Helaine Victoria Press, which printed "authentic historic pictures and stories" of women on postcards, captured the mood of the moment: "Discover Our Heritage," it implored. "Share your pride and discovery every time you write a note on our postcards, notes & greetings."[1] Both inside and outside the academy, in manifestoes, on posters, and even on stationery, activists seemed to believe what historian Gerda Lehrner would argue in 1981: "Women's history is the primary tool for women's emancipation."[2]

Perhaps one of the most crucial outposts of this feminist historical consciousness was women's history produced for children. These texts, which translated academic women's history

[1] Advertisement appeared in advertising pages of *Ms.* magazine intermittently in the first years of the magazine's run.

[2] "Gerda Lerner on the Future of Our Past," interview by Catharine R. Stimpson, *Ms.*(HQ1101.M55) 10 (September 1981): 94, 95

into picture and storybooks, games, and activities, combined the movement's emphasis on writing women into American history with new discoveries from psychology and sociology that linked girls' self-confidence with representations of women in educational and entertainment materials.[3] While excellent scholarship has been written about the development of academic Women's Studies, feminist efforts to preserve women's historical landmarks, and the movement's influence on early childhood socialization, less attention has been paid to this intersection of the women's history movement and children's culture.

In this presentation, I will explore a selection of works of women's history produced for children before, during, and after the "revolutionary moment" of the Women's Liberation Movement. Seeking to include children in the project of "writing women back into history," these texts created a model of educational entertainment that used accessible narrative forms (stories, poetry, and play) to impart factual information about women who challenged the limitations of their historical moment. In so doing, participants in the women's liberation movement created a form of feminist "edutainment" that facilitated the entrance of women's history and feminist pedagogy into public education and popular culture in the decades surrounding the movement's emergence.

The works of "edutainment" I discuss were not produced as part of an overarching, coordinated effort: they appeared independently of one another beginning in the early 1960s and continuing well into the 1980s. Nevertheless, whether they were created as part of an explicitly revisionist feminist agenda, like *Stories for Free Children* or the Great Women card series, or were works of historical fiction intended for a general audience of children, such as Eve

[3] For an extended discussion of "visibility as an important measure of gendered power," see Leslie Paris, "Where the Children are Free: *Free to Be…You and* Me, Second-Wave Feminism, and 1970s American Children's Culture," in Lori Rotskoff and Laura L. Lovett, eds. *When We Were Free to Be: Looking Back at a Children's Classic and the Difference It Made* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012) 83-84.

Merriam's *Independent Voices* or Mary Stetson Clarke's *Petticoat Rebel*, they each present a specific type of idealized historical figure: what I call the female "barrier breaker." Imbued with a presentist bias, these stories set forth "lost women"—typically pioneering professionals, political activists, or women who transgressed gender boundaries by becoming soldiers or sportsman—as role models for modern young girls facing unprecedented educational, professional, and athletic opportunities. These texts, then, were as much a product of the women's history movement as of what Leslie Paris has called, "the centrality of young children's socialization to second-wave feminist activism."[4] Just as projects like *Free to Be…You and Me* (1972) worked to combat sexism by presenting more varied images of girls and boys in children's culture, women's history edutainment looked to the past to establish a set of heroic "foremothers" that would challenge sex-role stereotypes.[5]

In the introduction to the 1982 collection *Stories for Free Children*, editor Letty Cottin Pogrebin articulated the emphasis on historical "heroes" characteristic of women's history edutainment:

> "Today," she wrote, "legions of female heroes are breaking barriers and breaking records in sports, science, politics, medicine and virtually every occupation. But there have also been exceptions in the past. The stories in this section [Famous Women, Found Women] introduce a few such girls and women, some well known, others almost anonymous, but each audacious and admirable in her fashion. Just as both sexes are expected to draw inspiration from Abraham Lincoln's intrepid honesty and Martin Luther King's resolute visions, these female heroes are intended as models for both boys and girls."[6]

Almost without exception, "Famous Women, Found Women" celebrates those women who defied gender convention or sought and achieved professional success in a male-dominated realm. One story, about Deborah Sampson, emphasizes the fact that she not only passed as a male soldier to fight in the American Revolution, but also that she "was one of the first women

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[4] Paris, 82.
[5] Paris, 91.
[6] Letty Cottin Pogrebin, editor. *Stories for Free Children: A* Ms. *Book* (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1982), 9.

in the country to travel alone and give talks for money" in the United States.[7] Another tells the story of Sibyl Ludington, the "female Paul Revere."[8] Other women are celebrated as doctors, baseball players, legislators, and suffragists. Even Laverne Morris' narrative, "I Remember Grandma," which depicts the quotidian details of a pioneer woman's life, highlights the fact that she "achieved equality in marriage."[9] With varying degrees of success, the stories depict the realities of daily life for women in different historical moments, but their driving concern is to illustrate the critical moments at which women successfully transgress sexist social roles.

A similar process of gender modeling is implicitly at work in Eve Merriam's *Independent Voices,* a book of history poems for children published in 1968. Merriam offers a selection of historical figures, Benjamin Franklin, Elizabeth Blackwell, Frederick Douglass, Henry Thoreau, Lucretia Mott, Ida B. Wells, and Fiorello LaGuardia, as "heroes and heroines" for young readers. Though her adult writing had strongly criticized sexism throughout the 1960s (perhaps most prominently with the publication of her book *After Nora Slammed the Door: American Women in the 1960s, the Unfinished Revolution*) Merriam inserts Blackwell, Mott, and Wells into this group quietly, making no explicit reference to sex in her "A Note to the Reader."[10] However, the women she includes in the book are united in their iconoclastic desire to achieve goals that exceed their expected social role.

Merriam presents Elizabeth Blackwell's medical education literally as a fairy tale, in which a maligned girl "studying, studying throughout the night/warming herself with an inner light" receives the "happy ending" of graduating head of her class.[11] Lucretia Mott appears as a

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[7] *Stories for Free Children,* 62.
[8] *Stories for Free Children,* 66.
[9] *Stories for Free Children* ,81.
[10] Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's* Liberation (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 143-144.
[11] Eve Merriam, *Independent* Voices (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 17-18.

woman “salty, adventurous all her days” committed equally to her husband, her Quaker faith, and her abolition activism.[12] Ida B Wells, who “couldn’t learn to hold her tongue,” and “walked with her head held high and persisted in staring life straight in the eye,” achieves her dream of working as a journalist and anti-lynching activist.[13] Throughout her text, Merriam offers ambition and professional success as ideal traits when they belong to women. In establishing a canon of American “independent voices,” Merriam defines the terms in which to present female barrier breakers as fundamentally patriotic heroines.

Longer works of historical fiction, such as Mary Stetson Clarke’s chapter book *Petticoat Rebel*, used fictional characters to explore American history from the perspective of a young girl. *Petticoat Rebel* follows Candace “Dacie” Tybbot as she grows from a frustrated student in a school for girls to the instructor of the first coeducational classroom in 1770s Gloucester, Massachusetts. From the outset, Dacie is talented but frustrated, continuously chafing against the confines of her proper role as an eighteenth century lady-to-be. She has learned Latin as a child, and longs to continue studying it. She envies her brothers, who know the political and business news of the town because they spend the day in public with their father, and who might have the chance to study at Harvard College one day.[14]

Early in the story, Clarke dramatizes an individual act of gender rebellion when Dacie is expelled from her girls’ school. “All her pent-up frustration and disappointment burst forth in a sudden rage,” Clarke writes, “She pulled so hard on the shoulder strap that it gave way; half freed, she undid the other straps and ran out of the schoolroom.”[15] This unseemly physical and literal act of barrier breaking foreshadows the social revolution that Dacie will bring about when

[12] Merriam, 42
[13] Merriam, 66
[14] Mary Stetson Clarke, *Petticoat Rebel* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), 25, 34.
[15] Clarke, 27.

she becomes a teacher as the colonial rebellion begins. Through this fictional character, Clarke invites her young readers to consider the limitations of egalitarian rhetoric and to understand Dacie's quest for gender equality not only as a justifiable break with the status quo, but as part of the larger project of American liberty and progress.

Toys and games of the period, which invited children to physically interact with women's history, offered another avenue to celebrate—and on occasion, playact as—barrier breakers. In 1979, an article in *Ms.* magazine suggested that children celebrate their birthdays with a "Susan B. Anthony birthday party" that would include party games such as a "huge crossword puzzle, biographical charades, and 'Hit the Unratified States'" which involved pasting "felt cutouts over those states that had not yet ratified the Equal Rights Amendment" and throwing "Velcro balls at those targets."[16]

By the late 1970s, children and adults alike could collect versions of Great Women: A Biographical Card Game, which came in a variety of packages, such as "Foremothers," "Founders and Firsts," and "Poets and Writers." The package of "Founders and Firsts," for example, explicitly celebrated "outstanding women": women who "broke the sex barrier in law, medicine, and aviation; women who pioneered in journalism, education, and social activism." "Foremothers" paid tribute to leaders of the Women's and Anti-Slavery movements by offering "photos and facts" about ten of them. By incorporating the faces, names, and deeds of historical figures from Susan B. Anthony to Gertrude Stein into the physical act of a game of charades or rummy, feminist children's culture sought to restore and then normalize the presence of women as agents of history and role models for boys and girls alike.

[16] "Throw Yourself a Susan B. Anthony Birthday Party—I Did!" cited in Sarah T. Partlow-Lefevre, "Rhetorical Construction of First Wave Feminism in *Ms.* Magazine, 1972-1980" *Relevant Rhetoric: A New Journal of Rhetorical Studies,* Volume 3, Issue 1, Spring 2012.

As the above examples illustrate, women's history edutainment commonly emphasized female contributions to canonical historical events such as the American Revolution or the Civil War. Because they were interested in exceptional women and girls that overcame the sexism of their own historical moment to enter male-dominated arenas, these works generally reproduced rather than challenged the conventional narrative and periodization of American history. In this, the producers of women's history edutainment differed from academic women's historians significantly.

While academic women's history radically reoriented historical practice to examine women's unique worlds and rituals, women's history edutainment valued women's contribution to the political and public worlds they inhabited. As women's history in the academy challenged arbitrary divisions between public and private and the devaluation of the private sphere, women's history edutainment established ambition, activism, and professional success as heroic traits in women. Taking "barrier breaking" as a central value, these works tended to deploy a liberal vocabulary that privileged freedom, independence, individual accomplishment, and equality. Moreover, they often presented women's rights as a critical but inevitable development in the teleological narrative of American progress. This final characteristic made feminist edutainment particularly well suited for entrance into the nation's classrooms and playrooms, as stories of "secret soldiers," petticoat rebels, and suffragists could be easily incorporated into existing units on American political development.

Women's history edutainment held dual commitments: it participated in the project of writing women back into American history and public life, and it worked to make varied images of men and women available to children in an effort to combat sexist socialization. At many points, these goals converged successfully. The "Found Women" narratives in *Stories for Free*

Children, for example, often drew on the kind of archival research and microhistories performed in historical scholarship to produce inspiring stories of real-life "heroes" for girls and boys. But at other points, these commitments constrained each other. Edutainment that highlighted women's contributions to American military and political history enabled the inclusion of women's history in social studies curricula (and, more immediately, in the popular culture that surrounded the American Bicentennial celebration). This created positive images of women and girls to combat sexist socialization, but it also dulled feminist history's trenchant critique of American capitalism and liberalism. Texts that depicted barrier breaking as the key to dismantling sexism often overlooked the historical and structural realities of women's lives as they differed based on class, race, religion, and cultural moment. The tension between accurately representing and restoring women to American history and successfully presenting heroic role models for children persists in the children's culture of our own moment.

By turning to historical fiction, games, and toys, I hope that I have highlighted American playrooms and classrooms as important sites of women's history activism in the "revolutionary movement" and beyond. Women's history edutainment drew from and reconfigured the revolutionary academic work being done in the emergent field of women's history to produce a canonical women's history for children that endures in the textbooks and toys of today. The continuing impact of these early works, particularly the model of the heroic barrier-breaker, in the decades after 1970 reveals not only their powerful contribution to children's culture, but the ideological limitations that remain part of our public and educational history landscape.