



# Gendered marketing of children's books

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It's not what kids want.

Gendered marketing of children's books

It's NOT 'what kids want' says Anna McQuinn

As writers, librarians, reviewers, critics, child care workers, teachers and parents, we know that children need a wide range of experiences - real and imaginative - to grow up to be rounded, healthy adults. However, the last decade has seen a huge growth in the gendered marketing of children's books and toys. There has been resistance to this development, and in recent months this resistance has reached a crescendo, with the emergence of a plethora of groups fighting for the right of all children to experience a wide range of play materials and books, as well as a growth in producers offering alternatives to the gendered mainstream and groups signposting and promoting these alternatives.

The battle is only beginning however, as the mainstream counters with accusations that we're not living in the real world; that manufacturers and publishers are just responding to what children want; that our vision of childhood is some unattainable utopia and that gendered books and toys are not doing any harm anyway?

So let me take those points one by one:

## **In the real world?**

### **The market cares about sales not about children's needs.**

Let me first kick into touch the idea that publishers are just responding to demand and that girls are somehow biologically driven to only want stories featuring princesses (and that boys only want stories about diggers). As Take Back Halloween founder Suzanne Scoggins says, 'manufacturers are NOT just blindly responding to demand. They're working overtime to CREATE the demand.'

Segmenting the market into narrow demographic groups is a proven sales strategy; just because this works doesn't make it right. In supermarkets, putting sweets by the tills is extremely effective. However, parents and nutritionists know that it is not good for children and repeatedly campaign against it.

Similar campaigns against the strategy of gendered marketing have been met with robust defense by some publishers. They argue that in some imagined ideal world, maybe they could publish gender-neutral titles with gender-neutral covers. But, they say, since they exist in the real world (implying that those of us asking for something better are not), that's not possible. However, the narrow gender roles embedded in toys and books actually contradict modern reality. Over 75% of women (including over 70% of mothers) now work outside of the home, and in most families domestic responsibilities are shared more equitably than ever before. So in the real world, in an era of increasingly diverse family structures, it would make sense to see more gender-neutral advertising not the other way around. Yet anyone advocating for a wider variety of books is regularly dismissed as naïve, or out of touch or too wholesome or as making unreasonable demands, while producers justify their position as offering 'what children want'. In a recent excellent blog by Annabel

Deuchar, for example, I was saddened to see her preface her wish to see more adventure stories for her daughter with the words, "I know I sound a bit militant but?"

It's amazing to me that you can be made to feel militant for wanting a healthy range of options for your child to read! If we were to apply this logic to what we give our children to eat - i.e. only giving them what they want - many would happily live on a diet of chicken nuggets and chocolate! But nobody accuses us of being militant for wanting children to eat vegetables! As Lori Day asked in a recent blog, why is it objectionable to so many people that others are trying to give girls healthier messages than the ones they are currently bombarded with by society?

In fact, a diet of beauty and domesticity or one limited to action and construction, is as damaging (if not more so) to a child as a diet of chicken nuggets and chocolate. (And it also follows that the wider a range a child has available from the earliest stage, the more set up the child is for making wider, wiser choices as they grow up).

### **What harm is it anyway?**

There's certainly nothing wrong with children, regardless of gender, preferring certain books over others. The problem emerges when they are told that some books are not appropriate for them to like. Lise Eliot, neuro-scientist and author of **Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow Into Troublesome Gaps - And What We Can Do About It** argues that "psychologically and neurologically there are far more similarities than differences, particularly in children. By imposing these categories on children through the options we present them with, we limit their interests and what they might become. The potency of early learning means that what children learn early on, has a huge impact on what they become capable of later in life", says Eliot. "Why on earth would we want to limit the breadth of possibility?"

As Lyn Mikel Brown, co-author with Sharon Lamb of the books **Packaging Girlhood** and **Packaging Boyhood** argues, "When you offer few options and give kids a very narrow slice of life, there are things they don't learn, experiences they don't have. What the children do learn is strict gender norms - and children who don't adhere to those norms frighten their peers. They're made anxious by difference because we've given them sameness. To alleviate that fear, they tease the child who doesn't conform." So, as books and toys become more and more gender segregated, the social costs of boundary crossing and the peer pressure to stay within the lines are huge.

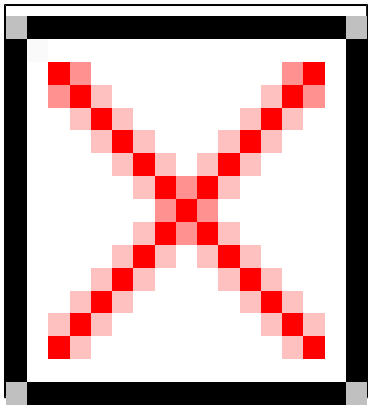
Other advocates for change put it more strongly. In a recent blog, Amy Jussel, founder and executive director of **Shaping Youth**, said that we have reached a tipping point. "People are beginning to connect the dots to the larger societal context and environmental exposure of these media and marketing messages, and see how they play out in the real world.

We need to look at how product messaging significantly alters, shapes, depicts, and frames children's identity, ambition, and self-worth, and hold media and marketing behemoths accountable," she says.

### **So what can we do?**

Own it. Stop it. Fix it. In that order, people.

That's the advice from Amy Jussel. "We CAN stand for open-ended discovery and meaningful play," she says, "and we can stand down corporations that choose to be tone deaf with hands firmly clasped over their ears. I would add that those of us in a position to create more positive materials should continue to battle to do so, that those of us who review and select books need to be on the look out for stories which appeal to boys and girls in less gender-limited ways, and that anyone who cares about this issue should make an extra effort to support anyone who is offering more gender-neutral view of the world.



I am excited to have acquired an amazing new title, **What Are You Playing At?** by Marie-Sabine Roger out on Universal Children's Day, November 20th for Alanna Books. The text trots out the familiar stereotypical reaction to any child who dares to cross the gender divide in their play, but when you open the flap, the image underneath pulls the rug from under that claim, showing an adult engaged in that very prohibited activity. Very powerful ? it's a book I'm hoping will challenge anyone who believes in limiting children's play or imagination. Books and play limited by narrow gender norms ? it's NOT what kids want!

Anna McQuinn is writer and publisher at Alanna Books

**What Are You Playing At?** by Marie-Sabine Roger, Alanna Books, 978-1907825026, 40pp, £12.99 hbk

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