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Female Characters in Children's Books

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Stone Soup, Carol Pasternak and Allen Sutterfield. Illus. by Hedy Campbell. The Women's Press, 1974. 29 pp.

Overnight Adventure, Frances Kilbourne. Illus. by Ann Powell. The Women's Press, 1977. 27 pp. ISBN 0-88961-047-9.

The Recyclers, Frances Kilbourne. Illus. by Ann Powell. The Women's Press, 1979. 28 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88961-060-6.

Sex-role stereotyping has been acknowledged for more than a decade. This awareness has prompted some authors to create characters specifically to counter the passive image of females found in textbooks and literature. When well crafted, such stories can serve an educational and literary role in the lives of young readers. Three titles from The Women's Press will be examined with this criterion in mind.

In *Stone Soup*, the equal status of the girls involved underlines a story about overcoming prejudice. Two young girls deal independently with problems that arise in *Overnight Adventure*. The girls who are the main characters in *The Recyclers* are innovative and creative in their selection and reconditioning of the found objects which they share with others. In all three books qualities such as self-reliance, decision-making, active involvement and successful outcomes are stressed.

Stone Soup, a successful re-telling of an old European folk tale, is set in an urban school. Those familiar with downtown Toronto will

recognise the location near Kensington Market. The story revolves around a classroom of children from many countries, now in the same school in Canada. Initial fears and the resulting dynamics are realistically and sensitively portrayed. Through the efforts of the school's elderly janitor, the children begin learning about one another and their different cultures while preparing a delicious stone soup.

The fast-paced plot gives us glimpses of the children's home environment and food customs. Involvement by a father and grandmother result when they hear about the soup. Each comes to share one food with the class. Because of the visit of the adults, singing and dancing follow the wonderful lunch. The appreciative response of the class is genuine and does not appear contrived within the plot. All tasks in preparation for the soup and the celebration are shared by children and adults, males and females. A strong sense of equality is developed as the story progresses. Respect for adults and each other emerges.

The fully illustrated pages which complement the text are detailed black and white drawings with red accents. They do not, however, appear bland or lifeless. Their rich detail and selective use of photo collage demand more than a quick glance (see Fig. 1). They add to the credibility of the modernized tale, making it very immediate.

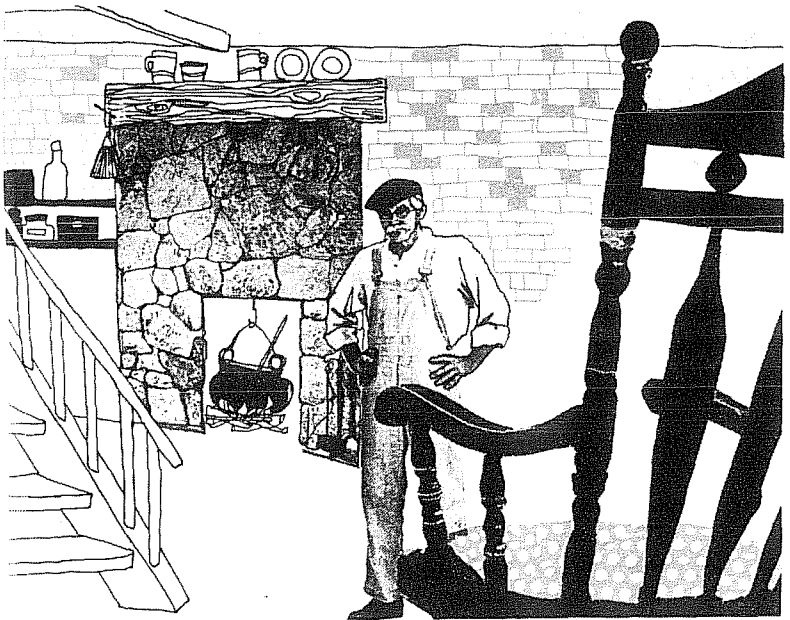


Figure 1

The difficulties facing immigrant children are sympathetically presented and the solution to their classroom problem does not appear artificial or preachy. Sharing around the food extends to the reader by way of an illustrated glossary of ingredients the children combined. Large print and frequent use of illustrations make this a valuable book for classroom use and could lead to a similar soup being created by any group of students.

Two wordless picture books are the work of Frances Kilbourne and Ann Powell. In *Overnight Adventure*, the two girls pitch a tent in order to sleep out in the back yard. Double pages depict an imaginary scene such as tigers in the jungle. This is followed by the real situation – cats fighting on the back fence. Four such scenes are depicted, each more frightening and problematic as the weather also takes a turn for the worst. A concerned parent is told by the girls “we’re fine.” They resolve the situation on their own by opening the tent flaps and placing their sleeping bags at the entrance.

Without words, the illustrations are the only clue to meaning that the reader has. Black and white drawings, accented with yellow, are dull, and the subject matter static. Subtle shading is used to show nightfall. Stylistic changes in the drawings are the only clue to differentiate the imaginary from the real situations, as the presence of the tent in each one at first tricks the reader. Transitions from one page to the next are weak or non-existent.

Guided by an adult, youngsters could be encouraged to talk about what each picture means and how the girls feel. On their own, pre-readers would have difficulty with this book. Its capable female characters are not backed up by clear plot development. The book thus fosters more confusion than appreciation in the young reader. It needs words to explain its pictures!

The second wordless book overcomes some of the problems of the first. *The Recyclers* has a bright multi-coloured cover, which is much more eye-catching than the jacket of *Overnight Adventure*. Familiar street scenes offer an intriguing setting for our heroines’ collecting of throw-aways. Different outfits worn by the girls show the passage of several days. More expressive body language in the drawings is evident. The scolding reactions of parents are easy to interpret. Greater clarity of illustrations (see Fig. 2) and continuity in setting contribute to smooth plot development. The book successfully introduces an important environmental issue.

The skills of both author and illustrator blend to create a strong sense of purpose in the girls. This meets with parental approval at the



Figure 2

end of the story. Pre-readers should have few problems with this book. It offers a starting point for discussion and activity in an entertaining manner.

All three books offer insight into the changing role of female characters in children's books. The value and contributions of young girls in these three stories are acknowledged without being artificially emphasized. Both *Stone Soup* and *The Recyclers* deserve a place on the school library shelf. Each would be well used at home as well. Structural flaws in *Overnight Adventure* prevent endorsement for either setting.

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